

# Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

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Overwhelmed by work



Wellbeing  
at the Bar

# Overwhelmed by work

*"I can't cope with how much work I have to do"*

Pupillage can be a very stressful period, it is in effect a year-long interview. It is likely to involve managing a huge workload and pressure from multiple sources including Pupil Supervisor, fellow pupils, clerks, other members of Chambers, clients, and often yourself. All while trying to make it all look effortless!

Late instructions, the multiple pressures mentioned above, combined with the very nature of many who practice within the profession as perfectionists, increases the likelihood of a burnout.

It is important to know your limits and not to become overwhelmed by this level of work. If you can, try to adopt the following tips:

- **In fine balance** – Think carefully about the amount of work you are taking on, and if you feel overburdened, consider approaching your supervisor and/or clerks to discuss your workload. It is common for people to ignore the signs of overwork until they become visible e.g. hair loss; weight loss; regular illnesses; or a change of behaviour.
- **Speak to someone** – When undertaking pupillage, there may be an expectation that you have a desire to impress your superiors by taking on more work. Sometimes more work is counter-productive and your clerks need to know this. As you are very junior, you may not feel comfortable asking for time out of court. Consider speaking to your Pupil Supervisor or Senior Clerk, who might be in a better position to help.
- **Buy some time.** Identify everything in your diary that has any possible room for movement. Remember that you are not the only person with an excessive workload. Others will understand the pressure you are under. People are more likely to respond sympathetically if you are upfront about your difficulties. Your opportunity to practice is not going to collapse if you do this.
- **Make a list** - Uncertainty exacerbates panic so try to be as clear as possible about what you actually have to achieve. Write a chronology of your deadlines. Separately identify everything that is already overdue and how long each task will take. This will help you to prioritise more urgent matters.
- **Plan work ahead** – Familiarise yourself with the timetabling or scheduling system within Chambers as early as possible. This will ensure that you keep on top of your schedule, and can respond promptly when asked about your availability or capacity to take on last minute/ emergency instructions.
- **Bigger Picture** – Avoid getting weighed down by the minutiae of the case, or the expectations of others within Chambers during pupillage. Keeping sight of targets will help you to remain motivated, and remind you of the reason you became a barrister.

- **Take breaks** – Try and take time small breaks where you can to help to rebalance your mindset if you are feeling overwhelmed from work e.g. download a mindfulness app or practice meditation. This will help to improve your efficiency in the long run.
- **Be realistic** - Refer to your list, establish what your irreducible minimum is for today and stick to it. Do not try to think about dealing with anything else unless and until you have finished it.
- **Deal with your [perfectionism](#)** - Some things cannot be delegated, other things *can*. It is counter-intuitive, but stop thinking that you have to do everything, and perfectly. Identify what support can properly be found in Chambers.