

Optimal functioning – a guide for legal practitioners

Lawyers typically work in demanding environments with significant responsibility and pressure. A high pressure environment may be highly stressful and result in poor mental health, depending on your ability to effectively cope with the demands of the profession. In such a context, it is helpful to be able to identify optimal vs sub-optimal functioning for yourself and others. Sub-optimal functioning can lead to serious mental health issues which can profoundly impact your health and your professional, social and interpersonal functioning. Being alert to the signs that you are not functioning as well as usual will enable you to take action early and prevent escalation of issues.

What does sub-optimal functioning look like?

There are a wide variety of signs that may indicate you're not functioning as well as you could. You may not experience all of them. You're most likely to notice the physical signs first while other people are more likely to notice, and possibly point out, the behavioural signs.

SHORT TERM SYMPTOMS (immediate to six months)

Physical	Psychological	Behavioural
Butterflies in stomach Nausea	Confused thinking Forgetfulness	Talking quickly or loudly Speaking aggressively
Dizziness or light headedness Headaches	Difficulty focusing on tasks	Walking quickly when not in a hurry Pacing
Tense muscles Aching joints	Procrastination	Fidgeting and agitation – nail biting, grinding teeth, drumming fingers
Disrupted sleep patterns – excessive dreaming/thinking, difficulty getting to sleep, waking frequently	Reduced decision making ability	Disengagement – yawning, decreased eye contact, looking away
Rapid shallow breathing Shortness of breath in the absence of physical activity	Negative thinking – critical of self and others, identifying flaws	Change in eating habits – overeating/bingeing or not eating
Racing or 'thumping' heart in the absence of physical exertion	Increased emotionality – getting upset easily or over-reacting to issues	Increased consumption of alcohol or other substances
Dry mouth Excessive thirst	Simmering – underlying feelings of frustration, anger or disillusionment	Irritability and anger outbursts
Cool skin Feeling excessively hot Increased sweating	Feeling overwhelmed or hopeless Feeling numb or disoriented	Reduced self-care activities such as exercise, socialising

LONG TERM CONSEQUENCES (more than six months)

Reduced immunity – more likely to get colds and flu	Depression, anxiety and stress	Social withdrawal
Digestive upsets – stomach aches, irritable bowel syndrome	Burnout, psychological breakdown	Alcohol or other substance abuse
Insomnia Fatigue	Increased suicidality	Reduced work performance Increased absenteeism
High blood pressure and heart disease	Inability to feel pleasure in activities	Relationship breakdown
Weight loss or gain	Low self-esteem	Communication difficulties and conflict
Loss of libido	Lack of self-confidence	Lack of self-care in appearance or general health

What does optimal functioning look like?

- Thinking in a clear, rational way.
- Using effective decision making processes.
- Understanding and accepting other people's opinions and behaviour.
- Regulating emotions rather than becoming overwhelmed by them.
- Having an appropriate and proportionate reaction to unexpected difficulties.
- Staying calm in stressful situations.
- Being adaptive and flexible to changing situations and environments.
- Engaging in activities you find enjoyable.
- Sleeping well with a regular pattern.
- Having healthy and regular eating habits.
- Moderating alcohol consumption.
- Incorporating regular physical activity into your lifestyle.
- Keeping in touch with family and friends.
- Maintaining a social life.
- Setting goals and recognising achievements along the way.

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Checklist: How well am I functioning?

Reflect on your answers to these questions:

- Is it hard to wind down or 'turn off' from work?
- Are you finding it difficult to relax?
- Are you overreacting to situations?
- Do you feel agitated or get frustrated about little things more quickly than usual?
- Do you experience difficulty breathing or shortness of breath when you are not physically active?
- Do you experience trembling or tingling eg in the hands?
- Do you feel you are close to panic or running on high alert a lot of the time?
- Do you regularly feel overwhelmed or weighed down by pressure?
- Is it difficult to work up the initiative or enthusiasm to do things – especially activities you used to find enjoyable?
- Are you laughing and smiling less than usual?
- Have your sleeping patterns changed?
- Has your alcohol consumption or substance use increased?
- Are you binge-eating or avoiding healthy foods?
- Do you feel down-hearted and blue most days?
- Have family, friends or colleagues expressed concern about you or your behaviour?

If you answered yes to one or more of the above statements, you may be functioning at less than optimal levels. If these symptoms continue long-term, you may be placing your physical and psychological health at risk.

How do I know when to seek help?

It is normal for functioning to have ebbs and flows. However, if your symptoms continue for more than a few days and you notice that you're not functioning as well as usual, then it is important to seek help.

- If you can relate to any of the signs and symptoms described above, consider seeking help to address these signs.
- Become mindful of your signs that you are not functioning as well as usual and monitor regularly.
- Listen to family, friends and colleagues if they express concern or notice any changes in you.
- Develop an action plan – what will you do if you aren't functioning as well as usual? What sources of support can you access? When will you take action – remember, the earlier the better.

Where can I get help?

Getting help may be as easy as talking with your GP or making an appointment with a counsellor via LawCare or your firm's employee assistance provider. If you are reluctant to seek help, review *Fact Sheet 2: Overcoming barriers to seeking help* for more information.

LawCare is a free confidential counselling service available to QLS members, their families and staff.

QLS also provides free ethics and practice management advice.



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