

Overcoming barriers to seeking help – a guide for legal practitioners

It's not uncommon for legal practitioners to experience stress, worry, or low mood, given that they generally work in a highly demanding environment. Such feelings are a natural response to the pressure and responsibilities typically present in legal practice, yet can lead to mental health issues if elevated, prolonged and inadequately managed.

We all have our own way of coping with the demands of legal practice and individual coping mechanisms can be very helpful and effective. However there may be times when you feel that you're not coping as well as you usually do. This may be a sign that you are experiencing some psychological distress and seeking help may be worth considering. Interestingly, recent studies have uncovered that many lawyers are reluctant to admit the need for support and to seek help.

Addressing barriers to help seeking in the legal profession

Stigma

Although research¹ indicates that stigmatising views on mental health difficulties are reducing among the legal profession, personal barriers to accessing help still exist. Overcoming your concerns of stigma and seeking support when required will help your professional and personal life and mental and emotional well-being.

- Remember that the legal profession is a highly demanding profession and that many people, not just you, feel overwhelmed by the pressure.
- Understand it is normal that, at times, you will feel stressed and your coping abilities may be compromised. This does not mean you are weak.
- Recognise that it is pro-active to seek help and to develop skills to manage pressures effectively.
- If you are concerned about colleagues knowing you are having difficulties, there are avenues to get support without anyone knowing.

Time

Time pressure is a major barrier to help seeking among lawyers. Billable hours and competition to reach targets can manifest in long work hours and a sense of urgency. Spending time to address mental health issues may seem indulgent or time-wasting.

Spending time to build skills to manage pressures effectively and to maintain good psychological wellbeing will save you a lot of stress and time in the future. After all, prevention is the best cure.

- Identify some resources that you can access at a convenient time and place for you, such as online tools.
- Develop a list of potential supports that you can access quickly if you need to.
- Locate psychologists who offer evening and out of work hours appointments so your work time may remain unaffected.

Lawyer personality – high degree of scepticism

Lawyers typically rate significantly higher on the personality trait of scepticism than the general population². While a critical, inquiring mindset can be an asset in legal practice, it can become a liability if it encroaches on your ability to seek help when required. High levels of scepticism can lead to:

- doubt about the seriousness of mental health problems
- doubt about the effectiveness of treatments
- a belief that no-one would understand or be able to assist.

Challenging your scepticism may help you build additional skills that are helpful for your personal and professional life.

- Do your own research to overcome your scepticism.
- Accept that evidence consistently demonstrates that receiving psychological therapy from a trained professional is an effective way to promote healthy functioning.³
- Realise that you actually don't know if it will help until you try.

Evidence demonstrates that seeking support from a qualified mental health professional enables people to build skills to maintain optimal functioning and that psychological therapy:

- can be as effective as medication, especially for depression and anxiety
- is more effective than no psychological intervention at all
- is particularly effective when there is a good therapeutic relationship between the client and their mental health practitioner.⁴

Why are lawyers reluctant to seek help?

Lawyers may be reluctant to seek help because of:

- fear of the stigma associated with negative stereotypes of people who struggle with their mental health
- fear that seeking help is a sign of weakness and inability to cope
- a belief that being a high achiever means being able to solve any problem without assistance
- worry about being viewed as unable to handle pressure or unreliable
- fear of losing one's job or having your professional reputation and potential employability negatively affected
- time pressure
- uncertainty about where to seek help and doubt around the effectiveness of interventions.

Not knowing how to reach out for help

Many people find it difficult to reach out or ask for help as they may be concerned about feeling uncomfortable in disclosing and discussing highly personal matters.

Reaching out can come in many forms:

- simply acknowledging to a colleague that things are a bit tough at the moment
- sharing your concerns with family, friends or your mentor, if you have one
- attending a seminar on psychological wellbeing
- calling a support line or seeking online support
- talking to your GP or a mental health professional.



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Psychological Wellbeing:
Best Practice Guidelines
www.tjmf.org.au



What types of support are available?

LawCare and QLS

LawCare offers free, confidential counselling services to QLS members, their families and legal support staff. QLS members can access four psychology sessions per year. LawCare can organise an appointment for you or provide you with the names of approved providers in your area. To access LawCare, phone Assure Programs on 1800 505 015. QLS also provides free ethics and practice management advice to members.

Family, friends and colleagues

Believe it or not, simply letting someone know you are experiencing difficulties has been found to reduce psychological distress.⁵ While you may not want to burden others with your troubles, receiving social support from a supportive family member, friend or colleague can be an effective coping strategy to help you gain perspective on the situation and see a way forward.

Your GP

Many GPs have completed mental health training and are qualified to discuss your concerns and assess whether medication or psychological counselling would be helpful for you. Your GP can also determine if there are any underlying medical conditions which may be impacting on your coping abilities.

If your GP diagnoses a mental health condition, they can prepare a Mental Health Treatment Plan which entitles you to 10 Medicare rebated psychology sessions per year. Your GP can recommend a psychologist for you or you can request a referral to a psychologist of your choosing.

Psychologists

Psychologists are registered mental health professionals who have completed at least six years of training. They use evidence-based strategies to assist their clients to meet their goals and are regulated by the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Authority. They adhere to a code of ethics and are required to participate in ongoing professional development as part of their annual registration requirements.

The Australian Psychological Society offers a service to help you locate suitable psychologists in your area – <http://www.psychology.org.au/ReferralService/About/>

Online or phone support

There are a number of quality supports available online or via the phone.

beyondblue provides resources and support for depression, anxiety and related disorders. An online webchat service, information sheets on mental health topics and available treatments and practitioner listing are available on their website – beyondblue.org.au

Moodgym is a free self-help program to develop skills to manage depression – moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome

Lifeline offers free phone crisis counselling service 24 hours a day on 13 11 14. Their website has online self-help tool kits and fact sheets for a variety of mental health issues – lifeline.org.au

How many counselling sessions are required?

This will vary according to individual circumstances. Brief therapy can achieve results in three to five sessions, while more significant or long-standing issues may be addressed over a period of weeks or months. Initial sessions are generally weekly and may then taper to fortnightly or monthly, with the aim of developing long-term coping strategies. Booster sessions can be helpful three, six and twelve months after therapy has ended.

What can I expect if I see a psychologist?

Psychological therapy enables lawyers to discuss their issues in a confidential, non-judgemental forum and to develop skills and strategies to deal with and manage such difficulties. This may be achieved through:

- psycho-education
- problem solving and skills building strategies
- mindfulness training
- stress reduction techniques
- identifying unhelpful thinking patterns that direct behaviour and emotions.

Psychologists understand that many people, including lawyers, may feel anxious about attending their first session. The first session may involve:

- signing a privacy and confidentiality agreement to acknowledge that all information discussed in the session will be confidential and to outline any exceptions to confidentiality
- completing a questionnaire/s about your current psychological functioning
- discussing your background, your lifestyle, and other factors that may impact on your mental wellbeing
- working with the psychologist to identify your goals for counselling and discussing how they can help you meet your desired outcomes.

Subsequent sessions may involve:

- reviewing any changes and continuing to assist you to meet your therapeutic goals
- asking you to complete 'homework' tasks designed to help you embed skills and strategies discussed in sessions into your daily life
- addressing any emergent issues
- troubleshooting and working through any difficulties with implementing the skills and techniques into your life.

References

- ¹ beyondblue. Annual Business and Professions Study 2011.
- ² Richard L. Herding cats: The lawyer personality revealed. Report to Legal Management. 2002;29 (11):2-12.
- ³ Australian Psychological Society. <http://www.psychology.org.au/community/effectiveness/>
- ⁴ Australian Psychological Society <http://www.psychology.org.au/community/effectiveness/>
- ⁵ Suicide Prevention Australia. Work and Suicide Prevention Position Statement, 2014.



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