

# Stress in the Legal Profession: Does it come with the Territory?

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Some lawyers live for high pressure; the fast-paced manic deadline thrill that drives them to success. Some lawyers cope so very well with stress, manage it and not let it affect their home life. If last year's Law Society JLD Wellbeing and Resilience survey tells us anything, it is that stress levels are rising and stress is negatively affecting a large proportion of our junior lawyers. Workplace stress is affecting our junior lawyers' work wellbeing and is creeping into their home lives and relationships. The survey reports long hours and high demands are leaving some junior lawyers worried their personal lives are being compromised.

## **Is this something that the legal profession can change?**

There are some questions to consider here. Is your firm aware of stress levels? Are they in tune with the office 'vibe'? Is there an unspoken rule of "I went through it, so will you?" What services are in place to assist those suffering with stress? How accessible are these services?

It appears that some firms are aware of the stress levels of its staff. Some firms are offering services such as holistic activities and organising wellbeing days in the same way that some managers are more empathic and others are unaware. Having the right balance of awareness in leadership is vital in any management structure. There are some firms subscribing to external services such as coaching and offering an Employee Assistance Programme (which often includes counselling as part of the package).

## **What could be done differently?**

Are the management making themselves approachable enough so that staff feel able to talk openly about their work pressure? Whilst regular one on one manager and individual meetings are a great way to engage with staff, busy schedules and deadlines sometimes mean that these sessions are not happening often enough. Setting aside regular and planned meetings ensure that the staff feel important, valued and help with motivation – it's also important to ensure such meetings have a considered structure. It is well known that "praise is as good as a raise" and having feedback from colleagues on "a job well done" goes a long way in providing validation and recognition.

Managers engaging in coaching and counselling themselves strengthens their own self-awareness (especially surrounding their own coping mechanisms) and goes an enormous way to encouraging positive wellbeing and mental health awareness cultures.

Employee Assistance Programmes are useful and should be readily advertised and promoted. The resource is there, it is paid for by our employers and staff will only benefit from it if the staff are engaged with wellbeing and “make the call”.

The results of last year’s Wellbeing and Resilience survey suggests appointing wellbeing officers in the office as well as arranging and hosting more holistic recreational activities such as lunchtime yoga and massages through the day. These provide for an incredibly supportive workplace and evidence supports that some law firms are starting to make changes in the right direction.

### **Tips for managing stress**

There are several changes you could try to help manage stress such as healthy eating, limiting alcohol intake, making sure you have hobbies outside of work and getting a good night’s sleep. It is important to consider how to manage stress at work by taking on one task at a time, taking regular breaks and to seek supervision where possible.

If you are experiencing stress in your workplace (or generally) here are some recommended tips:

1. Share your worries with someone who is empathic and can validate your feelings of anxiety and stress;
2. Journaling is always helpful to keep a note of anxious thoughts (especially before bedtime). This way, the anxious thoughts are down on paper for you to effectively forget about or work through at a different time of day, rather than at bedtime;
3. Physical exercise and mindfulness practice – online podcasts are fantastic and are a tool I recommend to many of my clients; and
4. Counselling to examine the cause of the anxiety and stress. A good counsellor will help you develop ways to change patterns of behaviour which may contribute to the stressful situation and help you to understand your own coping mechanisms.

### **So, does stress come with the territory?**

In short: yes. The legal profession itself is demanding, fast-paced and challenging (which is why many solicitors thrive in the environment). Self-awareness is so very important alongside managers being aware of stress levels in their teams. Not only is it incumbent upon us to change the way we deal with stress, it is also just as important that when a member of management can see one of their team struggling, to sensitively take this in hand (in the same way as a physical illness).

In order for staff members to be engaged in wellbeing programmes, managers can encourage a culture change by praising their teams in person and by openly discussing the awareness of rising stress levels. By positively modelling engagement with wellbeing, Law Firms will be looking after their frontline team mentally, practically, and financially!

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