



LawCare Ltd.
Health Support and Advice for Lawyers

An Alternative Career?



Helplines

Solicitors: 1800 991801

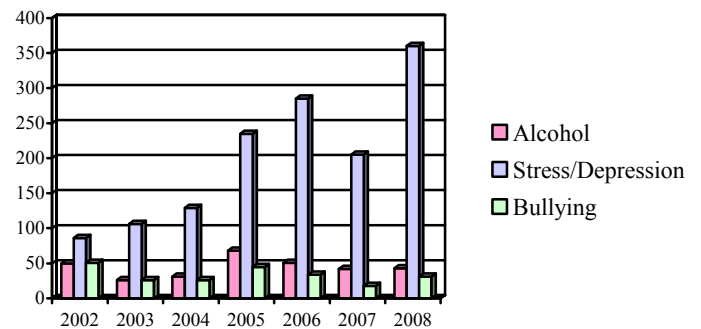
Barristers: 1800 303145

www.lawcare.ie

Introduction

The legal profession can be rewarding, but it also has its stresses and strains. At LawCare we have found that situations can occur where the levels of stress can become so high that the affected lawyers begin to wonder whether or not they are suited to the continuing practise of law. A study by a major life insurance company revealed that 35% of people who left employment for pastures new did so because of stress, and a 1998 American survey contacted 1,000 lawyers at random and found that a third of them were so unhappy and disillusioned with the profession that they were considering leaving.

The chart shows the number of calls to LawCare's helpline relating to stress, depression, alcoholism and bullying. Whilst our aim is to help and support the suffering lawyer, so that he/she can return to effective work in the profession, inevitably there are some who have no wish to do so.



There are a number of reasons for wanting a change of career that we regularly hear from our callers:

- Some people may become lawyers only to discover that the profession it is not what they had expected it to be.
- Others find they simply lack the skills required, or the personality / mindset that would make them a really good lawyer.
- Many people tell us that while they would cope well and enjoy the work under more relaxed conditions, the levels of stress are such that they cannot face going into the office any more.
- We frequently hear from lawyers who are disillusioned because they have failed to make partner once again, or are not achieving the income and / or recognition that they reasonably expected.
- Serious physical or psychological illness – stress induced depression, for example – may make it impossible for someone to remain in practice.
- Poor relationships with others in the office e.g. bullying (which can be far more insidious than outright aggression/shouting/abuse) are making the working environment intolerable.

Obviously, a career change is not a decision to be taken lightly, so it is vitally important that time is taken to consider all of the options and an emotional reaction to a particular set of circumstances does not lead to throwing away all of the years of time and energy invested in achieving qualification and a career. If you are feeling particularly distressed or frustrated at present, perhaps over a recent incident, or you are suffering from stress, depression, or a similar illness, then take time to recover, or calm down, before making any hasty choices.

LawCare has information available on stress, depression, bullying and other topics, which may help you.

If you are dissatisfied with your current job there are three levels of changes you could consider.

1. The first is job change, or doing the same type of work in a different setting, which is the least radical move. A change of specialism or firm, for example.
2. The second is career alteration, or utilising one's legal skills and background in a different setting – teaching at a law school, or working as an industry solicitor, for example. A list of a few such careers is on page 6.
3. The third is career transition or the pursuit of another career significantly different from the practice of law. This could well involve retraining.

While LawCare cannot actually provide specific career advice, this document aims to help you think about the options available to you, and point you in the right direction. We can also support you not only with the stress you may be suffering now, but also as you make your decision. Should you need confidential help, or other information, please do contact us on our freephone helpline, 1 800 991801 (solicitors) or 1800 303145 (barristers), or look at our website: www.lawcare.ie

Reviewing Your Situation

When it all gets too much it is easy to declare that you want to give it all up, but there may be an easier and less drastic solution. Review your situation by asking yourself these questions.

- When did you last take time off? Do you simply need a good holiday?
- Are you working too many hours? Neglecting your family or any recreation time to recharge your batteries?
- Would you feel differently about leaving the profession if you could find a way to reduce the stress or improve your work/life balance? (Ask for LawCare's Anti-Stress Desk Workbook and Stress/Depression pack.)
- Would a change in specialism or area of practice help?
- Can you remember a time when you loved the profession and enjoyed your work?
- Do you need additional training to help you do your job better?
- Would a change of firm help? Believe it or not, there are firms that value their employees and treat them well.
- If a particular person were to leave the firm, would you feel differently? There's little you can do to influence another's behaviour, but ask for LawCare's information on bullying for further advice.

Try to remember that you are a worthwhile human being as well as being a well educated and highly trained professional. Your firm has doubtless invested a good deal of time and money

in recruiting and training you, and it is in their interests to keep you if at all possible. Speak to a Partner, Supervisor or Manager in confidence. Often, the first that a firm knows of an individual's unhappiness is when that person hands in his/her notice and, in fact, the firm may be willing to make any changes necessary to encourage you to stay on, rather than lose you.

Leaving the Law?

One problem with being a lawyer is that it can lead you to believe that you are not qualified or fit to be anything else. This can lead to a feeling of being trapped in an unhappy career, which simply adds to the stress already being suffered.

Also, many people understandably feel that if they leave the legal profession altogether, they will be wasting the time, money and energy they or their families spent in their qualifying as a lawyer. These thoughts can be unhelpful and cause feelings of guilt about moving on. Remember, that whatever you choose to do in future, a law degree/ professional qualification/experience gained in practise on your CV are marketable commodities, and you may find that you can use these experiences and qualifications in another setting, outside private practice.

Career Counselling

Career counselling may help to provide you with the advice and ideas you need, but it can be expensive and it can be difficult to find careers counsellors with specific knowledge of the legal profession. Life Coaching is another option to help you identify your goals and strengths but, again, this is not always viable for those facing a financially uncertain future.

There are often smaller, local careers agencies but whilst they may act as a good starting point, their knowledge of the profession is likely to be limited and they are often more geared towards school leavers than professionals looking to change. However, they may have a helpful library and be able to give you general advice.

A simple exercise may help you to be your own career counsellor. Career planners often start off with a "career check-up" to identify what are the major employment issues that have led the person to seek help. A comprehensive and detailed personal history is taken which includes professional status, education, employment, professional affiliations, marital and family background and financial needs. Why not create one for yourself, adding as much detail as possible and thinking laterally, to include all of your experiences in practise e.g. admin, staff relations, cash flow, and initiatives?

If you have a sympathetic friend, spouse or colleague, why not ask whether you can talk it through with them? The process of openly discussing ones strengths and weaknesses, with an

understanding and supportive friend, relative or counsellor can be beneficial. A strong sense of self is gained which, if nothing else, empowers the individual to address the problems they are facing.

If you don't have someone you can discuss it with, then take some quiet time to brainstorm with your career check-up, a blank sheet of paper, and perhaps the career pages of the newspaper, or the internet.

Your initial aim should be to:

- ◆ evaluate, renew and re-energise your career goals
- ◆ clarify your personal values and priorities, including balancing the competing demands of work and family
- ◆ explore whether a job change or career change will be needed and beneficial
- ◆ develop a concrete and realistic plan for changing job or career
- ◆ get your CV up to date and as attractive as possible. There are several firms and internet sites which can advise you on this.
- ◆ explore temporary or contract employment opportunities as a transitional option to get you out of an unhappy situation and buy you thinking time.

Try asking yourself these questions.

1. What are your major and secondary skills, interests and capabilities?
2. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses?
3. What part of your work do you enjoy most, find challenging or gratifying?
4. What do you dislike about your job (irritating, boring, etc.?)
5. List your network contacts, both in and out of the legal profession; clients, associations, etc.
6. What do you do for fun? Can any of these lead to a potential job or career choice?
7. Are you prepared to take a pay cut in favour of greater job satisfaction?
8. Are you prepared to requalify in another career, with all the necessary cost, study and training that will entail?
9. Has the time come to go it alone in that big business venture you've always wanted to try?

Making the Change

Changing jobs is in the top ten in any list of sources of stress, immediately following bereavement, divorce and moving house, but it needn't be traumatic if you think it through calmly and quietly and make considered decisions. Your financial and family position obviously needs to be considered before you hand in your notice and unless you cannot bear

to stay in your present position, it is only prudent to secure alternative employment, or a training place, before handing in your notice. If you need additional training or skills for your new career, and cannot afford a period without an income, consider taking night classes whilst still working.

Check your contract and note how much notice you need to give. If it is as little as a month, you could put off handing in your notice until you have secured an alternative position – most employers expect to wait at least a month before you start work. If you need to give three months notice, then, again, most employers expect that an executive will have that notice period and will be prepared to wait. If it is considerably longer e.g. six months for a Partner, you may have to try and bargain your way out early or negotiate with your new employer to wait that long. It may be important to plan ahead and build up a cash reserve to live on whilst you look for a new post and / or put in place all the skills and training you need before going for any interviews.

Ideally, try to take at least a week off between finishing one position and starting another. This gives you a chance to recover and take stock, and to spend some quality time with your family, without using precious holiday entitlement.

Finally, remember that the grass is not always greener on the other side. It is not always easy to start somewhere new, doing work which is unfamiliar, with new surroundings, systems and people, especially if you have been used to being in control.