

Factsheet: **Stress**

We can all get stressed at times. We all react differently to pressure and not all stress is bad – it can be motivating. However, serious and prolonged stress can be very upsetting and cause serious physical and mental health concerns

Stress is by far the most common reason for calls to the LawCare helpline. Many working or studying in the legal sector have a driven, perfectionist personality that makes them more prone to stress. They often work long hours in pressurised situations, and believe they should always be in control. Feeling unable to cope with work can be particularly difficult.

“After talking through my worries with LawCare, the burden lifted. They sent me practical advice and offered the support of a LawCare peer supporter. Ann called the next day and I really felt she was there for me. I had the one-to-one support I craved and was able to talk to her about what I might do to resolve my problems.”

Symptoms of stress

- SLEEP DEPRIVATION:** This is a vicious circle: worries about work lead to lack of sleep and lack of sleep makes it difficult to perform well at work.
- PHYSICAL CHANGES:** Headaches, skin complaints, frequent colds, aching muscles and digestive problems are often indicators of stress.
- DRINKING AND SMOKING:** Many lawyers turn to drinking and smoking to escape from the pressures of everyday life. However, alcohol is a depressant and smoking creates a new stress: the craving for a cigarette.
- EATING:** You may find yourself comfort eating or skipping meals.
- MOOD SWINGS:** You may become irritated and frustrated, get very angry one minute and feel fine the next. Other people may complain that you are short-tempered, selfish and difficult.
- PANIC ATTACKS:** These can happen suddenly, for no clear reason. You may feel sick, short of breath, shake, sweat and experience a sense of unreality, as if you’re detached from the world around you.

Managing stress

It is important to take steps to control stress before it overwhelms you. There may be little you can do to change external pressures, but you can learn how to deal with them. It is better for your health and career to deal with the situation and change things than to struggle on. You are not alone – support is available.

What’s causing your stress? The first stage in managing stress is to identify the source so that you can plan a strategy to tackle it. Common issues identified by our callers include:

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| Job insecurity and lack of status | Long, antisocial or inflexible hours |
| Impossible targets | Lack of support or supervision |
| Unsupportive colleagues/manager or having no friends at work | Overwhelming responsibilities or difficulties at home |

Stress diary Keeping a stress diary over two or three weeks may help you to identify why you are stressed. When you feel that you're not coping, write down how you're feeling, including any physical symptoms. Note what you're doing and have just been doing. You can then start looking for clues to your stress. As you work through the diary, you may realise that something that appeared insignificant at the time could be a major stress trigger and you need to make changes.

Talk about it Don't stay silent. Legal professionals, in particular, may feel it's a sign of weakness to admit they aren't coping, but it's better to address problems early, before they get out of control.

Talk informally to a trusted colleague or your supervisor if you feel they might be helpful. Refer to your diary notes of triggers for stress or aspects of work you are finding overwhelming. Many callers find it difficult to tell their employers or chambers that they are stressed, fearing they will be unsympathetic. But when the stress escalates and perhaps becomes a problem, many partners, colleagues and supervisors say they had been unaware of the situation and would have offered support if they had known. Make sure they know.

If the stress is largely a response to your work being criticised, make a list of those criticisms and ask for a meeting with your supervisor to clarify what you are doing wrong and how you can improve. Analyse their responses. Are the criticisms justified or unfair? If justified, work out how to address the issue and request support and training if appropriate.

Tips

- ▶ Try to be objective: ask yourself why you are letting things annoy you
- ▶ Talk to someone you trust
- ▶ Prioritise: don't over commit; learn to say "no" or "I can't do that until next week unless I drop something else"
- ▶ Use your full holiday entitlement at work; or book time off from chambers, take a lunch break and short breaks during the day
- ▶ Do one thing at a time; break complex tasks down into manageable chunks
- ▶ Eat healthily, exercise, avoid alcohol and smoking
- ▶ Panic attacks: try to keep calm, slow your breathing, wait for it to pass
- ▶ Think through your options: should you change job within the legal profession or consider a different career entirely?

Crisis control

When you feel the stress building, stop, breathe deeply and slowly, and work through this list:

- ▶ What is the worst thing that could happen if I didn't do this?
- ▶ Will this still matter next month?
- ▶ Would I feel better about this if I broke it down into smaller sections and tackled it a piece at a time?
- ▶ Must this be done now, or can I delay it until I am feeling better about it?
- ▶ Can I pass this on to someone else?
- ▶ Am I trying to do too many things at once?
- ▶ Would talking to someone about this make me feel better?
- ▶ Do I need a holiday/good night's sleep before I tackle this?
- ▶ Don't procrastinate – the more you worry about it, the more time you have lost

Treatment for stress

Many people find counselling and CBT (cognitive behaviour therapy) helps with stress. **Mindfulness** can also help calm the mind. Check out the **Headspace** website www.headspace.com or app for more information.