

Factsheet: **Worried about a Colleague?**

If you are working with someone who appears to be struggling, is frequently anxious, short-tempered or low and may be depressed, please get in touch with LawCare, we can help.

How do I know there's a problem?

Out-of-character behaviour may include:

- ▶ Irritability, mood swings, anger and short temper
- ▶ Lack of energy, concentration and motivation
- ▶ Frequent bouts of illness
- ▶ Failure to achieve targets despite apparent commitment and long hours
- ▶ Overconfidence despite making mistakes
- ▶ Withdrawal from normal social interaction
- ▶ Deteriorating relationships with managers and/or colleagues
- ▶ Neglect of personal dress and hygiene
- ▶ Coming into the workplace smelling of alcohol
- ▶ Over-reacting when challenged

Consider asking your colleague in private what is wrong and how you might help. Suggest they discuss the situation with a trusted colleague in chambers or in the office, with HR or with an understanding supervisor and encourage them to phone LawCare's confidential helpline.

Possible causes

There could be many reasons for your colleague's behaviour, including:

Depression

Many people will experience depression at some point in their lives. It is not a character flaw, self-indulgent or a sign of a weak personality. Depression affects the entire body, not just the mind, and it can affect any one of us, all ages and genders, all ethnic backgrounds and economic groups. Many people will try to hide their depression from employers, managers and colleagues. Early treatment means less time lost at work, increased productivity and the avoidance of costly consequences both for the individual and the profession.

If you believe a colleague is showing signs of depression, encourage them to see their GP immediately. With effective medication and counselling, most people will recover. Most organisations will be willing to support a colleague receiving treatment for depression through their recovery, and will make reasonable adjustments to make their return to work as comfortable as possible.

Stress

Colleagues under stress can be short-tempered and will often not be doing their best work despite putting in long hours. A review of their workload can help, ideally with supervisors or senior staff, to ensure the colleague is not being expected to take on more work than is feasible, or take on work for which they have not been adequately trained or are not being adequately supervised. Staffing levels and holiday cover availability should also be addressed.

Different people have different tolerance for stress, and respond to stress in different ways. One person's motivating pressure can be another person's intolerable stress. It doesn't mean that anyone is stronger or weaker than anyone else, but people are entitled to work in an environment which does not put their mental health at risk. Encouraging your colleague to take a lunch break or a holiday can help, and to talk to someone when they feel things are getting on top of them.

Bullying

At LawCare we hear from many legal professionals who tell us their mental health is being affected by a colleague who is making life unpleasant for them. Bullying takes many forms, from deliberately overloading someone with work to withholding information, constant criticism, or belittling the person in front of colleagues. It can be overt or covert.

Firms can also be guilty of this behaviour. Employers who treat their staff badly – failing to provide them with training, equipment and support, or demanding that they do work for which they are not qualified or experienced – are, in effect, bullying them. Denying rights such as sick leave and holiday, or not having systems in place whereby individuals can safely air their grievances, can cause feelings of frustration and distress and may make some people ill, mentally or physically.

If you believe that bullying is a factor in your colleague's distress, encourage them to phone LawCare's helpline.

How to talk to a colleague about mental health

Talking about mental health at work can be difficult. Some may find it helps to be open, and feel relieved that things are not hidden any more, but they may also experience negative reactions. It's important for people to remember they're not alone, and that many people in work have mental health problems. It's the individual's choice to talk about their mental health with colleagues or employers, there are no set rules, but talking may help to get the practical support needed to stay healthy at work.

It is also not necessary to be an expert in mental health to talk to a colleague who may be experiencing an issue. People may feel anxious about starting the conversation, but it's important to remember that talking could make all the difference to a colleague's mental health.

The conversation could be started with a simple 'How are you?' Offering to make the person a cup of tea, inviting them somewhere private for a chat, or suggesting popping out to a nearby café or for a walk, can all get people talking. Setting aside enough time to talk and switching the phone off are also good things to do in this situation.

Addiction

Denial is common to many addicts, and getting the individual to admit they have a problem can be difficult. However, their legal career depends on their recovery and, with persuasion, many addicts will reach a point where they decide to access professional support.

One of the most successful programmes for alcoholism is the 12-step method employed by Alcoholics Anonymous and other organisations. Other 12-step groups for addiction include Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous. These groups are free and there are meetings all over Ireland.

In-patient treatment and regular follow-up is very effective for addiction, but there are considerable costs involved. Some organisations may pay for rehabilitation, and certain types of private medical insurance cover treatment for alcoholism.

There are some useful tips on how to start that conversation from **Mental Health First Aid Ireland [MHFA]** www.mhfaireland.com. The tips are:

Keep the discussion positive and supportive – explore the issues and how to help

Be mindful of body language – make sure it's open and non-confrontational

Be empathetic and take them seriously

Don't be tempted to say things like 'pull yourself together'

Ask questions such as 'How are you feeling at the moment?', 'How long have you been feeling like this?', 'Is there anyone you feel you can ask for support?', 'Are there any work issues that are contributing to how you are feeling?', and 'Is there anything I can do to help?'

Listen carefully, don't interrupt, and try to be non-judgmental

Be reassuring and signpost them to support such as LawCare, HR, another colleague, or suggest they visit their GP