

# Work stress *the* *bald facts*

## **Sharon Glynn** *advises on how to recognise and deal with symptoms of stress*

**W**hile the saying 'stress at work can make you bald' is not strictly true, a recent study showed work stress poses a real and immediate threat we should be taking active steps to reduce both our exposure to, and levels of, stress is clear.

Recognising the symptoms of stress will help you identify whether your health is at risk. Possible symptoms you may experience might be one or more of the following:

- Anxiety
- Headaches
- Tearfulness / depression
- Tiredness / apathetic behaviour
- Developing dependencies

If you are experiencing symptoms of stress, and have confirmed that there are no underlying medical conditions for your symptoms, consider the source of your stress. Potential sources include work, relationships, family and money problems.

### **Triggers**

There are many possible triggers for workplace stress. As well as deadlines and competition, which were specifically mentioned in the study as risks to health, as solicitors we may also deal with court and CPR timetables and financial targets. Add to this high, and sometimes, dare I say it, unreasonable, client expectations, long hours and heavy workloads, the potential for health problems is very real. This list does not even cover generic sources of stress; conflict with colleagues and management styles, lack of light and space, and so on.

### **Remedy**

Once the source of stress has been identified, you can work on a remedy to the situation. Whatever the cause, speak to your supervisors, remember they are not mind readers and they will not be able to help you if you do not talk to them.

If your problem is workload / responsibility based, consider whether your difficulties result from the size of your caseload or the way you manage it. Speak to your supervisor if your caseload does not reflect your experience. If it is too small, you may worry about billing targets and job security. Equally, if your caseload is too big, and you fail to act, this may result in an avoidable negligence claim if you miss that important deadline because you just couldn't keep track...

If you feel effective case management is a problem, attend a time management course. Several of the main course providers run a time and stress management course. Such courses also give you CPD points which will take another worry off your mind.

Management styles and colleagues can be a source of major anxiety as we struggle with working practices and personality styles.. Dealing with such problems are difficult due to the personal and sensitive nature of the subject. One word said out of tone could affect friendships, working relationships or even career prospects.

### **Good to talk**

One solution is to talk to the offender. If this is too mammoth a task, speak to others in the office. Choose those who appear to get on well with the colleague you have difficulties with, to get some insight into their character. If you feel that the offenders' behaviour is tantamount to bullying, take immediate steps. Speak to your supervisor, or their supervising partner / the managing partner and make sure action is taken.

If your working environment is adding to your stress levels, be practical. While unlikely that a move into a different part of the office will be possible, think about what it is that is making you unhappy and see where you can make changes. For example, bring in a plant, put up photographs, get defective equipment replaced etc.

### **Practical support**

In recognition of the specific problems facing lawyers there are organisations offering practical support and advice. LawCare (0800 279 6888 [www.lawcare.org.uk](http://www.lawcare.org.uk)), formerly SolCare, is partly funded by, but completely independent from, the Law Society and offers a free and confidential support and advisory service for lawyers, their staff and their immediate families to deal with health issues and related emotional difficulties.

Those of you requiring assistance can discuss your problems with a helpline volunteer, also a lawyer, who will assist in determining the precise nature of what is troubling you. You may then, where appropriate, be referred to other specialist organisations or offered support from a volunteer (another lawyer) who has been through similar experiences.

Help with personal, financial or professional matters can be found at the Solicitors Assistance Scheme (020 7320 5795 [www.solicitorsassistancescheme.org](http://www.solicitorsassistancescheme.org)), which is supported by over 100 lawyers. As with LawCare, telephone calls are confidential and with the quote "it saved my sanity" on the homepage it is surely worth a try. The initial advice is free but you may have to pay for subsequent advice.

If, in the pursuit of solving your clients' problems you find that you have become one of them, the Lawyerline (0870 606 2588) offers advice and assistance on how to deal with client complaints.

Stress requires action but whatever you try to do, have patience, there is no miracle solution. Try not to put additional pressure on yourself by expecting instant results and don't be afraid to ask for help.

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*Is your health at risk?*