



KEEPING ABOVE

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YOUR HEAD

LEGAL WATER

Life as a lawyer is not only a taxing one but also one that has never-ending demands. As a result of the demands being placed on us on a daily basis our work-life balance monitor occasionally becomes unbalanced. This is bearable on a short term basis as it enables you to recalibrate when the task is completed. However, what happens to you and more importantly, to your mental health and wellbeing when you have demands on your work-life balance over prolonged periods?

The way people deal with life and work stressors is varied. Some people cope very well. Whether that is because of someone's DNA, or life-learned coping strategies, or a combination of both, is a debate for another time. The literature in the last few years is to the effect that lawyers are one of the most stressed, drug dependent (prescription medication) and mentally unwell group of people in our society. The focus of this article is to outline measures that some law firms and government legal departments are doing to deal with this issue with the aim of raising awareness. This article is not an exhaustive list of what is being offered, nor does it in any way detract from the most important factor, which is to monitor your own mental health and wellbeing and to seek professional help if you feel you are not coping. Furthermore, do not be embarrassed or ashamed to call out for help.

Personally, I was completely unaware of how stress was affecting me. My first experience was early on in my legal career when I was drafting written submissions. These are not easy for the most experienced of lawyers. A tear rolled down my face whilst I was working at my computer. I wiped the tear away and got on with my submissions. A short time later another tear came down my face and I started to feel short of breath. I looked at my watch and realised that it was 2.30am and I was on my 18th hour of straight work.

I have spoken to a number of lawyers both junior and senior in the legal profession and my experiences are not dissimilar to theirs. All I can say is that the need to monitor your mental health and wellbeing is essential. One thing I have learnt is that the longer you stay in the legal profession the more skills you acquire (somehow osmotically) to cope with the daily stressors of being a lawyer.

The following are some of the activities that law firms and legal government departments are doing for their employees:

1. Yoga – having an external facilitator come to the office and provide classes. You can learn things such as “the meaning of downward dog.”
2. Pilates – again having an external facilitator attend your office.
3. Extensive lunchtime health and wellbeing seminars such as ‘resilience and mental toughness’, ‘heart health’, ‘breast cancer awareness’ and ‘sleep and fatigue’.
4. Subsidising a gym membership. The literature is clear that physical exercise aids in controlling your stress.
5. Winter cooking demonstrations – learn how to make a yummy laksa or a delicious curry. Eating well and having a balanced diet is essential to maintaining mental health and wellbeing.
6. “R U OK” day – which is hosting a morning tea and awareness session for staff and allows them to have a morning break and social chat with colleagues about themselves and their lives.
7. Free counselling sessions to employees and their immediate family. As a member of the Law Society of WA you are entitled to free counselling.
8. Sponsoring employees to participate in such activities like the

HBF Fun Run, corporate triathlons and Ride to Work Day. Personally, doing a triathlon would increase my stress levels rather than reduce them, but hey whatever works for you go for it!

9. Massage – having an external massage therapist attend the office. This is more up my alley. A day spa treatment would be better - just putting it out there employers.
10. Launching a ‘Personal health optimiser’ – which is an interactive online health and wellbeing community that generates personalised health reports, assists staff to set and monitor their progress against health and fitness goals, provides ongoing support in terms of tips and discussion forums.
11. Group walking – working at the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions (WA) we have formed a group of employees who go for walks along the river.
12. Providing fruit to employees – healthy body, healthy mind as the saying goes.

As can be seen from the above there are many things that employers can provide to employees to assist in monitoring their mental health and wellbeing. From an employer's perspective the mental health and wellbeing of employees will not only result in a more positive working environment but ultimately be more productive and cost effective when compared with employees who are disgruntled, take sick leave, make stress claims or resign. This places more pressure on other lawyers in your firm to take up the slack with the absence of these lawyers who are off work due to mental health issues.

NOTES

1. Any view expressed in this article does not reflect the views of the Director.