

Psychological first aid for lawyers

To mark World Mental Health Day, **Angus Lyon** advises lawyers on recognising and responding to the signs of burnout in themselves and their colleagues



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Now adopted by police forces across the UK and overseas, Project Griffin was developed by the City of London police and introduced in central London over a decade ago with the Metropolitan police force to advise and train organisations on security and counter-terrorism.

The project has shown that victims respond in different ways after a bomb explosion. The majority will be numbed by the shock of the event, a minority will be thrown into total panic, and another small group will retain the presence of mind to help fellow victims. Clearly, in such extreme circumstances those who retain the composure to help others are of most immediate use.

This year, 10 October marked World Mental Health Day. The theme of the day this year was 'psychological first aid' (PFA). One immediate application of

PFA is in providing support in the aftermath of crisis events such as terrorist atrocities, war, or famine. A less obvious, but more widespread, application of PFA is with individuals who experience overwhelming stress that is cumulative rather than sudden.

Changes happen to all of us over which we have no control, and this applies to lawyers as much as anyone. The experience of most who contact the lawyers' mental health charity LawCare is of a deterioration in mental health over an extended period of time and of continuing to work under increasingly intolerable pressure. PFA is equally applicable in situations in which stresses are sudden or cumulative.

Recognise

How do we recognise signs of burnout in ourselves and those in our teams?

When mental illness develops, changes will be noticed to a greater or lesser extent by others who work with us. Broadly, these will relate to attendance, productivity, and mood. There may be an increase in unexplained absences or sick leave. People may become more disorganised, work more slowly, and make mistakes more often. There may be a tendency to avoid delegating tasks or to try to work too hard. Stressed staff may become indecisive and decision making can be impaired. There may be a noticeable increase in dissatisfied clients.

Changes in mood will almost certainly be noticed by co-

workers – for example, more frequent irritability or tearfulness, overreacting to difficult situations, tiredness or lack of motivation, apparent loss of self-esteem, a tendency to withdraw from social contact, and possibly a lack of interest in self-presentation and appearance. Although normally disguised, there may be an increased use of alcohol, drugs, or tobacco.



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Respond

It may be hard to detect these changes in co-workers. When noticed, it can be far harder to know how to raise this with the person in question.

How do we break the ice? We need to listen. And we need to do so in a non-judgemental way. We need to be curious, but not intrusive, about the other person's experience. Even if their response may be negative and they say that they are OK, the ice has been broken and they will know that somebody else is

trying to get alongside them and help at a difficult time.

We can ask what we might be able to do to help. This will give them space to reflect about what has been going on and what help might be available to them.

Refer

Once the ice has been broken, then practical steps can be considered. We can point to help that might be available from medical or counselling professionals. In particular, as far as lawyers are concerned, LawCare's free helpline can be an invaluable first port of call. And we can let them know that they can keep the conversation going with us for as long as needed.

Respect

Not only should we respect others' privacy and confidences but, probably above everything else, we should be aware of a likely loss of self-respect in people who feel overwhelmed and burnt out. The stigma that attaches to mental illness is usually the main factor that prevents people from seeking out help in the first place.

Although circumstances may overwhelm us at times, there are steps that we can take to regain control and help ourselves and others. Preparing ourselves to respond in a crisis situation, whether after a sudden terrorist attack or a colleague's gradual burnout, may not guarantee that we do so with presence of mind and composure, but it will certainly increase the chances that we do. **SJ**