



TYLER WILSON

LASTING THE COURSE

A VIEWPOINT ON MENTAL FITNESS

“It is by no means easy to work at peak performance throughout a 35-year career – especially when the challenge is not just to sustain your levels but to keep on improving them.

In this Viewpoint, we collaborate with our new associate, Dr Laura Haigh*, to take a look at mental fitness as the key to professional longevity.”

🔗 WHAT BRINGS US HERE?

Take a tour of any floor in your office and look around you. What you will see is an array of high-performing, high-achieving experts actively demonstrating their excellence on behalf of clients. They are well-regarded and well-rewarded for their efforts. Their workplace is thoughtfully set up to support their endeavours, across desks, floors, offices and time-zones. Unlike many of their counterparts in the corporate world, they have a realistic expectation every day of achieving the triple crown of career satisfaction: autonomy, mastery and purpose. In all these respects, they inhabit an optimal working environment.

Yes, work is rewarding – not just in terms of compensation, gratification and validation but also because it enables us to express something more fundamental about ourselves. For lawyers, this often means being able to right wrongs, win arguments, save people from themselves, eradicate mistakes, demonstrate cleverness or find acceptance in a group. Yet each of these is driven by a concern to avoid the opposite: respectively, rejection, failure, unfairness, mistakes, ignorance and exclusion.



❶ BREAKING THE VICIOUS CYCLE

So, inevitably, the rewards of work will always bring anxiety: in the tasks themselves, the related choices that we make, our interactions with others, and the scrutiny we encounter along the way. Avoiding what we fear by following our instincts can propel us in directions which may provide short-term gratification but nonetheless do us damage. This can easily become a vicious cycle in which negative thoughts evoke negative feelings and prompt negative behaviours.

Because the role of the lawyer is to be objective, we become adept at pushing our feelings away, often to the point that we can't even name them. The cycle from thoughts to feelings to behaviours simply displaces the problem rather than solves it. When we lie in bed, we worriedly keep ourselves awake by rehearsing the importance of sleep to our schedule tomorrow. If we get tetchy in a conversation, we admonish ourselves angrily for the shame of having lost control. On the final lap of a proof-read, the thought of missing something makes us lose our place and have to start again.

❷ NOTICING UNHELPFUL PATTERNS

The patterns are self-reinforcing, but first they must be identified before they can be broken. Many people who are too busy to spend time thinking about themselves have had their eyes opened by keeping a diary in which they record the routines that pattern their lives and start to give each part a pleasure rating. What they discover often suggests that the help they have prescribed for themselves is in fact only making matters worse.

Thus, those feeling mildly depressed or listless may decide to cope with their workload by cancelling their social life. Work-life balance can't come from reducing home life to a steady state: time away from work should be devoted to pleasures every bit as intense as work is gruelling, doing activities that don't simply replicate our challenge-reward pleasure system but free the non-lawyer part of ourselves from captivity. We must be demanding consumers of our leisure time, spending it judiciously rather than packing it with low-grade filler, such as bad TV, Sudokus, and junk food.

Likewise, those feeling anxious or panicky may soothe themselves by relaxing their iron grip of discipline on a particular pastime – giving themselves a little pocket of chaos in which to splurge without rules

or limits. It shouldn't be smoking, eating or drinking, although it often is. These are not problems but symptoms. They are warning signs of what could become obsessive or excessive.

❸ DEALING WITH THE SYMPTOMS

So look again around your office. Survey your capable colleagues, none of whom are unwell, all of whom are performing at a high level. Yet in their routine ways of meeting the challenges of partnership are the very symptoms they need to monitor. A tendency to withdraw. The occasional outburst or flash of aggression. Self-criticism. A fondness for catastrophisation. A proclivity for rumination. Obsessive checking. Procrastination. Black and white thinking. Negativity. The full list is longer.

The path to partnership may be steep and arduous but, once achieved, the gradient only increases. To expect to arrive fully equipped to survive its many challenges is unrealistic. Everyone needs to consider that what got them there may not be enough to keep them on top; what they used to get away with now comes at a higher cost; and what once might have been their sole preoccupation now has to compete with marriage, family, moving house, choosing schools, elderly parents, financial planning and all the upheavals that accompany them.

Coaching is premised on the idea that everyone has something they would benefit from changing about their life or work. The time for change is before the talk turns to 'problems' of resilience, stress and mental health (and before more therapy-based intervention is required). It is unwise to assume that everything you do is an immutable trait, or that the coping mechanisms you use now are intrinsic to your success. As a 'type', lawyers are known to be extreme in their need for achievement, for control and for affirmation or reward. If the best way to achieve all three is to stop or modify what you are doing, you will, won't you?

**Dr Laura Haigh is a Chartered Clinical Psychologist and Cognitive Behavioural Therapist with long experience of working with senior professionals. We work with Laura to provide Mental Fitness workshops for law firm partners.*

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