



TYLER WILSON

HITTING THE WALL

A VIEWPOINT ON MENTAL FITNESS

“In this Covid marathon, we may be hitting the wall. The end is in prospect but not yet in sight. In the meantime, the repetitiveness of ‘groundhog day’ is weighing ever-more heavily for many.

In this **Viewpoint**, in collaboration with our colleague, Dr Laura Haigh, we discuss how lockdown merits law firms continuing to fine-tune their approach to mental fitness.”

Lockdown has been a fulcrum of learning for law firms, on many levels. We have moved beyond an initial enthusiasm for Zoom to a frustration at its limitations and intrusions. Having at first rejoiced in the flexibility of WFH, we now bemoan its conjoined siblings: shop from home, dine from home, school from home, holiday from home.

For many, social isolation describes a disharmony not just with those from whom we are separated but also those with whom we are confined. Even without the added seasonal gloom of winter, we should perhaps measure viral impact not just by numbers of deaths but also by the accompanying loss of living.



RESPECTING DIFFERENCE

When we suspect that someone is struggling, it is always difficult to know what to do. For law firms, this problem is multiplied a thousand-fold. As an employer, HR can prescribe help in only a few, tightly-budgeted, ways. They are not themselves experts in the field. The everyday language of 'stress', 'anxiety' and 'depression' is not calibrated in the same way as medical classifications, and may mask any number of discrete problems: money, break-ups, bereavement, conflict, food, drink, insomnia, loneliness, separation, and so on. Tricky to know, therefore, whether counselling or CBT or other interventions might offer the most suitable route. Now may be the time for HR teams to consider whether they, and those in the firm seeking support, might benefit from clearer guidance, a pathway if you like, to the most suitable form of support for different situations.

HIDDEN DARKNESS

There are signs that the pandemic is spawning a threat to our wellbeing of a wholly different order, and it matters not that work is collateral to rather than causal of it. According to the latest (15/01/21) ONS study into the social impacts of lockdown, levels of public anxiety have returned to the heights of April 2020, while feelings of satisfaction and happiness with life have fallen to new Covid lows. Lockdown comprises a set of conditions that become more inimical to mental wellbeing through repetition and also shield tell-tale symptoms from an employer's view.

The good and bad news about repetition is that we become what we repeat. Many of us may be trapped in our own personal doom-loop without even recognising it: the obsessive perfectionists busting a gut to be the perfect worker and the perfect parent in parallel rather than in sequence; the compulsive extraverts left floundering in the lonely echoes of their internal narrative; the simmering self-critics who put themselves through a spin-cycle of self-loathing, retreat and recrimination. There are many varieties: we each mix our own poison.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

In our work as coaches, it is a symptom of these times that we are increasingly drawn into issues that cross the boundary between work and personal life. It is for this reason that we work with [Dr Laura Haigh](#), Chartered Clinical Psychologist and Cognitive Behavioural (CBT) Therapist: at those boundaries where our expertise ends, hers begins.

Until now, many law firms have tended to encourage staff to maintain wellbeing through various forms of self-care. If working from home is to be normalised, it may now be prudent to offer recovery strategies for those for whom remoteness becomes a problem.

CBT – probably the most widely-prescribed and evidence-based treatment for anxiety and depression as recommended by NICE guidelines (www.nice.org.uk) – focuses on interrupting the cycles of negativity in thinking and behaviour. It works because it hands people back their sense of agency rather than entrusting it to experts. There is always more that can be done to stay in balance: CBT trains us how to do it. Importantly, it can be used to prevent, as well as to treat, a deterioration in mental well-being.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

The *first step* is to plan ahead and learn to incorporate some sense of balance, pleasure and achievement. This means punctuating activities with mood-improving treats and distractions. It could be conversation, crosswords or cake as much as meditation, mindfulness or muesli – whatever can genuinely be looked forward to. It also means avoiding spill-over – keeping everything in the day rather than holding on to grudges, arguments or disappointments. The evidence shows that focusing first on changes in behaviour gets the most rapid improvement in mood.

The *second step* is to replace the damaged internal conditioner that stains the outlook black or grey. This is not a matter of re-casting Eeyore to play the role of Tigger, but about stepping in to break the chain of unhelpful associations between certain thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This allows individuals to recognise the part they play in dragging themselves down, rather than seeking to blame it all on external circumstances.

The *third step* is to help respect one's own boundaries. It is not weak to have limits; it is a strength to acknowledge them. Stress, anxiety and depression are indicators that we are bumping up against ours. The adrenaline and cortisol produced by the body's natural stress response is very helpful as a short-term booster but, over the long term, can be disruptive and harmful, including as a direct cause of anxiety and depression. Think of it as a chemical process, not a psychological one.

Viewed in this way, work better resembles a team sport than an endurance race. There is no set distance to travel, no record time, no requirement to compete unaided. If there is a finishing line in sight, it is only for lockdown, and winter and vaccination. Making help available along the way allows everyone a better chance of finishing the course.

Dr Laura Haigh works with HR teams to discuss appropriate pathways to different forms of support. She also offers webinars for team leaders and for the wider firm on the use of CBT strategies to address stress, anxiety and negative thoughts.



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