

Worried about a Colleague?

If you are working with someone who appears to be struggling, is frequently anxious, short-tempered or low and depressed, please get in touch with LawCare, we can help.

HOW DO I KNOW THERE'S A PROBLEM?

Out-of-character behaviour may include:

- ▶ Irritability, mood swings, anger and short temper
- ▶ Lack of energy, concentration and motivation
- ▶ Frequent bouts of illness
- ▶ Failure to achieve targets despite apparent commitment and long hours
- ▶ Overconfidence despite making mistakes
- ▶ Withdrawal from normal social interaction
- ▶ Deteriorating relationships with managers and/or colleagues
- ▶ Neglect of personal dress and hygiene
- ▶ Coming into the workplace smelling of alcohol
- ▶ Overreacting when challenged

Consider asking your colleague in private what is wrong and how you might help. Suggest they discuss the situation with a trusted colleague in chambers, HR or with an understanding supervisor and encourage them to phone LawCare's confidential helpline.

POSSIBLE CAUSES

There could be many reasons for your colleague's behaviour, including:

Depression

One in five people will experience depression at some point in their lives. It is not a character flaw, self-indulgent or a sign of a weak personality. Depression affects the entire body, not just the mind, and it can affect anyone of us, all ages and genders, all ethnic backgrounds and economic groups. Many people will try to hide their depression from employers, managers and colleagues. Early treatment means less time lost at work, increased productivity and the avoidance of costly consequences.

If you believe a colleague is showing signs of depression, encourage them to see their GP immediately. With effective medication and counselling, most people will recover. Most organisations will be willing to support a colleague receiving treatment for depression through their recovery until their return to work.

Stress

Colleagues under stress can be short-tempered and will often not be doing their best work despite putting in long hours. A review of their workload can help, ideally with supervisors or senior staff, to ensure the colleague is not being expected to take on more work than is feasible, or take on work for which they have not been adequately trained or are being adequately supervised. Staffing levels and holiday cover availability should also be addressed.

Different people have different tolerance for stress, and respond to stress in different ways. One person's motivating pressure can be another person's intolerable stress. It doesn't mean that anyone is stronger or weaker than anyone else, but people are entitled to work in an environment which does not put their mental health at risk. Encouraging your colleague to take a lunch break, or a holiday can help.

Addiction

Addiction is an illness, but only the person themselves can take the decision to address it and change their behaviour. Denial is common to many addicts, and getting the individual to admit they have a problem can be difficult. However, their legal career depends on their recovery and, with persuasion, many addicts will reach a point where they decide to access professional support.

One of the most successful programme for alcoholism is the 12-step method employed by Alcoholics Anonymous and many addiction treatment centres. AA is free and there are meetings all over the UK and Ireland.

In-patient treatment and regular follow-up are very effective for addiction, but there are considerable costs involved. Some organisations may pay for rehabilitation, and certain types of private medical insurance cover treatment for alcoholism.

Bullying

At LawCare we hear from many legal professionals who tell us their mental health is being affected by a colleague who is making life unpleasant for them. Bullying takes many forms, from deliberately overloading someone with work to withholding information, constant and unconstructive criticism, or belittling the person in front of colleagues. It can be overt or covert.

Firms and chambers can also be guilty of this behaviour. Employers who treat their staff badly – failing to provide them with training, equipment and support, or demanding that they do work for which they are not qualified or experienced – are, in effect, bullying them. Denying rights such as sick leave and holiday, or not having systems in place whereby individuals can safely air their grievances, can cause feelings of frustration and distress.

If you believe that bullying is a factor in your colleague's distress, encourage them to phone LawCare's helpline.

“I was told by my supervisor on my first day, ‘I am going to break you’. She overloaded me with work, berated me publicly and was unpredictable and inconsistent – sweet and helpful sometimes, obnoxious and insulting at others. Another member of the department left under the strain. I was signed off with depression.”

*Call LawCare's free, independent, confidential helpline on **0800 279 6888** for immediate support or visit www.lawcare.org.uk*