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## **Some positive news about depression**

**Depression is one of the X factors affecting the legal profession. In a two-part coverage, Cameron Cooper discusses initiatives that Freehills is pursuing to help employees, while Greg Dwyer from The College of Law outlines the profession's latest strategy to combat the ailment.**

*Cameron Cooper*

For those in the legal profession who cannot grasp the seriousness of the threat posed by depression, Gareth Bennett cites some illuminating statistics.

The director of people and development at Freehills notes that lawyers are up to three times more likely to suffer from depression than employees in other professions, and about 30 per cent of solicitors will suffer depressive symptoms to the point of disability during the course of their careers.

"Clearly, it's a big issue," Bennett says.

If such numbers are not disturbing enough, he throws in another bomb. Depression is forecast to be the number one killer of people in Australia by 2020, ahead of heart disease.

"It's a seriously debilitating thing."

While Bennett agrees that depression and other associated illnesses are also increasing across society in general, he adds that "we are seeing higher peaks of it (in the legal profession) than in other areas".

"So I think maybe it's hitting us faster and earlier than it is in other parts of society."

### **Fighting back**

Freehills is one of a number of law firms that have joined forces through [resilience@law](mailto:resilience@law), an initiative designed to raise awareness about depression and promote strategies to address the problem (see accompanying article).

One of the key elements of resilience@law is a DVD in which lawyers of all backgrounds talk about their personal experiences with depression. Freehills partner Matthew Stutsel recounted how he once tried to commit suicide before turning his life around and now being a full-functioning partner.

Bennett explains: “Actually getting people to tell their stories and to demonstrate that it doesn’t have to be career limiting is the most powerful thing. Those messages are incredibly powerful.”

Freehills has adopted a “bottom up and top down approach” to tackling depression in an effort to ensure it is addressed at all levels of the firm. It is also acting on the comments of Australian of the Year, Professor Patrick McGorry, who reports that depression kicks in under the age of 25 for three in four people. So while awareness of depression is being encouraged across Freehills, there has been a particular concentration of efforts within the firm’s ‘younger’ group. Part of the approach is to call on young lawyers to strike a balance between life and work.

“At that age it’s all bravado and working long hours is part of the culture and it’s the thing to do,” Bennett says. “It’s only later that it starts to show through in terms of that becoming stress, which becomes depression.”

Despite taking a proactive approach, Bennett does not begin to believe that Freehills has tamed the black dog.

“We certainly don’t see ourselves as being immune to it.”

### **Tackling stigmas**

With many major firms signing up to the resilience@law initiative, Bennett is hopeful that a joint approach will be effective.

“We thought getting the law firms together would be the most powerful thing that we could do because obviously there’s a high competitive element between Mallesons, Allens, Clayton Utz and Blake Dawson and ourselves, but we see this as an issue that is above and beyond competition. We want to demonstrate that the law can be a great place to be and we want to make sure that we protect our people regardless of where they go to work.”

One of the chief goals of the resilience@law program is to break down stereotypes and stigmas around depression.

“It’s probably the last big area of stigma,” Bennett says. “If you were to present at work with a broken arm, people have got sympathy and they want to help. If you present with a disease, they have sympathy and they want to help. If you present with depression then there is an immediate stigma – is this person going to be able to do the job, are they going to be able to work in the future, can I trust them? All of those things kick in.”

While some management teams may question whether a compassionate culture is realistic in a legal sector that prides itself on achieving great results, Bennett is confident both can co-exist.

“People come into law because they want to make a difference in society. The drive to achieve results is very important, but it’s equally important that they are supported in a team environment.”

In any case, Bennett has no doubt that happy, healthy workers will produce better outcomes for the firm, too.

“When people are healthy and well, they are many more times productive than they would be if they are just here in presence,” he says. “It’s good for the firm, good for society and good for law overall.”

## **College of Law rolls out training module**

*Greg Dwyer*

Resilience@law is a collaboration between five major national law firms – Allens Arthur Robinson, Blake Dawson, Clayton Utz, Freehills and Mallesons – and The College of Law to take a leadership role in raising awareness and understanding of the nature and impact of stress, depression and anxiety across the legal profession.

The aim is to make a lasting contribution by developing a learning approach for people at each stage of their legal careers – from graduate lawyers through to partners. The training module for graduate lawyers which the college undertook to develop has now been run as a pilot for two groups of Practical Legal Training (PLT) students

### **Background**

Following the release of the report by Professor Ian Hickie, entitled *Courting the Blues: Attitudes Towards Depression in Australian Law Students and Legal Practitioners*, which flowed from the work of the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation, the group of five national law firms formed DAWG – the Depression and Anxiety Working Group. At the College of Law Sydney campus, lecturers Michael Appleby and Judy Bourke, having attended the inaugural Tristan Jepson Memorial Lecture, gathered a consultative group including health professionals, educators and law firm representatives, including members of DAWG. The collaboration between the college and DAWG resulted in the resilience@law project

## Objectives

The four objectives of resilience@law are:

1. awareness and education
2. removing the stigma which surrounds mental illness
3. self-care strategies
4. support and resources for mental health concerns

Professor Ian Hickie, in his preface to *Courting the Blues* report, wrote: "A detailed examination of experiences of mental health problems, as well as assessment of knowledge and attitudes to care-seeking across the legal profession, has the potential to influence greatly our educational and professional response ... Our law schools, legal firms and professional societies can each play key roles in the promotion of better mental health throughout adult life as well as assisting with the prevention of major complications of mental ill-health."

## Educational module

The College of Law has now developed an educational module to implement the objectives of the group and which is reflective of the measures recommended by Professor Hickie. With the assistance of experienced mental health educator Susan Goldie, and led by Appleby and Bourke, the college has invested in the creation of new teaching materials and resources which have been included in the existing PLT program. Feedback from students in the first two pilot groups has been extremely positive. Goldie has also delivered Mental Health First Aid training, both to learning and development and human resources staff at DAWG firms, and to college lecturers. The college sees this as a baseline qualification for lecturers teaching the resilience module.

The module – resilience@law, Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Legal Profession – will be rolled out to all PLT students at the College of Law's campuses nationwide from this year. In all it will reach about 2500 graduate lawyers a year, a considerable mental health initiative.

Teaching of the program will take place as a core part of the PLT program in face-to-face workshops of usually no more than 20 students, facilitated by College of Law lecturers. The workshops will involve a number of elements including group work, class discussion, individual workbook activities and use of the DVD. The course materials contain a list of mental health resources.

The workshops will cover issues such as:

- what is resilience?
- building resilience
- understanding stress
- what is mental illness?
- responding to mental illness
- depression
- anxiety
- substance misuse
- how to talk about mental health concerns
- getting help for a mental health concern.

The college's managing director Neville Carter says: "It is crucial that our key organisations in law and legal education take leadership roles in advocating resilience in study and practice. It is in the education of graduates as they enter the profession that the college seeks to make its most significant contribution and it is proud to be able to offer a new module as part of the Practical Legal Training program. The module will contribute to better understanding of the issues associated with depression in legal practice and the resources available for dealing with it."

The college is considering how the resilience@law training can be extended to other parts of the profession. For a copy of the resilience@law DVD please email [collaw@collaw.edu.au](mailto:collaw@collaw.edu.au) or phone the marketing team at The College of Law on 02 9965 7000.

*Greg Dwyer is director of the Centre for Best Practice at The College of Law.*