

Well-being for Lawyers

BY CHRIS KAY

An interview with Chetna Bhatt, co-founder of [Being Lawyers](#).

The Well-being Crisis

Recent statistics show the extent to which junior lawyers experience stress. The [2018 JLD Resilience and Well-being survey](#) results show that over 82 per cent regularly or occasionally felt stressed in the month before the survey with 26 per cent severely/extremely stressed.

More widely across the profession, statistics show that 96% of solicitors are experiencing negative stress with 21% experiencing severe or extreme levels of stress.

Lawyers are under pressure to deliver outstanding work in an increasingly competitive market and law firms and organisations cannot continue on this trajectory without making an investment in the well-being of their people a priority item on their agenda.

The Well-being Conversation



The first time I co-hosted a [conference in January 2016](#) with the Law Society to transform the well-being of lawyers, it felt like we were opening up a new type of conversation with delegates having a safe space to vulnerably share well-being challenges.

Over the last couple of years, well-being has worked its way up the law firm agenda with some leading the way by rolling out various well-being initiatives.

The climate has changed too with the [‘This is Me’](#), [‘Time to Change’](#) and [‘Heads Together’](#) campaigns being rolled out to change the conversation. All of these have helped to break down the stigma associated with mental ill health by having people speak up about mental ill health challenges. There has undoubtedly been progress in raising the awareness of mental ill health.

However, there remains a considerable amount of work to be done in implementing sustainable solutions to help individuals with their mental and emotional well-being.

The Business Case for Well-being

Some firms are still calling for fully reliable metrics to evidence the return on investment with well-being initiatives.

Nigel Jones, Chairman of the [City Mental Health Alliance](#) and a partner and Health and Well-being Champion at Linklaters LLP, warns against using this as an excuse for not taking action with well-being initiatives in a [video](#) he made making clear the link between improving well-being and the bottom line.

In our experience, employers have long since recognised the clear link between the health and happiness of their employees and their overall levels of productivity and performance.

However, any steps taken to address the high levels of stress appear to have primarily come in the form of a sticking plaster approach, such as advice on getting more sleep and exercise and keeping a healthy diet.

We believe that this advice, whilst completely valid, does not address the underlying root cause of stress and the issue is not showing any sign of improving.

The idea behind this approach is to fix or improve the individual's circumstances. This assumes that the circumstances can indeed be fixed. However, if they cannot be fixed, the strategies don't work.

Hence, the sticking plaster becomes unstuck.

It is now time for a more fundamental, grassroots shift in the way lawyers and law firms operate, so that the issue of stress can be addressed at its source.

A New Perspective

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What we, at Being Lawyers, believe brings a sustainable, realistic and immediate shift – and what underpins our work – is to teach individuals an understanding of the workings of the mind so that they can understand what is happening when they experience emotions like stress.

When we understand what stress is, there is no need to manage it or cope with it. In the same way that once we understand, and remember, that we are watching a horror movie, we do not need to deploy tools to manage or cope with our fear to feel better.

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This understanding enables individuals to go from relating to stressful feelings as overwhelming to being able to take them in their stride. In turn, they can navigate pressures, such as a high workload, without compromising their well-being.

An Insight Into Our Work

It is worth mentioning that although Being Lawyers works mostly with lawyers and other professionals, the understanding we have been trained in and share is universal to human beings.

One of the major life-changing shifts we experienced, and which we now support clients in seeing, is in understanding how we all create our experience of life from the inside-out.

Many of us believe our experience of life is dictated by external circumstances that happen *to* us. However, this is an innocent misunderstanding we have (and that society at large has) about how the human mind works.

Our mind plays tricks on us. Because our thoughts are invisible to us, it looks like our outside circumstances are the cause of our feelings and then we react internally to those circumstances (outside-in). However, this is a compelling and alluring lie. The truth is that the mind only works one way; inside-out. Our experience is entirely independent from our circumstances and our feelings are created 100% by our thinking in the moment.

This explains why on one day we may struggle with our workload and on another day, are able to approach the same workload with effortless flow. It also explains how we all respond to external challenges in different ways. Take the example of billing targets that stay the same in a particular week. If the targets were the cause of our stress, we should all react in the same way. Yet, in reality, one person buckles under the pressure of them, whilst they incentivise another to thrive.

The root cause of our stressful feelings is our stressful agitated thinking in the moment. The more we see this, the less hoodwinked we are into believing they are being caused by our circumstances. It is liberating for us to see that we are not at the mercy of our circumstances changing before we can feel better again.

For example, I saw that it wasn't actually my demanding high-pressured career as a lawyer that had a detrimental impact on my well-being; rather, I saw the impact of my constant overthinking and over-analysing of everything; I saw how my need for the approval of others, perpetual worrying and all-consuming perfectionism were taking their toll on my physical, and mental, well-being.

The understanding we share gave me the freedom to continue working part-time as a lawyer today rather than turning my back on a profession, which I had previously (innocently) believed to be the cause of my stress.

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Whilst it was initially confronting to look at myself, rather than point the finger at my external circumstances, what I discovered was profound, transformative and liberating.

I went from feeling victimised and feeling helpless as my well-being was in the control of my circumstances, to understanding the true source of my stressful feelings. This gave me psychological freedom and the ability to thrive, whatever my external circumstances.

Ultimately, I was able to respond to exactly the same external challenges in a completely different, and more effective and calm way.



The Purpose of Being Lawyers

Co-founding Being Lawyers was a natural step to take. Having dealt with our own well-being challenges whilst practising as lawyers, we know all too well how failing to prioritise our well-being can ultimately lead to long-term illness.

We are passionate about sharing the understanding of the mind that we have been taught with others.

The understanding enabled me to make a full recovery from a debilitating chronic illness and for my clients it has enabled them to thrive as a lawyer with less stress and more resilience. In some cases, it has also eliminated anxiety.

The lawyers and law firms we work with are leading the way by investing in themselves or their staff to reach their full potential in a way that does not lead to burnout and which, in turn, improves the bottom line.

We work with lawyers individually and with law firms, through coaching programmes, talks and/or online courses and it is our mission to bring this work to as many people as possible so that they too can gain transformative insights needed in relation to their well-being and navigate external challenges with more grace and ease.

With the statistics as they are, it is more important than ever for law firms to invest resources into their most important assets: the human beings working for them.

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Bio



Chetna is both a qualified executive coach and an in-house part time employment lawyer, having qualified into private practice in 2005.

Chetna co-founded [Being Lawyers](#) as she is passionate about human potential. She is trained in a new understanding of the mind, which enables people to access their full potential and experience less stress and greater resilience.

Having herself recovered fully from a chronic illness to thrive as a lawyer, she is committed to transforming the well-being of the legal profession. Since 2013 she has been helping clients based in the UK and abroad access elevated levels of well-being, performance and leadership.