



# College of Law, Mental Health First Aid for Legal Professionals

with Andrea Phillips

Written by Amy Danek

I attended the College of law mental health first aid for legal professionals CPD course this week, which consisted of an online learning component and two live, interactive zoom sessions with Andrea Phillips.<sup>1</sup> Andrea is qualified in both psychology and law. She is an Adjunct lecturer at The College of Law and lectures at Monash University within the unit: *'True happiness: The art, practice and science of human flourishing.'*<sup>2</sup> I feel like this unit is a necessity for Australian law practices and employers. Having a trained mental health first aid person who has had this education strengthens your duty of care obligations to maintain a safe and healthy workplace by providing supports to help mitigate risks of mental health impacts known to the legal profession.

The course covers education on prominent mental health issues common to the legal profession, such as depression, anxiety, substance use and suicide. Two in five people have experienced a mental disorder, affecting 4.2 million people, Anxiety being the most common.<sup>3</sup> Employers' obligations to maintain a safe workplace and implement reasonable adjustments were covered. Notably, first-aid action plans and implementation strategies were discussed and demonstrated in different scenarios.

I think that this unit is highly valuable to the legal profession, given the high rates of stress and anxiety that come with the job.<sup>4</sup> In my opinion, mental health implications and potential impacts that come with working in the legal profession, by being exposed to clients' trauma and the often fast-paced, argumentative advocacy environment in general, should be taught at university. Gradual exposure to the real-world impacts of advocacy gives students ample opportunity to absorb that education, know what to expect, and apply mitigating mental health strategies to help protect the well-being of future colleagues and themselves.

I found the discussion around vicarious trauma and its impact on legal professionals very insightful. There are a lot of social stigmas surrounding seeking help for your mental health, especially in high ego-driven professions such as law.<sup>5</sup> Confidence is a quality that drives success and is a 'must have' in the advocacy tool kit. Anxiety and depression can have a massive impact on an individual's confidence. It's easy to see why the common perception of ignoring the problem is the preferred option over seeking help. Andrea advised mixing up casework to limit exposure to the same types of issues day in and day out and practising self-care as paramount importance to tackling vicarious trauma.

I will end this article with a quote that I found to be the most powerful and insightful advice from Andrea regarding dealing with high-conflict conversations:

*'When dealing with conversations of anger, stress can be contagious, but so can calm... use slow speaking, calm language...the other party to the conversation will reciprocate....'*

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<sup>1</sup> College of Law, *Mental Health First Aid for Legal Practitioners* <https://www.collaw.edu.au/learn-with-us/our-programs/professional-development---cpd/mental-health-first-aid-for-legal-practitioners>

<sup>2</sup> Monash University, *ATS3327- True Happiness: The Art, Practice and Science of Human Flourishing* <https://handbook.monash.edu/2022/units/ATS3327>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing* (22 July 2022) <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/2020-21>

<sup>4</sup> Lawyers Alliance, *Preventative Measures to Stop Burnout in the Legal Profession* (7 September 2021) <https://www.lawyersalliance.com.au/opinion/preventative-measures-to-stop-burnout-in-the-legal-profession-314#:~:text=A%20recent%20study%20of%202020,of%20a%20colleague%20who%20is>

<sup>5</sup> International Bar Association, *Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study* (October 2021) <https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-report-Mental-Wellbeing-in-the-Legal-Profession-A-Global-Study>

## Helpful Resources for Students

Maintaining your mental health and wellbeing while studying 'A how to guide for students.'

<https://law.uq.edu.au/files/69319/health-wellbeing-guide-college-of-law.pdf>

University of New England, Student Accessibility and Wellbeing Office

<https://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/student-access-and-inclusion>

University of New England, Student Advocacy and Welfare

<https://www.unelife.com.au/advocacy>

## Employer / Lawyer Resources



College of Law, *Mental Health First Aid for Legal Practitioners*

<https://www.collaw.edu.au/learn-with-us/our-programs/professional-development---cpd/mental-health-first-aid-for-legal-practitioners>

Minds Count Foundation, *The 13 Workplace Factors*

<https://mindscount.org/the-13-workplace-factors/>

The Law Society of New South Wales, New South Wales Young Lawyers, and Australian National University, *Being Well in the Law, A Guide for Lawyers*

<https://www.lawsociety.com.au/sites/default/files/2018-08/Being%20Well%20in%20the%20Law%20Guide.pdf>

The Law Society of New South Wales, *Other Support Services*

<https://www.lawsociety.com.au/resources/mental-health-and-wellbeing/other-support-services>

NB Lawyers, *Managing Mental Illness in the Workplace* (18 December 2019)

<https://www.lawyersforemployers.com.au/managing-mental-illness-in-the-workplace>

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*She is passionate about research and writing on issues relevant to psychology, neuroscience and science and technology as they relate to law. Her goal when she finishes her studies is to find a niche area of law that inspires and challenges her, such as in family, children's, medical, emergency powers in government or biotechnology law.*