



WELLBEING AT THE FOUNDATION OF THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Research and insights from a decade of
trainee solicitor counselling in Ireland

Introduction

Trainee solicitors and law students in professional training face intense academic and work-related pressures, which can adversely affect their mental health (Organ et al., 2017). Studies have highlighted high levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological distress in this population (Skead & Rogers, 2015). For example, a 2021 multi-school survey found that nearly 70% of law students required support for emotional or mental health issues in the preceding year- an increase from 42% in 2014 (Organ et al., 2022). Similarly, in a UK survey of junior lawyers (including trainees), 93% reported feeling stressed in the previous month, and nearly half experienced mental ill-health during that period (Junior Lawyers Division, 2019). These findings underscore the urgent need to address the well-being of trainee solicitors and law students, with elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and related difficulties reported across jurisdictions.

Despite these clear needs, many trainees and law students have historically been reluctant to seek help, primarily due to stigma or fear of professional repercussions. In one national survey, 45% of law students admitted to avoiding mental health treatment because of concerns that it might jeopardize their bar admission prospects (Organ et al., 2017). The legal profession's culture of perfectionism and toughness - alongside character and fitness inquiries- has traditionally discouraged open discussion of personal struggles.

In response, the Law Society of Ireland established a free counselling service in 2013, accessible to all trainee solicitors. The service provides six free counselling sessions to each student enrolled in the Professional Practice Course. Its goal is to reduce stigma by promoting open dialogue around mental health and assuring trainees that seeking support is both acceptable and encouraged within the legal community. In Ireland, the Law Society is the sole provider of professional legal education for trainee solicitors. This centralized and cohesive training structure presents a unique opportunity to embed mental health support services directly within the educational framework.

This study examines qualitative feedback from trainee solicitors who accessed the Law Society of Ireland's counselling service between 2015 and 2023. The primary aim is to understand why trainees chose to engage with the service and how it influenced their personal and professional lives. These insights are situated within the broader literature on the mental health of trainee lawyers. By identifying common themes in the feedback, this research seeks to illuminate the motivations behind service use and the perceived value of such support for emerging legal professionals.

While prior studies, such as the LawCare report, identified junior lawyers as experiencing high levels of distress (with 22.6% of respondents being junior lawyers), most existing research focuses primarily on law students- individuals who may not yet have professional or practical legal experience. This study addresses a significant gap by exploring the experiences of trainee solicitors, a unique cohort who straddle both academic and professional realms. In doing so, it contributes valuable, original insight to the existing literature.

Method

This research adopted a qualitative design to explore trainee solicitors' experiences with the counselling service. Data were collected via anonymous Google Forms surveys administered to those who had engaged with the service between 2015 and 2023. The survey included open-ended questions designed to elicit written responses about the trainees' motivations for accessing the service and the perceived impact on their personal and professional development.

On average, approximately 65 responses were received each year, resulting in an estimated 500 responses over the study period. Participation was entirely voluntary and confidential, encouraging honest and reflective responses. No personally identifying information was collected, preserving anonymity and supporting the expression of sensitive experiences.

A thematic analysis of the feedback was conducted following the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A bottom-up, inductive approach was chosen, appropriate for this novel dataset exploring trainee solicitors' perceptions of counselling during their professional training. As thematic analysis is not tied to any specific theoretical framework, it offers a flexible and insightful means of interpreting complex qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017).

All responses were first read thoroughly to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial coding was then performed. Meaningful phrases and concepts, such as references to "stress" or "coping mechanisms", were identified and labelled. These codes were then iteratively reviewed and clustered into broader recurring themes. The themes were refined to ensure they accurately captured the diversity and depth of participant experiences. Three overarching sets of themes were ultimately developed, corresponding to each of the open-ended questions posed in the survey.

Results

REASONS FOR ENGAGING WITH THE COUNSELLING SERVICE



In response to the question “*Why did you decide to engage with the counselling service?*” trainees cited a mix of personal motivations and practical considerations, which developed into several key themes.

Curiosity and Openness:

Many trainees were willing to give it a try “out of curiosity” or a desire for personal growth. Some had never experienced counselling before and were curious about the process, for example, one respondent shared that they ‘*signed up partially out of curiosity and also because there were a few minor issues in my life that I wanted to talk to someone outside of family and friends about*’. This theme suggests an open-minded attitude amongst trainees, where counselling was seen as an opportunity for self-exploration.

“I had heard good recommendations from other friends on the course.”

Accessibility and Encouragement:

A frequent practical reason was that the service was free and easily accessible through the law school. Knowing that counselling was provided at no cost lowered the barrier to entry for many students. Additionally, several respondents mentioned that the service came recommended by peers, faculty, or the institution. For instance, a trainee noted, “*I felt it would be a good thing to try and had heard good recommendations from other friends on the course, in particular it was useful after this year of the pandemic.*” The influence of recommendations (social proof) and the removal of financial cost made trainees more inclined to seek help. This highlights the importance of making support services readily available and visibly endorsed within the training program.

Personal Distress (Anxiety/Stress):

A large subset of trainees pointed to personal mental health challenges as the driving factor. Words like “*anxiety*”, “*stress*” and references to feeling overwhelmed were prevalent. Trainees described high levels of stress related to their coursework, professional exams and balancing training with personal life. One typical response was “*Feelings of anxiety brought on by a mixture of stresses*”. The counselling service was thus a resource to help manage these intense pressures. In some cases, personal or family issues also motivated the decision to seek counselling support. Trainees experiencing bereavement, relationship difficulties, or other personal issues turned to the service for help coping.

Desire for Understanding and Insight:

Another theme was the wish to understand oneself or one’s problems better. Some respondents framed their decision as wanting to gain clarity on personal issues or to learn why they were feeling or behaving in a certain way. Counselling was seen as a way to obtain insight into their situation. For example, one trainee wrote that they sought counselling to “*To learn about myself and to try and understand my emotions and reactions better and consequently be able to manage them better.*”

This indicates that beyond symptom relief, trainees valued the reflective self-awareness that counselling could facilitate.

Across these themes, it is evident that trainee solicitors engaged with the counselling service both because they were experiencing significant personal stressors and because the service was approachable (available, free and endorsed by others). Notably, even those without acute crises reported being proactive or curious enough to try counselling, suggesting a shift towards viewing mental health support as a normal part of personal and professional development.

IMPACT OF COUNSELLING ON PERSONAL LIFE



For the question “*In what way has the counselling impacted your personal life?*”, the qualitative feedback coalesced around several positive outcomes. Thematic analysis of responses revealed five key themes describing how trainees felt counselling influenced them personally: addressing personal issues, relationships, self-awareness, perspective and coping skills.

Addressing Personal Issues:

Many trainees reported that counselling helped them confront and work through specific personal issues that had been troubling them. These issues ranged from managing anxiety or imposter syndrome to dealing with past trauma or family conflicts. By discussing these matters with a counsellor, trainees felt they made progress in resolving or understanding long-standing problems. One respondent noted that therapy offered them “*The opportunity to work through and deal with issues that were impacting my personal relationships*”.

“I started being more self-aware. I have carried this forward.”

Improved Relationships:

A number of respondents highlighted positive changes in their relationships as a result of counselling. By learning to communicate better and regulate their emotions, trainees found their interactions with friends, partners and family improved. For instance, one trainee shared that from availing of counselling, “*I have a better relationship with my friends as I understand my responses to certain situations better*”.

Heightened Self-Awareness:

Gaining personal insight was a recurring impact, echoing the motivations above. Trainees frequently mentioned increased awareness of their own thoughts, emotions and behavioural patterns. Through reflection in therapy, they became more conscious of triggers for stress or learned how past experiences influence their current reactions. A participant explained, “*I also started being more self aware, I was not very aware of how others perceive me at all. I have carried this forward*”.

Perspective and Mindset:

Counselling often gave trainees a new perspective on their challenges. Respondents indicated that they learned to reframe situations more constructively. As one put it, “*It’s made me see things from another perspective and taught me that my personal fears/anxieties are perfectly normal and has given me tools to deal with them going forward*”.



Enhanced Coping Skills:

Many trainees referred to improved coping mechanisms or better ways of dealing with stress as a result of counselling. One trainee noted that they found the service a *“Huge benefit through coping mechanisms and means of dealing with personal issues”*.

Finally, service-users were asked *“In what way has the counselling impacted your professional life?”* Analysis of the responses revealed five key themes describing how trainees felt counselling had influenced their work life: stress management, confidence, work-life balance, career clarity and the interplay of personal and professional domains.

“I’m happy where I am in my professional career and have found I am loving work and studies again.”

Stress Management and Coping Strategies:

A dominant theme across responses was the development of practical tools for handling stress in the workplace. Trainees described how counselling taught them to better regulate emotional responses to high-pressure situations, to identify early signs of burnout, and to adopt more balanced approaches to demanding workloads. One trainee reflected, *“I will hopefully be more aware of managing stress and other similar issues in my professional life and hopefully never let myself get overwhelmed”*.

Confidence and Assertiveness:

Many respondents reported feeling more confident in their roles and more capable of asserting themselves in the office. For some, counselling helped challenge feelings of imposter syndrome, while others described learning to speak up or advocate for themselves in professional interactions. *“I think it helped me to see my strengths in a work environment so that I gained more confidence in my abilities”*. Another trainee shared that the counselling sessions gave them *“A way to deal with a rude work member in a more professional and assertive manner”*.

Work-Life Balance and Boundary Setting:

Establishing healthier boundaries between work and personal life was another frequently mentioned impact. Several trainees noted a new awareness of the importance of setting limits, learning to say no, and valuing their wellbeing alongside professional demands. *“I learned about importance of the work and life balance. I will try to achieve that balance when I get back to work in April”*. This insight often extended to a broader re-evaluation of values and priorities concerning their professional lives. *“It has helped me to take a step back from my current situation and assess what I want to achieve professionally”*.

Career Clarity and Direction:

For some, counselling helped them gain a clearer vision of their professional goals and how their career might align with their personal values and strengths. Others experienced a shift in ambition or reaffirmation of their current path. *“I’m happy where I am in my professional career and*

have found loving my work and studies again". Others used the space to reflect on how their career aligned with them on a deeper level, with one saying, *"It helped to empower me to make choices in my career that will be right for me and my well-being and not to make choices based on what society/my family/peers expect"*.

Interplay of Personal and Professional Domains:

Many participants commented on how improvements in their personal wellbeing had naturally influenced their professional outlook. Trainees acknowledged that personal struggles often spilled into work life and that counselling helped restore balance, indirectly benefiting their performance and engagement. One noted *"Some of the personal issues I believe affected my professional life unbeknownst to me so I think resolving the personal issues will help my professional career too"*. Another noted *"I definitely gained more from the service in respects of my personal life rather than professional life, although this could probably be attributed to the fact that all my issues with my professional life stemmed from personal"*.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer compelling evidence that counselling services for trainee solicitors have a meaningful and multifaceted impact on both personal and professional development. The recurring themes identified across participant responses indicate that trainees engaged with the counselling service not only to manage distress, but also to explore self-development and gain insight into their thoughts and behaviours. This broad spectrum of motivations ranging from acute personal challenges to proactive self-awareness demonstrates a progressive attitude among many trainees toward mental health, aligning with recent shifts in cultural norms within the legal profession.

The service's accessibility and affordability were crucial in encouraging uptake. The fact that counselling was embedded within the Law Society of Ireland's Professional Practice Course (solicitor training) and promoted by faculty and peers helped normalise help-seeking behaviours. This challenges the traditional legal culture characterised by perfectionism and stigma, a barrier that has been well-documented in the literature (Organ et al., 2017; Skead & Rogers, 2015). Trainees in this study did not view counselling as an admission of weakness, but rather as a resource for managing inevitable stress and achieving personal growth.

The data also reinforces how intertwined personal and professional domains are in the lives of trainee solicitors. Counselling often led to improved stress management, increased confidence, and better communication skills – attributes that are invaluable in high-pressure legal environments. Simultaneously, resolving personal issues, increasing emotional self-awareness, and learning new coping mechanisms contributed to a more grounded and reflective professional identity. Many participants explicitly noted that the benefits in their personal lives translated into improved performance and resilience in professional contexts.

Importantly, the study reveals a movement toward preventive and reflective use of mental health services. Some trainees engaged with the service before reaching a crisis point, reflecting a healthier, more proactive stance on wellbeing. This evolution is particularly significant given the historic reluctance within the legal field to acknowledge vulnerability. The counselling service appeared to offer a confidential, stigma-free space where future legal professionals could develop greater self-understanding, build emotional resilience, and cultivate long-term strategies for mental wellbeing.

The Law Society's efforts to extend support beyond the training period further reinforce its holistic commitment to solicitor wellbeing. Initiatives such as LegalMind, a confidential counselling service for qualified solicitors scaffold the development and wellbeing that begins during training, ensuring that solicitors continue to have access to mental health resources as they transition into practice. This continuity of care is particularly important given that early career stages often involve sustained stress, steep learning curves, and further identity formation as legal professionals.

These insights support the broader literature suggesting that systemic, embedded support services within legal education can help address the mental health crisis in the profession. Unlike many previous studies which have focused primarily on law students without practical training, this study uniquely centres on trainee solicitors who are actively engaged in both academic and professional realms. As such, it provides a more integrated picture of how mental health interventions can influence real-world legal practice.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable qualitative insights into the lived experiences of trainee solicitors who accessed the Law Society of Ireland's counselling service between 2015 and 2023. The findings affirm the critical role that mental health support plays in enabling trainee solicitors to navigate the unique challenges of legal training, including high stress levels, performance pressures, and personal transitions. Importantly, the counselling service was not only utilised in response to acute distress, but also as a proactive resource for personal insight and professional growth reflecting a shift toward healthier, more constructive attitudes around mental wellbeing in the legal profession.

The broad range of reported outcomes including improved stress management, enhanced emotional awareness, greater professional confidence, and clearer career direction demonstrate that accessible and well-integrated counselling can have a deep and lasting impact on emerging legal professionals. Furthermore, the interplay between personal wellbeing and professional effectiveness highlighted by trainees suggests that mental health support is not a peripheral service, but rather a foundational element of sustainable legal practice.

Crucially, these findings align with and reinforce the strategic aims of the Law Society, particularly its stated goal of enabling solicitors to thrive. The counselling service reflects an institutional commitment to wellbeing that is integral to the work of the entire Law Society extending beyond academic instruction to embrace the holistic development of future professionals. This initiative also embodies the collaborative effort between the Law School, the wider Law Society, and Psychological Services to create a cohesive support structure that meets the evolving needs of the legal community.

In light of the *LSRA Breaking Down Barriers* report, it is also important to consider how the counselling service can evolve to better support non-traditional and hybrid-route trainees who may face additional challenges and be less visible within traditional institutional frameworks. Ensuring these groups are actively included in outreach and access strategies will help broaden the service's impact and promote greater equity within the profession.

As such, the counselling service stands not only as a practical mental health intervention but also as a strategic investment in the long-term vitality of the profession. Continued support, visibility, and development of such services will be essential to sustaining this progress and ensuring that all solicitors – beginning in their training years – are equipped to thrive both personally and professionally.

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