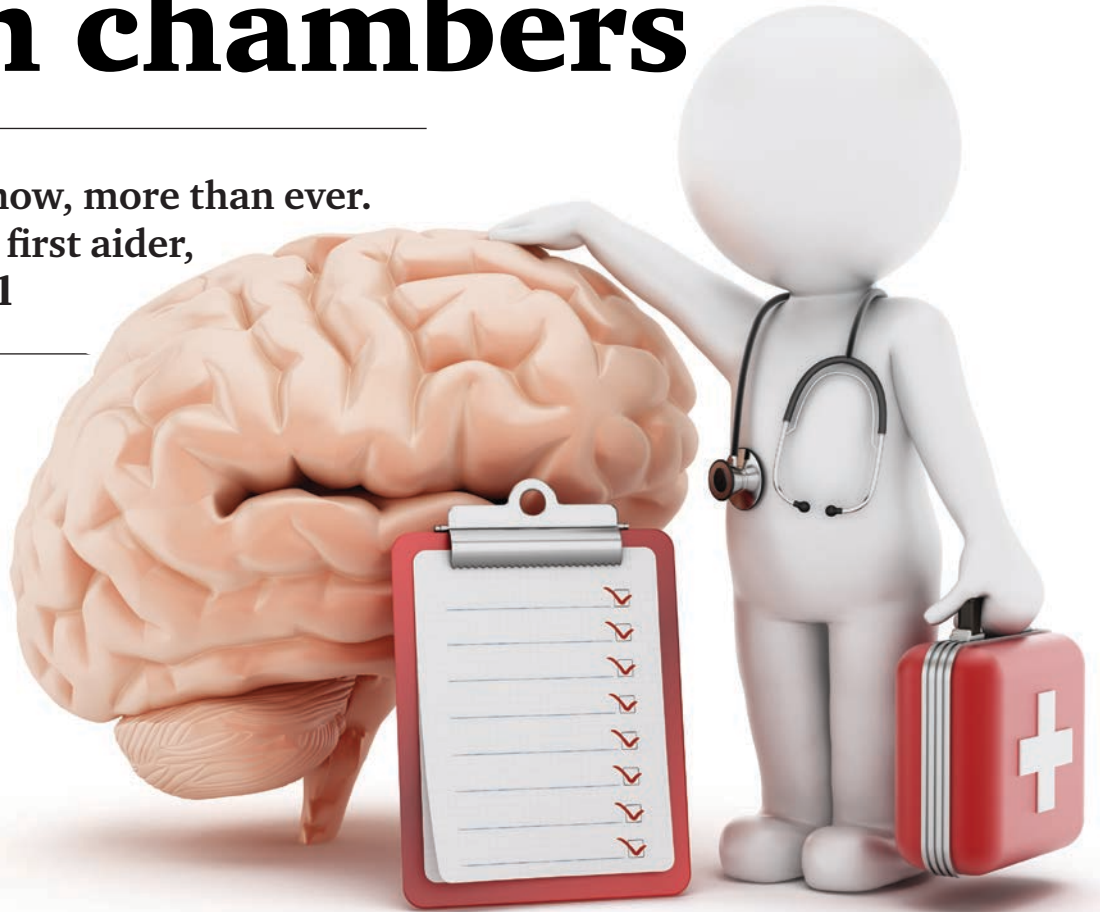


Mental health first aid in chambers

Why it's needed now, more than ever.
By mental health first aider,
Richard Copnall



With the old, informal, support networks crumbling, we thought we should do something.

The Bar has a justified reputation for innovation and adaptation to the changing needs of society. However, the pace of change in the last few years has been dizzying and has created new stresses and strains on barristers and our support staff.

A number of familiar pressures are chronic: they have been with us for some time and continue unabated. Chambers have become larger and spread over multiple sites. Members and staff come and go at an increasing rate. The days of knowing, still less being friends with, most of our colleagues, is long gone. In many areas of work, the longstanding, downward pressure on fees is relentless. In all areas of practice, the expectation for ever faster responses and availability at all times is now endemic. Those changes have turned up the heat over several years, gently cooking us like the apocryphal frog.

COVID has produced acute changes to our working lives – at a speed and to an extent that is perhaps unprecedented in peace time. The first effect was, for some, a massive and sudden loss of

work and income, and for everyone, a justifiable anxiety about how our practices would be affected. For many of us who had not gone over to paperless working, this became an essential and very steep, learning curve.

Many readers may well be thinking: life at the Bar has always been challenging, demanding and precarious. This is true. However, the Bar had evolved a complex web of informal support structures that helped to cushion those demands and provide support, encouragement and an emotional outlet. Although earlier generations would not have used the terms: being with our colleagues was a 'safe space' in which to 'decompress', to share our successes and failures and to lean on others for advice and support. This might have been in robing rooms, outside court, with our roommates and others in chambers, or perhaps over a lunch or a drink after work.

COVID did away with all of that overnight. Suddenly we were locked away at home, beavering away at papers, or attending remote conferences and hearings. A sudden transformation from a collegiate lifestyle to a monastic one.

The pandemic (or at least the prospect of lockdown) is now behind us, but there is no way to turn back the clock. Those of us who have gone paperless will remain paperless. Courts that are now adapted to remote hearings will continue to use them for many shorter hearings. We have got used to less travelling, more sleep and a smaller environmental footprint. For many, that close connection to our professional 'family' in chambers has gone and is not coming back.

Join the community of mental health first aiders

Which brings me to the subject of this piece: mental health first aid. With the old, informal, support networks crumbling, we thought we should do something. My chambers arranged a training session provided by MHFA England (mhfaengland.org). The principles were simple and clear. Much of it would strike, even the more traditional thinkers, as good 'common-sense'. But talking about mental health is not something with which most of us are familiar or comfortable. The course provided a simple framework for approaching a conversation with a colleague who might be in need. All of those who attended the course came away feeling more confident about discussing this issue and more certain that if they

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did, they would be helping and not making the situation worse.

Doing the course was the easy bit. Our next challenge is to remove the reluctance (if not the taboo) of discussing mental health and to encourage our colleagues who might be struggling, to ask for help. We have some way to go on that issue and if other chambers have had successes with that, we would love to hear from you.

As with any convulsive changes, it will take time for new, healthy patterns of work to emerge. In the meantime, we might need to work a little harder to look out for each other. Mental health first aid is a small but valuable step in that direction. ●

Find out more about the MHFA England Mental Health First Aider course at mhfaengland.org. Details of the Bar Council/Wellness for Law mental health training course can be found at bit.ly/3GQ3j7X.

For support, contact LawCare on 0800 279 6888, email: support@lawcare.org.uk (Mon-Fri, 9-5), and www.lawcare.org.uk whenever you see the red 'Chat Online' button; Samaritans are on 116 123 or email: jo@samaritans.org; international helplines at befrienders.org



About the author

Richard Copnall is a barrister at Parklane Plowden. He acts for vulnerable individuals and public bodies in cases that involve professional and institutional failings and which often involve issues of mental health and human rights.