

Georgia, Barrister, West Midlands

Advance warning: this case study discusses suicide and contains some details some individuals may find upsetting.

In October 2020 Georgia completed her pupillage qualifying as a Barrister, an ambition she'd held since childhood. But it was a journey that nearly cost her her life, as along the way she experienced serious mental illness leading to a suicide attempt.

I knew that taking on a pupillage was going to be challenging and demanding, but the reality was far harder than I could have imagined. I found the nature of pupillage draining. There's a very distinct power dynamic, because there are no guarantees you'll be taken on. Your future is entirely at the mercy of others, and discussing experiences with other pupils showed me that sometimes pupils are pushed to their limits to prove themselves.

The pressures of Pupillage



It felt like living in a fish bowl, being scrutinised constantly and having to second guess how you're being perceived. A lot was unspoken – rules you were expected to know about that weren't out in the open. It brought every vulnerability and self-doubt to the forefront and was a very anxiety-inducing time for me. What makes it harder is feeling too scared to speak up, for fear of looking weak. Many people suffer in silence.

I'd been struggling with anxiety and depression as a result of both personal and work pressures. In December 2019, I was suicidal and attempted to take my own life. I returned to work just before Christmas when I'd recovered physically and looking back, I can see this was too soon. However, I was too afraid of taking any more time off work during my pupillage. I didn't tell anybody about my mental illness, only that I had been unwell.

A path to burnout

It started to snowball and one day in February 2020, I simply could not get myself into work. I explained that I'd been suffering from anxiety and depression and could not make it in for the mock trial. Things moved quite quickly after that. I was referred to somebody within my Inn of Courts and an action plan was put into place to help me return safely to work.

A month later, we were in lockdown and working from home. This brought its own set of challenges to my pupillage which were difficult to navigate, e.g. the amount of work available, but some elements eased. I found it a lot easier not having to be in the office with all eyes on me. I managed to complete my pupillage and successfully secured a position as a tenant.

Wellbeing strategies

I'm now a Barrister in the Midlands, practising exclusively in family law with an emphasis on children work. I find it easier having more autonomy now that I'm qualified, but conversations about my mental health at work are still difficult. It's important I put things in place to protect my wellbeing. I know myself and what strategies work – having time between challenging cases, preparation days when I'm feeling vulnerable to avoid unnecessary pressure. These are simple interventions that can help me work most effectively, and so far, I've not had to take any significant time off for mental illness.

However, within the profession as a whole, there still appears to be a stigma and judgement around mental illness, like it's a sign of weakness.

I hope in time this culture changes, and we become more open about mental health in the sector. It's particularly important at the pupillage stage. Having a clear channel of support could make all the difference when you are at your most vulnerable.

Visit Resolution's [Wellbeing page](#) for resources and training, including a free Webinar with LawCare