



The value of coaching as a tool for preventing wellbeing problems

By Hormoz Ahmadzadeh

Hormoz Ahmadzadeh spoke at the wellbeing seminars held by the Junior Chancery Bar and the Chancery Bar Association on 12 November 2015 and 15 June 2016 respectively. Hormoz is a director at Result Community Interest Company (www.resultcic.com), a coaching and training company. In this article, he talks about how coaching can help barristers avoid wellbeing issues and increase their resilience in dealing with the stress of working at the Bar.

A breakdown isn't something that happens to other people. It can happen to you. It happened to me.

At the height of my successful career, my breakdown struck me with a speed, strength and thoroughness which left me hospitalised. I shut down, totally. And I don't mean that I needed to spend a few days in bed and have a rest. All of my functions came to a standstill. I couldn't talk. I stopped eating. The people I love were suddenly plunged into the world of my depression which resembled 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest', but without the funny bits. It was all very dramatic.

But what brought it on?

It seemed to be triggered by a job interview. I was head hunted for a prestigious position at a time when I was seeking a new challenge. Part of the process involved an in depth test, analysing the type of character you are. Whilst I realise that the issues which led to my breakdown go back much further than that test, and have a great deal to do with the importance of being true to yourself, I remember feeling lost in that self-analysis, an alien sensation of self-doubt, of encroaching fear, taking over.

My work life had always been of the highly competitive, 'beat the next target' variety in the world of business development, a world in which I was engrossed for 13 years. Praise came from those around me for 'being so successful' or 'doing so well' but, at several stages, I knew I needed help. Yet I felt that seeking help was a weakness. Whilst everyone saw me as sociable and outgoing, calm and collected, and whilst I saw myself as resilient and optimistic, how could I at that stage possibly give in to feeling overwhelmed, confused and low?

My rehabilitation was a journey lasting several years. After getting to a point where I could function again, I wanted to carry on with 'business as usual' but, once I was back on track and the desire for financial reward returned, so did the pressure. It was at this point that, with the help of people around me and a short burst yet highly effective cognitive behavioural therapy and then coaching, that I felt that I began to really get to know myself. I surprised myself by realising that this was the first time in my life that I'd really looked deep inside myself to find how much I'd been holding within myself.

The impact of this realisation was huge. I'd been my own worst enemy for too long. My need for perfection and my highly self-critical manner had been so destructive where mistakes were elevated to catastrophes which needed to be erased. This was a far cry from the way I had regarded such traits as strengths. I had a close look at my values and concluded that my focus needed to be about much more than the pursuit of mainly material goods. The big question then: 'What makes me happy?'

Self-awareness takes time, and with that time, everything became better. And I genuinely do mean everything. Knowing that I had hit rock bottom but had been able to come out of it provided a different kind of resilience and confidence, one centred around awareness, not denial, around acceptance of mistakes and the potential to learn from them, and about the benefits of honesty.

I thought about how much the coaching I had received had made a difference in my self-belief, and decided to take a risk on a new career at the age of 49, a risk backed up by the feeling that this would be the best career decision of my life. And so I became a coach and soft skills training facilitator. As I approach 56, I know that the gamble has paid off.

Why do I feel compelled to share my story?

Time and time again, the 1 to 1 coaching work that I and my colleagues do, reveals how common the attitudes, pressures and feelings which contributed to my own breakdown are. Having learnt the very hard way, I want to work to try to stop others from going through anything remotely similar.

'Coaching as prevention' is a way of stopping people at all levels from falling into the spiral of depression and other mental health issues, allowing them to recognise the signs before it's too late. Often, we coach people who have a variety of mental health issues, from anxiety and panic attacks to actual depression, at different stages. Sometimes, they are in situations of crisis fatigue where there are too many issues to consider to allow for clear thinking, so they lose perspective and concentrate on minute details which may be insignificant to the bigger picture. As a result they are often incapable of focussing on the root cause of their anxiety and can feel helpless.

Central to my own recovery was a re-evaluation of my own idea of achievement and success. It had been largely about material goods and lifestyle, the sorts of things you can show off to others about. Lawyers I have coached have had similar notions of success, a concentration on billable hours and revenue overriding all else. It's a notion of success which can often have no limit and can therefore breed a very negative stress cycle.

Yet the lawyers who stopped themselves from falling into the negative stress cycle re-evaluated their thinking. Apart from the better known shorter term measures like time and stress management, much better nutrition, exercise and sleep, controlling caffeine, alcohol and recreational drugs plus good holidays, they knew that they needed to work out better long term strategies for themselves.

The relief expressed by people in high powered positions once they are freed to talk openly in coaching sessions cannot be underestimated. For many, coaching gives them their first opportunity to be freed in this way, and also the first chance to have a trained professional ask questions designed to encourage the exploration of fresh perspectives on long held ideas. It's an opportunity to have deeply felt limiting beliefs challenged, pushing towards an authentic version of what the person actually wants, rather than what they think their profession or society expects.

This approach means that, whilst your job will still be stressful, you'll be able to cope with that stress in a more constructive way, avoiding the kind of crash that nobody wants to go through.

In his book 'Stress Management for Lawyers'^φ, Amiram Elwork¹ talks of changes in his chapter 'All the Sages Agree.' He states that those who are happiest, those who enjoy the benefits of stress and not its destructiveness are those who:

- (1) have reasonable goals and expectations
- (2) feel competent in their jobs
- (3) have challenging work, but
- (4) have work balanced by leisure
- (5) have a good marriage and family, and
- (6) contribute to the community.

They do not seek success at any cost, do not demand or aspire to be the top dogs, do not spend their lives at work, and do not substitute work for family. Instead, those who contribute to the community are often the ones who feel the best about being lawyers, for they are the ones who can use their hard-earned skills for the common good.

Result Community Interest Company (CIC) concentrates on person-centred work with marginalised people including individuals with or on the verge of mental health issues. Result CIC's three directors and associates have all gone through life-changing and powerful low points which have resulted in personal paths consolidating self-awareness, resilience and clarity of purpose. Our acquired life skills together with specific training and experience has meant that we have been able to support hundreds of individuals and teams to evaluate many aspects of their lives and behaviour to much enhanced results. We increasingly work with the private sector, including the Chancery Bar Association, to further enable our community work.

We would love to help you release the stress valves that you may be feeling, using our confidential, non-judgmental and yet challenging dialogues with you.

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^φ Stress Management for Lawyers: How to Increase Personal and Professional Satisfaction in the Law, 2d ed., pp. 157-159.