

# Using shared experiences to support each other



Simon Keevey-Kothari outlines the benefits of LawCare's peer support programme.

Life doesn't run in straight lines, and this is true for all of us. But occasionally it can all just get too much, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed, helpless and hopeless. This can often be compounded by isolation, whether this is self-imposed or a result of circumstances beyond our control such as physical illness (or a pandemic), all of which can result in a person not communicating properly how they feel. This is where LawCare's peer support programme really comes into its own.

Put simply, peer support is when people use their own lived experiences to help others. Do the peer supporter's personal experiences have to match those individuals they are trying to help? Whilst it definitely helps if there are shared or at least closely-linked experiences between the supporter and the person they are helping, quite often there doesn't have to be – listening with genuine empathy and patience is sometimes all that is needed. And by the way, as I see it it's a two-way street – the peer supporter themselves receive a huge amount from providing support, simply by virtue of being able to have been of service to another person, especially during a very difficult time.

Whilst some of the areas discussed here might be rather upsetting, the good news, and the message here is very much one of good news, is that there are many happy outcomes, with a huge amount of positive light at the end of this particular tunnel.

All LawCare peer supporters obviously have their own specific life experiences, with their own ups and downs of varying kinds and degrees, but I can really only speak for myself. For me a time came when everything that was important and which any normal person would hold most dear had been lost – career, family-life, finances, friendships, self-respect, physical and mental health, the list goes on and on. Yes, the proverbial had truly hit the air conditioning (on many occasions) and it was going to continue hitting it. The nature and level of it all got worse every day, month, year; always worse, never better. It was unspeakably dark, unbearable and there was no way out. This went on day after day. For years. More Groundhog Decade than Day.

I only wish I could make this an expletive-laden article, since those kinds of words really do express how utterly [expletive deleted] life was, for me and anybody near me, for many years. Anyway, these are my bona fides as author of this peer support-related commentary.

Fortunately, one's past can often end up being beneficial to others, in this particular case through LawCare's peer support programme. So, who are all these people LawCare helps? The short answer is anybody, absolutely anybody, who works in the law – not just legal professionals (be they patent attorneys, trade mark attorneys, barristers, solicitors, paralegals, etc.) but also support staff too, secretaries, people in the IT or finance departments, and others who work in the legal world.

What are the kinds of issues peer supporters help with? These often include dealing with callers who may be suffering from anxiety, depression, stress, addiction, bereavement, relationship problems at work, bullying, returning to work after illness or a career break, worrying if law is the right career for you (yes, that old chestnut), facing disciplinary proceedings either by their regulator or employer, the list goes on and on.

How does it work in practice? LawCare peer supporters provide one-to-one emotional support by telephone. Usually, peer supporters provide support over two to three phone calls – in my experience it can occasionally be more than this, although sometimes less; I have had instances where a single call was sufficient to help out the caller and get them back on track. At the end of the day, it depends on what the caller needs. As far as possible, LawCare will try and match callers with particular peer supporters, since a caller may find it easier to talk to an understanding peer who has experienced what they are going through. Importantly, anything discussed with a peer supporter is confidential.

The bottom line is that if there is something which is troubling you, it's important to speak with somebody. It doesn't matter whether you feel embarrassed (you should hear some of my stories), ashamed (same again), fearful or just pretty miserable and not in the mood to speak with anyone (often a sure sign that you really do need to speak with someone!). You can and should just pick up the phone and call LawCare.

It's confidential, non-judgmental and the chances are you'll end up speaking with someone with whom you can relate – it's quite a relief and sometimes surprising, but pleasantly so, to find out that another person has had exactly the same experiences as you and was affected in the same way you have been. And most important of all they can tell you how they got out of that hole. In any event, the simple act of talking helps take you out of yourself, which can help alleviate the well-known 'washing-machine head', where you have the same thoughts (generally negative ones) going round and round in your mind.

By way of a personal illustration, the kinds of callers I have dealt with over the past few of years have included people of wildly different ages and experience, from trainees, pupil barristers, technical assistants, paralegals right through to senior partners in established firms and senior barristers. The issues addressed have been manifold – people who were struggling during lockdown, with the enforced isolation as a result of the pandemic resulting in their feeling overwhelmed by work (this seemed to have been felt most acutely by those starting out in their careers); imposter syndrome (which can affect absolutely anyone, whatever stage they are at in their work life journey); people suffering from depression

and feelings of resentment after being made redundant; a trainee who was being bullied and humiliated by a partner; a senior professional whose career was on the rocks and family life in tatters as a result of long-term addiction to alcohol, starting out on their voyage of recovery; a senior professional whose marital partner was suffering from addiction issues; historically highly responsible experienced legal professionals all of a sudden facing disciplinary proceedings resulting from one-off lapses of judgement.

The common thread running through all these cases was that every one of these individuals felt isolated, dejected and overwhelmed – until they picked up the phone and called LawCare. I have honestly lost count of the number of occasions where what started out as an upsetting, emotional, anxiety-filled telephone call ended up with myself and the caller laughing our heads off by the end of the call. It's just good to speak with someone else, preferably someone who knows where you're coming from and with whom you feel comfortable – and the fundamental message of this article is that there always is such a 'someone' for you at LawCare.

The tough times and related raw emotions will pass, no matter how you are feeling at the time. Whilst the bad times (and the good times too for that matter) will come



and go, the plain fact is that speaking with another person can help you to actually see and feel that ‘this too shall pass’. The ephemeral nature of our most extreme emotions is expressed rather eloquently in this short poem by Ernest Dowson –

*They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,  
Love and desire and hate:  
I think they have no portion in us after  
We pass the gate.*

*They are not long, the days of wine and roses:  
Out of a misty dream  
Our path emerges for a while, then closes  
Within a dream.*

Although it might be considered by some as the opposite, I would say these are quite practical pieces of verse, and also very fitting to this discussion – at the end of the day we all have to live life on life’s terms. At times in our lives we are without question put through the mill, sometimes violently, but the related anguish does not last forever.

For my part, and to end with, all I can say is that it’s way, way beyond rewarding, to be part of a group whose sole purpose is to help people overcome rough times, get back on track and return into the stream of life.

I don’t really have much more to add about peer support, and simply hope that the above few paragraphs are of some small help to someone – that’s what LawCare’s about. The LawCare website is [www.lawcare.org.uk](http://www.lawcare.org.uk), and if you want to learn more about how peer support works please do check out [www.lawcare.org.uk/how-we-help/peer-support](http://www.lawcare.org.uk/how-we-help/peer-support).

As touched on earlier, life most definitely doesn’t run in straight lines. It’s important for people to know that they can talk openly, confidentially and without ever feeling they’re being judged, no matter what the issue is which is troubling them, be it stress, anxiety, addiction or anything else. Being able to speak with another member of the legal community helps too. All of this is uniquely available at LawCare. ▣

*Simon Keevey-Kothari is a barrister and senior associate in the transactions team at Carpmaels & Ransford. LawCare’s services are available to anyone working in the law including support staff, see more at [www.lawcare.org.uk](http://www.lawcare.org.uk)*

## LawCare extends online chat service

During Mental Health Awareness Week 9-15 May 2022, legal mental health charity LawCare extended its online chat service for legal professionals from one to four days a week.

LawCare offers free, confidential, emotional support to anyone working in the law, has been operating a helpline and peer support programme since 1997 and has supported over 10,000 people in the profession to date. It introduced online chat in July 2019 and has been running the service every Wednesday. Online chat will now be available every week Tuesday-Friday 9am-5pm and will be staffed by ten new specially trained volunteers all of whom work in, or have worked in, the law as well as the LawCare staff team.

Elizabeth Rimmer, Chief Executive of LawCare, said: ‘We recognise that many people can’t or won’t pick up the phone to call us for a variety of reasons so we wanted to make it easier for people to reach out and get help with whatever is concerning them. We are keen to support anyone going through a tough time, even if they just need to let off steam or talk through a situation, we’re here anytime they need to talk. We don’t ask for roll numbers or details of workplace and people don’t have to give their name.’

Anyone working in the law including support staff can contact LawCare for free, confidential, emotional support. Online chat is available at [www.lawcare.org.uk](http://www.lawcare.org.uk). You can also call 0800 279 6888 or email [support@lawcare.org.uk](mailto:support@lawcare.org.uk). The charity also has a team of peer supporters, people who work in, or have worked in, the legal profession who may have been through difficult times themselves and can offer one-to-one support, friendship and mentoring over 2/3 telephone calls to those who need it.

**LawCare**  
Supporting the Legal Community