



One of this year's new initiatives is the commencement of a discussion group called 'Safe Place'. It is a discussion group, operated on the Zoom AVL platform, where barristers may meet and ventilate matters of concern to them, in a confidential setting.

Given the nature of the profession, many barristers will, from time to time, experience stress, anxiety, depression or emotional trauma. Causes may include the loss of a loved one, the end of a marriage or significant relationship, a downturn in work, an overwhelming volume of work, or financial stress.

Some cope better than others. Some withdraw. Some turn to alcohol, just to get through the day or to get to sleep at night. Some practise the art of denial until a bigger crisis emerges.

Historically, discussion between barristers about these issues has not been free flowing. While there is a collegiate culture at the Bar, it exists alongside a highly competitive approach to performing and obtaining work at the Bar. Some barristers may fear ramifications for their work and professional reputations if they speak in an unguarded way.



Enter the 'Safe Place'.

The Safe Place is a forum where barristers can share their personal travails and experiences and demonstrate to other participants that they are not alone. It is a place where what is said at the meeting stays at the meeting – confidentiality is assured. There is no judgment or advice. Participants can hear about the stresses and troubles in the lives of other barristers and can hear about how other barristers have recovered from past trauma. By focussing on the similarities

and not the differences, participants may draw comfort from the fact that adverse experiences often are not unique.

Most importantly, participants can feel free (and safe) to say what is *really* going on, without fear of adverse personal or professional ramifications.

The forum will be conducted on the Zoom AVL platform to protect the interests of participants, with the full security settings enabled. Participants can join via an AVL pathway with a password, or via a dial-in number with a password. Participants may join either with or without anonymisation. There will be a confidential waiting room where participants will be given the choice to adopt a pseudonym or otherwise. They may choose to have their video on or off. They may choose to speak, or just to listen.

Each meeting will be moderated. The moderator will open the meeting and identify the topic for that week, reminding participants that it is a safe place where they can share with others the challenges that they are facing, either specifically or generally. Topics may include common issues such as sleeping difficulties, exercise (or the lack thereof), financial stress,



alcohol use or abuse, traumatic events etc. The moderator will call on a participant to share his/her experience on the topic for about five minutes, then call on the next participant to share their own experience for about five minutes. And so on. Sharing is by no means compulsory. Listening is often an invaluable tool for those feeling vulnerable. Participants who do not want to share on the topic but wish to talk about some other issue that is vexing them will be free to do so.

The 'Chat' function will be enabled, so that messages can be sent between all participants (some anonymised, others not), or private messages may be sent between two participants. Some participants may feel, at the conclusion of a meeting, that they want to continue to talk to another participant one-on-one, in a similarly confidential setting.

Meetings will be conducted monthly, and will run for approximately 45 minutes to an hour, depending upon the numbers of participants. They will be held outside court hours, and the time and login details will be promoted through InBrief.

The Safe Place is a place where barristers suffering stress and trauma may discover that they are not alone. **BN**

