

The road to recovery

A UNIQUE
THREE-YEAR
MILESTONE
GIVES ONE
YOUNG
LAWYER
REASON TO
CELEBRATE
AND SHARE
HER STORY.



It's a sunny Saturday morning in Shepparton, and I'm rehearsing a talk I'm to deliver to the North Eastern Law Association with the Legal Services Commissioner Michael McGarvie. I finish my rehearsal and glance down at Becks, who's become a regular at the office, to see what he thinks. Becks doesn't comment – he's more interested in keeping a close eye on the willy wagtails bathing in his water bowl. But I can't help feeling he'd approve, given the obstacles I've overcome to be where I am today. It's been three years since I was diagnosed with clinical depression and anxiety, and I am now a partner at SMR Legal.

Pre-diagnosis

For a young lawyer, admitting you have a mental health problem is very difficult. We are high achievers and perfectionists by nature, so we often see anything less as a failure.

In 2008, I was dealing with some difficult personal issues. Combined with the stress of maintaining time sheets and challenging files in a busy workplace, the pressure became too much for me. Afraid to admit I was struggling, I started on the downward spiral of depression.

I began to feel useless about myself and my self-confidence decreased. At work, I became withdrawn and less able to carry out my work. I avoided eye contact with staff members and, as time went on, I withdrew further both physically and emotionally. I lived in hope that my behaviour would go unnoticed, but eventually my colleagues noticed the changes in my behaviour. Fearful of speaking up, I denied there was anything wrong. Then one day I collapsed in the tea room. Concerned for my welfare, the partners gave me time off to try to sort out my life, but the time off only fuelled my depression. I went back to work pretending I was OK. As the pressure of maintaining the lie mounted, I tried to commit suicide. I was fortunately saved by the police and taken to the Royal Melbourne Hospital for medical treatment.

The diagnosis

I was told I had suffered a severe emotional breakdown. Effectively, the prolonged stress I was under in both my personal and professional life had left me burnt out. The breakdown took place over 48 hours. I was restless and couldn't sleep; my mind constantly raced; my thinking was distorted and my

sense of hopelessness overwhelmed me – I lost all control. At the Melbourne Clinic I was diagnosed with clinical depression and anxiety and received in-patient treatment for six weeks.

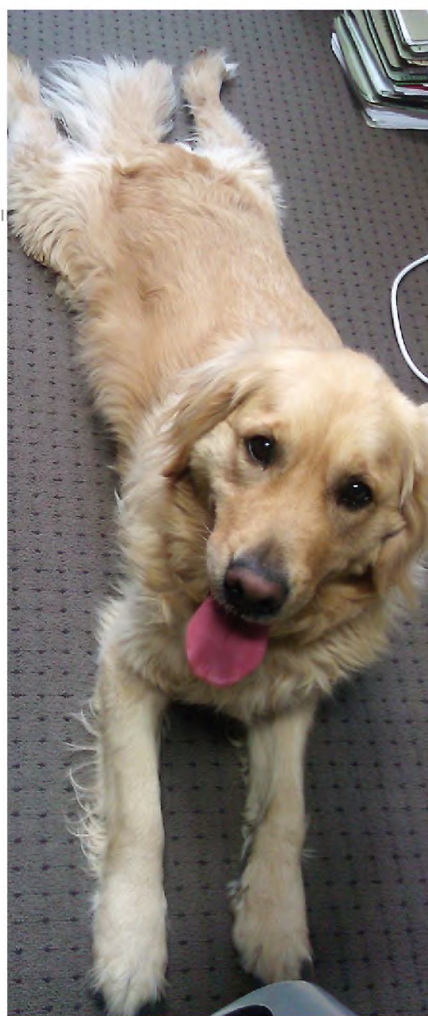
Rebuilding my confidence

Like so many young lawyers, I had been driven by the desire to prove myself and my skill as a legal practitioner. But after my breakdown I wasn't capable of returning to my former workplace; my confidence was shattered. I resigned from my position, because I was frightened I couldn't cope with any pressure. I wondered if I would ever practise again.

As I pondered the long road ahead, my partner, Rocky, encouraged me to contact one of my now work colleagues, Mary Stewart, to ask if she had any administrative work for me to do. I was completely honest with Mary about my situation: I explained that I had had an emotional breakdown, that I needed part-time work so I could continue psychiatric treatment in Melbourne, and that I was unsure whether I was capable of dealing with the pressures of a busy workplace even at an administrative level.

To my surprise, Mary invited me to commence work with her immediately. Because I had a mental illness and needed flexibility and understanding, I had automatically assumed I would be unemployable. As with many people who suffer with depression, the negative thoughts I had about my chances of re-employment were unhelpful and damaging to my already low self-esteem.

I commenced part-time work immediately, undertaking only administrative work at first. However, Mary helped me ease back into legal work when she thought I was ready. Throughout 2009, Mary gradually gave me more demanding and challenging work and my confidence grew. Over time, my belief in my skill as a legal practitioner returned and, in 2010, I was working full-time again. At this time I was presented



BECKS HAS BECOME
A REGULAR AT
THE OFFICE.

with the opportunity to become a partner of a new legal firm, SMR Legal.

The treatment

Getting to the point where I was ready to become a partner wasn't as easy as just building my confidence as a legal practitioner – it was also about learning to ask for help when I needed it. My initial psychiatric treatment required me to travel to Melbourne twice a week to see my psychotherapist and treating psychiatrist. The therapy sessions alone left me drained and tired. It soon became obvious that I couldn't maintain such a hectic schedule.

I then did something I wasn't used to doing – I asked for help. It had been my fear of speaking up and asking for help that had led to my breakdown in the first place. My psychotherapist changed my appointments so that I only had to travel to Melbourne once a week, while Mary allowed me to change my work hours.

When I felt ready to return to full-time work, there was still some question as to how I was going to achieve this; I was committed to continuing with my therapy but I was also committed to my work as a legal practitioner. With the assistance of my dedicated support team, we decided to trial psychotherapy sessions via Skype. It was a big gamble, but it paid off. I was able to work and undertake therapy in the same building.

My support

Just as important as my ongoing psychiatric treatment has been the approach my office adopted to mental illness; this made it easy for me to continue with my therapy and be open and honest with staff members. The SMR Legal staff form an integral part of my support team. They are aware of my illness and the treatment I undertake, and support me in that. When I had my last psychotherapy session on Skype earlier this year, the staff even surprised me with a cake and afternoon tea to celebrate the milestone. I no longer feel that I am struggling with the black dog of depression on my own. I am no longer embarrassed about my illness and treatment, because I do not feel that I am being judged as a failure.

The road ahead

I am often asked by others when my treatment will end. I always answer truthfully by saying "I don't know". I feel comfortable knowing that my treatment will continue indefinitely and that I have the strength to speak up and to ask for help. ●

KELLI RITCHIE is a director of SMR Legal and an advocate for raising awareness on depression and anxiety in the legal profession.