IM LAWYERS



Benefits of Mental Health First Aiders in a personal injury law firm

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In 2021, Luke Ingham-Myers, Legal Practitioner Director, and Ashleigh Shea, Solicitor, undertook training with Mental First Aid Australia to become accredited Mental Health First Aiders. We have always been conscious that in our roles, we support clients through some of the most difficult periods of their lives. We are aware of the significant responsibility that comes with this position. This is particularly important because as personal injury lawyers, often the injuries that we are assisting our clients to receive compensation for, are psychological in nature.

We felt that it was important for us to gain more understanding of psychological injuries our clients might be going through. As accredited Mental Health First Aiders, we have learned how we can best support people (including claimants, their family members and close friends) when they may be struggling through difficult times.

Below we provide some information about what is involved in the Mental Health First Aider accreditation process and what the accreditation means for us and our clients.

What is the role of an accredited Mental Health First Aider?

Mental Health First Aiders are not therapists or counsellors, and importantly the role of a Mental Health First Aider does not involve treating or diagnosing psychological injuries or mental health conditions. This is something that can only be done by appropriately qualified and trained medical professionals - for example, a psychologist, general practitioner or psychiatrist.

Rather, the role of a Mental Health First Aider is to provide initial support to someone who may be experiencing mental health problems. A Mental Health First Aider can listen when someone is struggling and needs to talk about their situation, and can help the people around them begin to have the conversations about their mental health where they may be needing some additional support. We can then also support and encourage that person to seek appropriate medical assistance by providing resources and

information.

What sort of training is involved in becoming a Mental Health First Aider?

Our Mental Health First Aider training, through Mental Health First Aid Australia, was specific for legal professionals and involved three main tasks:

- Online courses about various mental health conditions, including their causes, symptoms and treatment and important background information;
- A session with a Mental Health First Aid trained and licenced instructor, including discussion of background information and how we should perform our role; and
- A final examination.

Following our successful completion of these training tasks over a period of several weeks, we were accredited as Mental Health First Aiders. Our accreditation is valid for three years.

At the expiry of the three years, a refresher course is required to gain a further three years of accreditation. The reaccreditation process involves:

- a further training session with a Mental Health First Aid licenced instructor; and
- a further examination.

At the expiry of the reaccreditation period, Mental Health First Aiders are required to retake the full training course to maintain their accreditation.

How does our Mental Health First Aid training impact our work at IM Lawyers?

The Mental Health First Aid training and the information gained through the training impacts all our work at IM Lawyers.

The training regarding communication of and about mental health problems has helped us, particularly when we are assisting clients to seek damages (compensation) for psychological/psychiatric injuries.

We are comfortable discussing mental health problems directly with our clients and the difficulties that those mental health problems may cause in our clients' lives. We also understand that the matters we are required to discuss with our clients may be difficult conversations for those clients. Our training informs the way we approach these conversations.

The background knowledge gained in our training means that we are better able to understand the complexities of our clients' conditions, diagnoses and the treatments their doctors recommend for those conditions.

Our training not only assists us to ensure we are providing a supportive service for our clients, but also allows us to ensure that we are looking out for our colleagues in the firm. Work in a law firm can be stressful and can expose our team to a variety of confronting realities. We feel that the work we do at IM Lawyers is important, and so it is vital to ensure that our team are also being supported – as they say, "you can't pour from an empty cup".

Most significantly, though, our training has reinforced for us the importance of building a strong and trusted relationship with our clients and placing them at the centre of our work. Our clients and the matters we manage are not just numbers in our firm, and we strive to get to know the person behind the work we perform. We feel that this assists us in understanding our clients' personal situation as fully as possible to ensure we can seek optimal outcomes for our clients.

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