

Mental Health Website

Testimonials

Testimonials of students and practitioners who have suffered from depression in the past and have managed or are managing their condition effectively

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Lisa, 29, shares her experience of depression at university

Lisa is currently a lawyer at a mid-tier firm enjoying the challenge of her work and participating in pro-bono programs offered by her firm. She enjoys reading classic novels, going to comedy events and playing soccer and volleyball. However, things have not always been so good for Lisa.

"In my fourth year at university," Lisa explains "I suffered an episode of major depression. I had always been an anxious and stressed student but had just assumed that was normal and it didn't seem to affect my marks as I was receiving distinctions and high distinctions. Then one evening I began writing an essay for a subject I really enjoyed and I just couldn't write it. I had done all the research, drafted an outline but when I sat down to write it, nothing came out. I went to bed thinking that a good night's sleep might help things, but I couldn't sleep. I ended up not sleeping for about four days and didn't eat any food."

Things then took a terrible turn for the worse. Nearly four years later, Lisa still struggles to talk about what happened over the next week and rather than talk about it, Lisa would rather share her story of recovery. "My parents were really scared and took me to see a doctor. I was referred to a psychiatrist who said I had experienced an episode of major depression. She said that it is possible to have depression without there being a triggering event, such as a death in the family or a relationship breakup. I was prescribed anti-depressants and began to feel small changes almost instantly."

"I spoke with the Dean of Students at my university who allowed me to discontinue the semester even though the cut off date for discontinuing without receiving an academic penalty had passed. I took the rest of the year off to recover. It took a while, but eventually I started volunteering 2 days a week at an animal shelter (something I had always wanted to do) just to ease me back into seeing people and getting out of the house. I started exercising – something I had not done in a long time – by going for short walks, swimming laps and then joining a volleyball team."

When she went back to uni the next year, Lisa took subjects that she enjoyed. She did not do any part time work (she used to be a paralegal) and just focused on getting through each semester. "I went for a walk or a run every day, ate healthily and went out with friends often. I didn't tell many people what had happened as some of the people I initially told were really ignorant - you learn who your real friends are very quickly. Some people thought it was something I could just "snap out of" while one person thought anyone with a mental illness was prone to violence!!!"

Lisa finished uni and says “ironically, when I went back to uni and learnt to control my stresses, I received the best marks I had ever received. When I stopped comparing myself to others and started treating myself better, I found it easier to do well. I went to the Disability Support Service at uni who prepared a study plan for me that allowed me to seek extensions for my work without incurring penalties and without having to explain to each teacher why I might need an extension.”

Lisa still has bad days every now and again and still sees her doctor regularly but she has learnt to control her stresses. “Now, when I am feeling down, I exercise or I take a break and read a good book or I call my mum or a friend to just chat about nothing in particular. I am glad I got help because I don’t know that I would have done if I hadn’t. I really hope sharing my story helps anyone going through depression to know that you can manage your depression and you can still achieve many wonderful things both in your career and in your personal life.”

Michael, 27 reveals things he wished he knew before starting at a top-tier law firm

Michael is currently a lawyer at a top-tier law firm and enjoys running, swimming and cooking. He is now a fourth year solicitor and enjoys his job, but there were times when he didn’t enjoy his work and considered an alternate career path. To help other people who might have bad days at work and think there is no way out, Michael kindly offered to share a few things he thinks graduates might like to know before starting work to help them get through any difficult times.

“When law firms are promoting themselves to law students, they will focus on all the exciting work that graduates can become involved with. While it is true that graduates can be involved in exciting work, there is also mundane and repetitive work that has to get done in order for a deal to go through. Such work might include reviewing contracts for due diligence, drafting an index of many documents or proof reading documents such as affidavits. These tasks are still important and once you have mastered them and spent some time at the firm, you will be able to be involved in strategic work. Importantly, you will still learn things as you complete the mundane jobs, even though you may not realise it at the time. Clients at top tier law firms engage lawyers because they have knowledge of the legal processes of a deal that they might be involved with. Being directly involved in those processes will help you explain those processes to clients as you become more senior.”

Michael has been a “buddy” to summer clerks at his firm and is frequently asked about the hours he has to work. “During my first year as a graduate,” Michael explains “I often finished work by 6pm. As I became more experienced, however, I became more useful to the firm so they gave more work to me. I think it’s important for students to know that you can’t always meet friends after work for dinner and if you do organise to meet them, you may find yourself cancelling an awful lot.”

“It can be hard not always knowing when you will be working back late. Working back late will affect your relationships with others, especially your partner if you live with them. Clients and senior team members expect tasks to be completed within short time frames. This means that if you can’t get hold of someone but they expect something to be done by that evening, you have to wait around for them. You may also find yourself at work at 6pm waiting for something from a client or another firm that is needed for something else due the next morning and then having to stay late to work on it. I have found that if I want to do something – like go to the gym – I will go early in the morning when I know I will have the time available to do so.”

Michael says that prospective summer clerks also ask him about the pay they will receive as a new solicitor. "While the pay is good (and better than graduates in some other industries), when you work out the hourly rate, it doesn't always look so good. In the first few years, you will be able to live comfortably with the money but don't expect to be living in luxury. If money is your concern, then there are other more lucrative careers at a junior level."

Reflecting upon everything he has said, Michael is keen to stress that there are lots of positives to his job. "I get to work as part of a highly motivated team with intelligent colleagues. I have wonderful support staff and when I work late, dinners and cab rides home make things easier. Plus, some of my friends who have worked at top tier firms and then decided they do not want to be corporate lawyers, have found that the skills they have gained working at a top tier law firm are looked upon positively by prospective employers in a wide range of other industries and legal jobs. "

Lucy, 26 shares her experience of changing jobs to improve her well-being

Lucy has been a lawyer for 4 years and now enjoys rowing, cooking and going on trips to country NSW. However, one year ago, things were very different for Lucy. She was working long hours (including at least one weekend a month), not exercising and eating take away most nights. "I used to work at a boutique firm that specialised in intellectual property law. I had been there for 3 years and we always seemed understaffed. I was working long days nearly every day and was ordering take away most nights to eat at work. I felt like I had no energy to exercise and I often missed social events because I was either exhausted or working. There came a point last year when the negatives started to outweigh the positives. I enjoyed the work and the autonomy I was given but the long hours and bad eating started weighing me down."

One of Lucy's friends had noticed that Lucy always seemed tired and was no longer enjoying her work. She saw an advertisement for a job with the Australian Public Service that she thought Lucy might like and emailed her the advertisement. "I decided to apply – the job was a legal job but it also involved some policy work, which I had really enjoyed at uni. After the interview, I was told they wanted to contact my referees. I let my boss know and even though he was disappointed to see me go, he gave me a really good reference."

Lucy decided to take some time off between her jobs. "I had a lot of annual leave up my sleeve and my new job didn't start for 2 months so, after serving out my notice period, I took a holiday. I relaxed by a pool reading lots of books and took a cooking class. I used to row at school and I joined a rowing club."

Lucy stresses that changing jobs is not for everyone, but wants people to know that it is not as scary as it may seem. "I thought everyone would think I was a trader or something but we had a farewell lunch and my boss said something really nice things about me. He said they would have me back if I ever changed my mind. I still see my old work colleagues every now and again for farewells and birthdays so I know there are no hard feelings."

As for her new job, Lucy says "My job is fewer hours and even though the pay is less, I think I am probably earning more per hour than in my previous job. I now cook my dinner every night and have time for exercise. I have been meeting new people and socialising with my friends more and I think I am a better employee now that my mental health has improved. I am more productive and a much friendlier person to work with. The work is interesting and my colleagues are supportive so it was definitely worth the effort of changing jobs."

Robert, 25, is a solicitor at a community legal centre

Robert was admitted as a solicitor late last year and is working at a community legal centre as a solicitor. Prior to this, he completed his PLT with Legal Aid and worked as a researcher for an academic at his old university.

"I have always wanted to work with disadvantaged members of the community so I was thrilled when I got the job as a solicitor at a community legal centre. I like having to be a bit of a jack of all trades as a community solicitor – you have to be across so many different areas of law. You also have to be aware of all the different support services that are available to people as often a person's legal problem is the result of other factors such as poor financial skills or mental health problems. I also enjoy hosting community legal education events to inform community workers of how to identify when a person's problem is a legal one and what I can help that person with if they refer that person to me or someone else at the centre."

Despite enjoying his work, Robert says he has some days where he feels overwhelmed. "There is a huge demand for our services and so I have a very high workload. I can work very long hours and I sometimes feel as though I am drowning in work. Due to budget constraints, we only have one legal support officer so I sometimes get frustrated when I find myself doing work which is largely administrative (such as completing forms for people) when I think my skills would be better used working on a legal issue. The senior lawyers around me are very supportive and helpful, but at the end of the day, they have clients as well and may not always be available when I need them for advice."

Robert also warns that it can be hard not to get emotionally involved with his clients' problems. "I don't think anything can fully prepare you for working with really disadvantaged people. I have clients, for example, who are homeless or who have severe mental illnesses or who have drug problems. It can be hard to remember that you are a lawyer and there is sometimes only so much you can do. The senior lawyers tell me that it gets easier as you get more experienced but at the moment, as a new solicitor, I sometimes struggle not to feel sad or angry at the way society or the government has forgotten some people or placed them in the 'too hard basket'. It can also be frustrating when you help someone with a problem, such as a debt or a criminal matter, only to have them return a few weeks later with the same problem."

Robert says that he is learning to cope by focusing on all the people he has helped and seeking support from senior solicitors. "I also make sure I keep up my hobbies outside of work. I still do some academic research work, I play in a basketball team once a week and I have a subscription to a theatre company with my girlfriend. I eat out regularly with my friends (I have become the 'go-to' person when people want restaurant recommendations) and I subscribe to a number of magazines such as Men's Health and the Economist."

Robert hopes that he hasn't made his job sound too stressful! "Even though things can be hard, the positives definitely outweigh the negatives. Nothing beats knowing that you have helped a chronically homeless person get into public housing or helped a young disadvantaged person have their debts waived so that they can start their adult life on a strong footing. But I think it's important to be aware of your mental health. After all, a happy lawyer can probably help a client more than a sad lawyer!"