

Blue Monday

Angus Lyon advises lawyers on the five steps they can take to cope with the most depressing day of the year, even if it is just an urban myth



Angus Lyon is a consultant at Mears, Hobbs & Durrant and the author of *A Lawyer's Guide to Wellbeing and Managing Stress* @SenorGus www.guslyon.com

We are now in 2017. Brexit. Trump. Change. Upheaval.

How does it feel? The end of the world as we know it or feeling fine? Three weeks into the new year and maybe some of us still have a few resolutions intact.

It normally doesn't take too long for the annual optimistic aspirations to crumble under the pressure of renewed activity and demands. The weather is wet and cold. For many, Christmas has yet to be paid for. And we have to go cold turkey after seasonal excess of sugar, carbohydrates, and alcohol. And then there are those billable hours that have to be clocked.

I Don't Like Mondays

For over a decade the third Monday in January has been dubbed 'Blue Monday'. It is said to be the most depressing day in the year. Family lawyers plan for

an increase in divorce instructions in the new year. Therapy agencies recognise a marked upturn in new client enquiries, particularly from those experiencing clinical depression.

Reasons for this are complex and varied. Seasonal affective disorder is a common complaint in the winter months, caused by a lack of sunlight affecting melatonin and serotonin levels, leading to lethargy and low mood. And problems can be shelved over the festive break and faced up to when it's over. For many, Christmas itself can prove the last straw in a strained relationship.

Call It Stormy Monday

Actually, 'Blue Monday' does not exist. It's a fiction, an invention. In 2005 Sky Travel commissioned Cliff Arnall, a part-time psychology tutor, to come up with some statistics which would promote holiday sales. Arnall devised an equation factoring in categories like the weather, debt, motivation, and a 'need to take action' which helped the company to increase turnover. Commonsense observations were wrapped up in pseudoscience that has now assumed the status of urban myth.

Help!

For some this time of year can be particularly difficult. For others, depression and anxiety are not limited to the darker winter months. Arnall has

openly admitted his stats are nonsense, but, back in the real world, the chief medical officer's 2013 annual report showed that 26 per cent of adults reported having received a mental illness diagnosis, and lawyers are not immune.

LawCare's new website provides a wealth of resources for staying healthy and happy. The Bar Council also has a new 'Wellbeing at the Bar' site which has useful practical guidance for all lawyers, not just counsel.

Take Five

Maybe adopting the 'five ways to wellbeing' could be a realistic (and sustainable) resolution? The five ways are a set of evidence-based actions, all simple, everyday activities, which promote wellbeing.

The five ways were developed by the New Economics Foundation from evidence gathered in the UK government's 2008 'Foresight' project on mental capital and wellbeing, and sum up the project's findings. They have now been adopted by health organisations, schools, and community projects across the UK and globally to help people take action to improve their wellbeing. The five ways are:

- **Connect:** Evidence indicates that feeling close to, and valued by, other people is a fundamental human need and one that underpins good health. Social relationships are vital for wellbeing and create a buffer against mental ill health;

- **Be active:** Regular physical activity is linked with lower rates of depression and anxiety. Exercise is also vital for slowing cognitive decline as we age;
- **Take notice:** Studies have shown that being aware of what is taking place in the present moment directly enhances wellbeing. Appreciating what is happening around us and within us can help us to self-monitor and be more aware of what is really going on in one-to-one and group situations. Mindfulness is about taking notice;
- **Learn:** Continued learning through life enhances self-esteem and encourages social interaction and a more active life. This can be helpful whatever the stage of our career and particularly for those approaching the end of their professional lives; and
- **Give:** Participation in social and community life has been shown to enhance our own health. The weight of recent research shows that an altruistic frame of mind goes hand in hand with wellbeing.

Fitter Happier

And finally, if you're not affected by 'Blue Monday', check out 'Fitter Happier', Radiohead's cheerful guide to resolutions. That should help you imagine what it can be like for the 26 per cent and get you in the mood... **SJ**