



FAMILY LAW
EDUCATION NETWORK

Recognising When a Colleague May Be in Distress

Developed by the Family Law Education Network (FLEN)

Lawyers are trained to be strong, capable, and composed. But behind even the most professional exterior, someone might be silently struggling. Recognising distress in your colleagues is not about being a therapist—it's about being human, observant, and supportive.

Signs a Colleague May Be in Distress

1. Behavioural Changes

- Noticeable withdrawal from conversations or team activities
- Sudden irritability, outbursts, or defensiveness
- Missed deadlines or declining work quality
- Arriving late, leaving early, or unexplained absences
- Avoiding certain clients or tasks they once handled easily

2. Physical or Verbal Cues

- Looking tired, dishevelled, or unwell
- Flat or anxious tone of voice
- Unusual quietness or talking much more than usual
- Repeating self-deprecating remarks (“I’m just not good at this anymore”)

3. Emotional Indicators

- Increased sensitivity to feedback
- Frequent expressions of overwhelm or hopelessness
- Saying they feel like a burden
- Jokes or comments about quitting, “not coping,” or “not being needed”

What to Do (Without Overstepping)

Supporting a colleague doesn't mean solving their problems. It means showing up, with presence, compassion, and boundaries.

STEP 1

Open the Door Gently

"Hey, I've noticed you seem a bit off lately. I just wanted to check in –how are you really doing?"

- Use "I" language to express observation, not judgment.
- Don't push. Allow silence. Just create space.

STEP 2

Listen Without Trying to Fix

- Listen.
- Acknowledge: "That sounds really tough."
- Avoid giving solutions unless asked.
- Don't minimise with "You'll be fine" or "Everyone gets stressed."

STEP 3

Guide, Don't Diagnose

You might say:

- "Would you be open to talking to someone? I know our EAP is really helpful."
- "There's no shame in taking a breather—how can I support you with workload?"
- "Want to grab a coffee and take a walk?"



Firm-Wide Culture Tip

When support is built into culture—not just crisis moments—people feel safer speaking up. Normalise checking in. Praise empathy. Encourage team debriefs.

Download our detailed checklist recognising colleagues in Distress