

From Individual Burden to Collective Responsibility: Educating the Legal Profession on Reflective Practice



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Change is needed

- People working within the law disproportionately experience poor wellbeing: around 30% of lawyers (and almost 43% of early career lawyers) experience elevated levels of distress.
- In 2024, 29% of lawyers reported an intention to leave their current employer within the next 12 months, and 8.4% the profession, with wellbeing a contributing factor.
- Poor wellbeing has impacts for the individual (including burnout, mental illness), their work (cognitive impairment, reduced empathy) and the legal profession (staff attrition)
- Conversely, pressures on wellbeing exist at individual, organisational and systemic levels, with limited structural reforms in place.

Reflection: Think about a time you have felt overwhelmed at work. Did you frame it as a personal failing (e.g. of your work management strategies), or as a systemic issue?

Systems theory of change: from the individual to the collective

Systems Theory of Change focuses on the systemic factors influencing lawyer wellbeing and the corresponding systemic responses required.

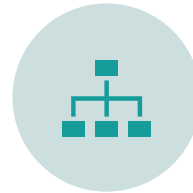
Reflective practice for systemic change



Individual: Enabling lawyers to understand how their wellbeing affects their practice, and building these mechanisms into regular professional life to support improved self-management



Interpersonal: Building improved networks for connection and support amongst lawyers, grounded in shared reflective practice



Organisational: Increasing understanding and value in the workplace and at the organisational level

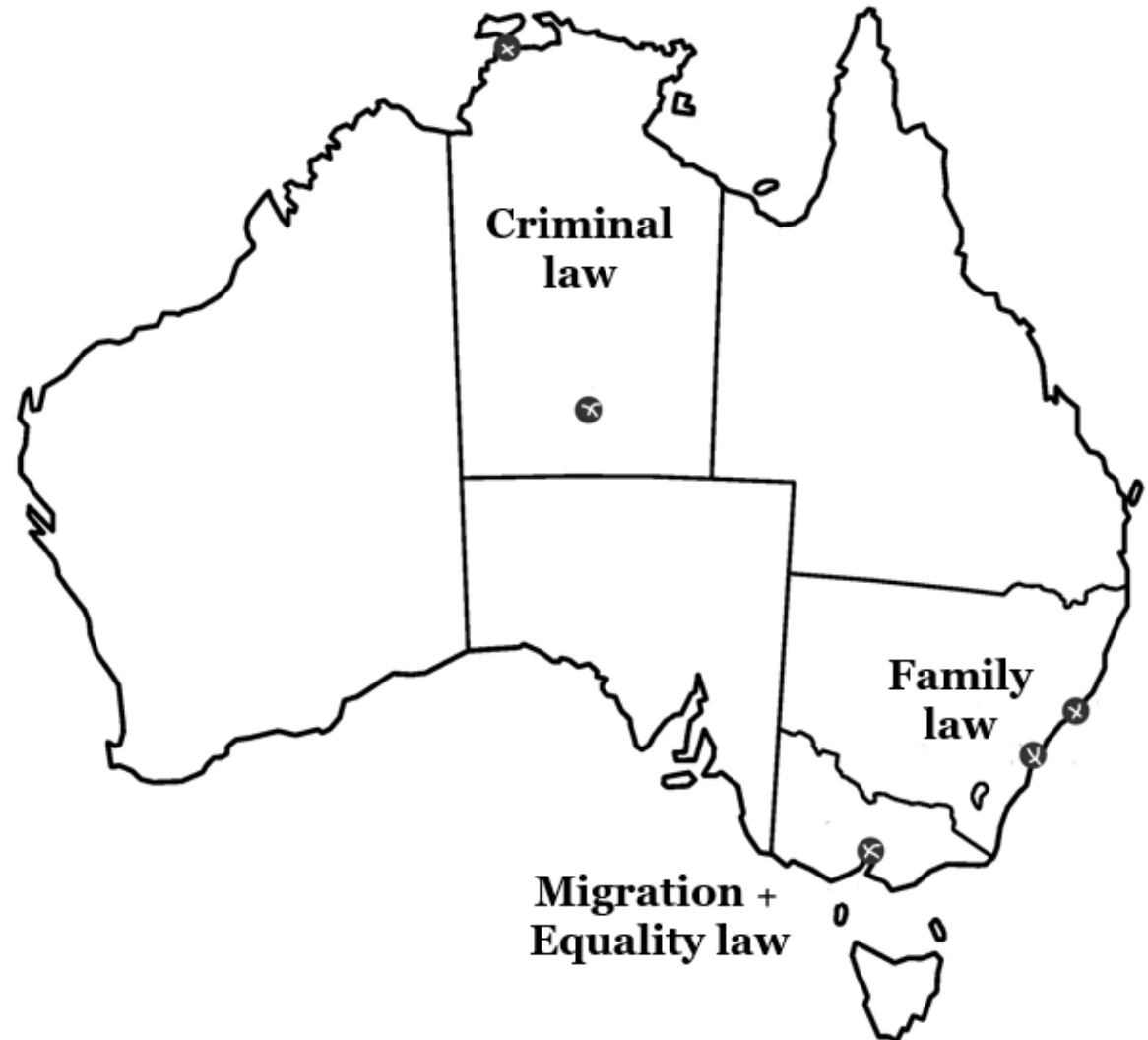


Sector: Supporting incremental change by foregrounding the nexus between reflective practice, improved wellbeing, and professional skills

Reflection: What features of your work have the biggest impact on your wellbeing? How much control do you have over these?

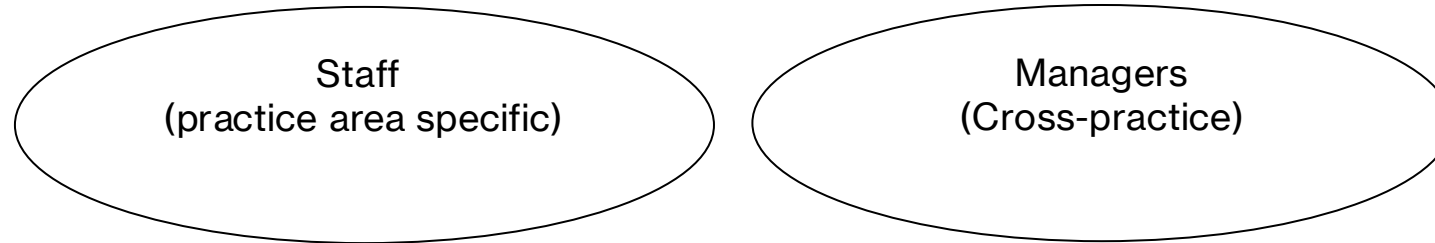
Supporting Trauma Informed Legal Services (STILS) Project

- Empirical study evaluating the implementation of trauma-informed lawyering across diverse legal settings
- Six teams across 3 jurisdictions and 4 legal practice areas
- Two-wave, stepped-wedge approach
- Partners:
 - National Legal Aid's *With You* project NSWLA, LANT and VLA
 - RMIT
- Funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC)



STILS Reflective supervisions

- Group, reflective supervisions implemented across all 6 teams



Preliminary findings: First Wave

- Overall, most staff found reflective supervisions useful
- Competing priorities were a barrier to participation
- Junior + Senior lawyers:
 - Both direct experience with the client group and expertise were important
- Managers:
 - Connecting with peers across practice areas was useful

Reflection: Think of a recent moment at work where you felt emotionally depleted. What signs, if any, suggested that this situation was affecting your wellbeing?

STILS Reflective Supervisions - Quotes

"Just hearing how [other managers] responded to those issues that have come up over the last 20 years that they've been doing it has been really helpful, giving me different frameworks for thinking about things, like just taking [time] out of the grind to take a step back has been super helpful."

- Manager, wave 1

*"Yeah, look, I mean, at times I dreaded supervision going into it because I was like, you know, **** this is what, like an hour and a half? [...] I've got all of this other **** to do. I don't have time for this. But then when I was in there, I really, really enjoyed the space of supervision."*

- Lawyer, wave 1

"I think as a team, I mean, we're always trauma dumping every day [...] but I don't think there's any like discussion around like healthy strategies really to manage [the trauma legal professionals are exposed to]"

- Lawyer, wave 1

Reflection: Think about a recent moment where you felt your wellbeing was impacted. Did you feel able to escalate this to your supervisor, or to raise it with a colleague?

STILS Lived Experience Storytelling

"[the lived experience session] was just this like shattering of the glass moment where I was like, hang on a second, I'm not fooling anyone here [...] when you're dealing with people regularly with the same kinds of issues and you're looking at it in a very like dispassionate and forensic and analytical way, you forget that at the end of the day, for all these matters, you're dealing with a human being."

- Lawyer

Reflection: When you feel overwhelmed or overloaded at work, how comfortable do you feel seeking help? What mechanisms are in place to support help seeking?

Lawyer Wellbeing Project

- An initiative under the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner (VLSB+C)'s Systems Theory of Change (ToC), which
 - Treats lawyer wellbeing as a professional capability;
 - Responds to the gap between traditional wellbeing initiatives and the realities of everyday legal work;
 - Shifts attention away from individual resilience alone and towards the work conditions, culture, and practice settings that shape wellbeing.
- The project uses structured reflective practice to help lawyers notice pressure earlier, understand how it affects their practice, and develop practical ways to respond before issues escalate.
 - Reflective, not therapeutic: they are bounded, facilitated, confidential, and focused on professional judgment, self-management, and sustainable practice
 - Uses codesign and lived experience methodology

Reflection: Think about a time a client, colleague or student shared something that was upsetting them. How did it make you feel? Did you feel responsible for fixing the problem?

From individual to collective responsibility

Individual: Reflective practice as supporting lawyers to understand relationship between wellbeing and professional judgement, and develop skills in self-management



Interpersonal: Developing networks within and across workplaces that are grounded in shared reflective practice, and a shared understanding of reflective practice



Organisational: Boosting the value of reflective practice within workplaces leading to more opportunities for reflective practice as part of regular day-to-day professional work



Sector: Making reflective practice a standard part of legal practice, supported by sector-wide expectations and resourcing

Reflections or questions?