



AFRICAN JUDICIAL TRAINING NETWORK

IN COLLABORATION WITH THE JUDICIAL INSTITUTE FOR AFRICA · UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Well-being behind the *Bench*

A model ninety-minute training module on judicial well-being
for African judiciaries · Trainer's Note

CONSULTATION DRAFT · JULY 2026

Marking the International Day for Judicial Well-being · 25 July

Nauru Declaration on Judicial Well-being · UNGA Resolution A/RES/79/266

76%

of judicial officers surveyed across
102 countries lacked sufficient time to
maintain their physical and mental
well-being (UNODC, 2022)

69%

regarded stress and mental health as
taboo subjects within their judiciaries;
a silence this module exists to end

90 min

one ready-to-deliver session for
induction or continuing judicial
education

Purpose and use of this note

1. This note provides judicial training institutions with a comprehensive, ready-to-deliver ninety-minute module on judicial well-being, suitable for inclusion in induction programmes for newly appointed judicial officers or in continuing judicial education for serving judges and magistrates. It implements the Nauru Declaration on Judicial Well-being (25 July 2024)¹ and United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/79/266 (4 March 2025)², which together recognise that the health and well-being of judicial officers are vital to judicial integrity, judicial independence, and the quality of justice delivered to the public; it also responds to the findings of the 2022 study³ by the UNODC Global Judicial Integrity Network⁴, which revealed that 76 per cent of judicial officers surveyed across 102 countries lacked sufficient time to maintain their physical and mental well-being, while 69 per cent regarded the subject as taboo within their judiciaries. African jurists made up approximately *eight per cent* of the respondents to that survey, and analysis of the African results indicated that the burdens were similarly heavy on this continent; the Network's subsequent paper exploring the link between judicial well-being and judicial integrity has since explicitly articulated that connection on which this module is based.
2. The module is tailored for the conditions in African jurisdictions: heavy caseloads with limited resources and inadequate infrastructure; single-judge courts in remote areas and the professional isolation they involve; dockets crowded with sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking, and homicide cases; public scrutiny heightened by social media; and, in some jurisdictions, threats to personal security. Institutions are encouraged to adapt names, court structures, and terminology to local contexts, and to deliver the module in their judicial language; nothing in it is prescriptive.

THE ORGANISING PROPOSITION

Well-being is not a private frailty but a professional competency and an institutional obligation. Its recognition and management can be taught, exactly as evidence, ethics, and judgment writing are taught; and teaching it in the training room is itself the most effective known antidote to stigma.

3. The facilitator should state this proposition early and revisit it regularly; each part of the module exemplifies it.

PART II

Learning outcomes

4. By the end of the module, participants will be able to: (a) explain why judicial well-being is essential for judicial integrity and independence, and identify its place within the Nauru Declaration, Resolution A/RES/79/266, Article 11 of the United Nations Convention against Corruption, and paragraph 194 of the Commentary on the Bangalore Principles;⁵ (b) recognise the signs of vicarious trauma, burnout, decision fatigue, and professional isolation in themselves and colleagues; (c) identify practical individual strategies and, importantly, the institutional measures that support those strategies; and (d) develop a personal well-being plan with at least one specific commitment.

¹ https://track.unodc.org/track/en/track/resourcehub/2024/nauru_declaration_on_judicial_well-being.html

² <https://docs.un.org/A/79/L.52>

³ https://track.unodc.org/track/en/track/resourcehub/ji/2022/exploring_linkages_between_judicial_well-being_and_judicial_integrity.html

⁴ <https://www.unodc.org/ji/>

⁵ https://www.unodc.org/conig/uploads/documents/publications/Otherpublications/Commentary_on_the_Bangalore_principles_of_Judicial_Conduct.pdf

Practical arrangements

5. Audience and size. The module works best with between twelve and thirty participants, seated at round tables of four to six to encourage small-group work. Mixed seniority is an advantage; when a head of jurisdiction or senior judge participates openly, the authority this demonstrates is more valuable than any slide.

6. Facilitation. Co-facilitation is highly recommended: one facilitator from the training institution or the judiciary, and one with mental health expertise, such as a psychologist familiar with occupational stress. Where no clinician is available, the module may be delivered by a trained judicial educator alone, provided the referral information in paragraph 8 is in place.

7. Ground rules. The facilitator should open with three straightforward rules: everything said in the room stays in the room, and nothing said may be attributed; no one will be asked to disclose anything personal, and each exercise can be completed without self-revelation, as the scenarios reveal things on participants' behalf; and leaving the room at any time requires no explanation.

8. Duty of care. Because the subject can touch on real distress, the facilitator must hold and announce the contact details of a confidential counselling service or employee assistance resource available to participants, whether within the judiciary, a public health service, or a professional body. Training materials must not include graphic case content, photographs, or audio; research on trauma-informed training shows that such material risks re-traumatising the very audience the module is designed to help.

9. Materials. Required: this note; Handouts A to C; blank index cards; a flip chart or whiteboard; and, where connectivity permits, an anonymous polling tool. No slides are necessary, and the module is deliberately designed to be deliverable with paper alone, recognising the range of settings in which member institutions operate.

PART IV

Session plan at a glance

TIME	SEGMENT	METHOD	MATERIALS
00:00–00:10	1. Why well-being is an integrity issue	Mini-lecture and framing	Flip chart
00:10–00:25	2. Naming the pressures	Anonymous card exercise and facilitated discussion	Index cards or anonymous poll
00:25–00:40	3. The mechanisms: trauma, burnout, fatigue, isolation	Interactive mini-lecture	Handout A
00:40–01:05	4. Case scenarios	Small-group work (15 min) and report-back (10 min)	Handout B
01:05–01:18	5. From coping to institutional design	Plenary discussion	Flip chart
01:18–01:30	6. Personal well-being plan and close	Individual exercise and voluntary commitment round	Handout C

PART V

Facilitation notes, segment by segment

10 MIN Segment 1 · Why well-being is an integrity issue

10. Open with the ground rules, then move to the framing scene: the robe the public sees and the human being it conceals. Briefly state the international framework without slides: the Nauru Declaration and its recognition of a dual responsibility resting on institutions and individual judges; the General Assembly's proclamation of 25 July; the grounding in UNCAC Article 11; and the earlier recognition in the Bangalore commentary that well-being underpins diligence and competence. Then present the argument, rather than merely assert it: an exhausted judge makes slower decisions and reasons less effectively; an isolated judge has no colleague to test doubts against, making error and improper approach more likely; a judiciary under immense stress often hides its problems until scandals emerge. Conclude the segment with the two figures from the 2022 study, 76 and 69 per cent, and note that evidence from Africa remains to be collected, starting, modestly, in this room.

15 MIN Segment 2 · Naming the pressures

11. Distribute index cards and ask each participant to write, anonymously, the single aspect of judicial work that weighs on them most heavily; collect, shuffle, and read a selection aloud, clustering them on the flip chart as they emerge. Experience suggests the clusters will naturally form: workload and backlog; distressing evidence; isolation; public and social-media scrutiny; security; and the difficulty of discussing any of these issues. The facilitator's role is to promote normalisation, and the most helpful phrase is some variation of: notice that the room wrote each other's cards. (*"You will have noticed that many of these cards say the same thing — you have, in effect, written each other's cards"*).

Where connectivity allows, the two questions from the 2022 UNODC study may be posed as an anonymous poll, with the results displayed alongside the global figures; institutions should record and submit aggregate, anonymised results to the AJTN secretariat so that an African evidence base can begin to develop (paragraph 20).

15 MIN Segment 3 · The mechanisms

12. Walk through Handout A, one row at a time, in plain language. On vicarious or secondary trauma, the essential teaching is that the cumulative effect of bearing witness to violence and abuse is a documented occupational phenomenon, first described in helping professions and since confirmed in judicial

populations. A majority of surveyed judges in one large American study report symptoms, and Kenyan research among judges and magistrates of the Rift Valley documents secondary traumatic stress arising from adjudicating trauma-laden cases. It recommends regular psychological debriefing as the institutional response; this is a consequence of exposure, not of weakness. Regarding burnout, distinguish its three classical features: exhaustion, detachment or cynicism, and a collapsing sense of accomplishment. South African research has documented both the strains of the role and, importantly, the features associated with flourishing within it. On decision fatigue, the practical point is that judgment is a depleting resource; hence, it argues for careful list design, breaks, and strategic timing of difficult rulings, not heroics. Concerning isolation, it is the most Africa-specific of the four, given the geography of single-judge stations, and the one most directly addressable via institutional design. Invite recognition instead of disclosure: ask which row participants have observed in a colleague, never in themselves.

CLOSE ON A POSITIVE NOTE

Well-being is not merely the absence of harm, and the research on meaningful work finds that the sense of purpose judges derive from their office is itself among the most powerful protective resources available to them, a finding echoed in the South African work on judicial flourishing. The object of this module is to protect what makes the work meaningful, and not to treat judging as a problem.

25 MIN Segment 4 · Case scenarios

13. Assign one scenario from Handout B to each table; with fewer tables, prioritise Scenario 1. Groups have fifteen minutes to answer the four questions printed beneath the scenarios, and a spokesperson reports for two to three minutes per table. In the report-back, consistently emphasise the fourth question, which asks what would make it safe to seek help in your jurisdiction, as it transforms empathy into design. Capture every institutional proposal on the flip chart, as these inform the next segment. Do not allow the discussion to devolve into advice that the judge in the scenario should simply toughen up; if it drifts there, ask whether the same would be said of a surgeon with a tremor.

13 MIN Segment 5 · From coping to institutional design

14. Work from the flip-chart list towards the measures with the strongest support in practice and literature: structured peer support or intervision, in which small groups of judges meet regularly and confidentially to discuss the pressures of the role; routine debriefing after cases involving distressing evidence, offered as standard so that uptake carries no stigma; rotation and mixing of lists so that no judicial officer carries an unbroken diet of sexual-offence or child-abuse work; sensible case-allocation and sitting patterns that treat decision fatigue as a scheduling fact; deliberate contact and mentoring for judges at remote stations; security protocols and social-media support handled institutionally rather than left to the targeted judge; and well-being as a standing item in judicial leadership training, because presiding officers set the temperature. Continental precedent is accumulating: the framework presented to the Judiciary of Uganda's Annual Judges' Conference in January 2026 treats judicial wellness explicitly as a tool of effective case management, an institutional framing that heads of court in the room may find readily transplantable, since it answers the objection of cost with the arithmetic of delay; and the recent practice-management literature warns that stigma is aggravated precisely where leadership is poor and supervision weak, which places the remedy squarely in leadership's hands. The closing point of the segment belongs to the Nauru Declaration's dual responsibility: individual strategies fail where institutions make their use costly, and the participants who lead courts should leave knowing the first move is theirs.

12 MIN Segment 6 · Personal well-being plan and close

15. Distribute Handout C and allow seven quiet minutes for completion; it is private and will not be collected. Invite, without requiring, a closing round where any participant may share one commitment aloud. Conclude by reaffirming the organising proposition: seeking support is a sign of strength and

professionalism, never weakness; and a judiciary that cares for its judges is not indulging them, but protecting public justice. Reiterate the counselling contact details and the evaluation form.

Recognising the signs

CONDITION	WHAT IT IS	COMMON SIGNS	WHAT HELPS
Vicarious (secondary) trauma	The cumulative inner effect of bearing witness to violence, abuse, and suffering in the course of judicial work.	Intrusive images or dreams from cases; numbing or avoidance; a darkening world view; irritability; changed sense of safety; withdrawal from family.	Naming it as occupational, not personal; debriefing after heavy cases; peer support; varied lists; professional counselling where signs persist.
Burnout	Exhaustion produced by chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.	Depleted energy; cynicism or detachment from litigants and colleagues; a collapsing sense of accomplishment; dread of the list; reliance on alcohol or other numbing.	Realistic workloads and backlog relief; genuine leave actually taken; mentoring; leadership attention to allocation; medical advice where entrenched.
Decision fatigue	The measurable depletion of the quality of judgment over a long sequence of decisions.	Deteriorating concentration late in the day; shortcuts and irritability from the bench; postponed rulings accumulating; second-guessing.	List design and breaks; scheduling complex rulings early; reserved-judgment discipline; treating judgment as a finite daily resource.
Professional isolation	The loneliness of an office that forbids ordinary confiding, sharpened by remote single-judge stations.	No colleague to test doubts against; reluctance to telephone senior judges; social withdrawal in small communities where every litigant is a neighbour.	Structured peer networks; scheduled contact with mentors; circuit visits; judicial association activity; taking isolation into account when officers are posted, with time limits and rotation for remote stations

None of the signs listed is, on its own, a diagnosis; this table is a prompt for self-awareness and collegial awareness, not a clinical instrument, and persistent difficulty should be addressed by a professional.

Case scenarios

SCENARIO 1 The station at the end of the road

Magistrate A has served for three years at a single magistrate station four hundred kilometres from the nearest colleague. Her list is dominated by sexual offences against children; she is the only judicial officer the district has, and every adjournment is noticed. She sleeps poorly, has begun to dread Mondays, and has twice caught herself snapping at a young prosecutor. In the shop where she buys her food she is greeted as Your Worship by the relatives of accused persons and complainants alike. She has told no one, because there is no one to tell, and because the last magistrate at this station was described admiringly, at his farewell, as a man who never complained.

SCENARIO 2 The retribution online

Justice B delivers a ruling in an electoral matter. Within hours a coordinated social-media campaign accuses him of having been bought; his photograph circulates with his home suburb named, and one widely shared post mentions the school his children attend. The judiciary's communications office issues nothing, on the settled view that judgments speak for themselves. Justice B continues to sit, but he has quietly asked the allocations registrar whether she might be spared them, and wonders whether wanting to be spared them is itself a failure of judicial courage.

SCENARIO 3 The backlog

Judge C inherited three hundred additional part-heard matters when a colleague retired and was not replaced. He now works most nights and every weekend, has missed his daughter's graduation, and has had chest pains he has mentioned to no one. A judgment reserved eighteen months ago has become the subject of a complaint to the judicial conduct body. Asked by the head of his division, in passing, how he is managing, he answers in one word; he regards the question as a courtesy and the truthful answer as a resignation letter.

QUESTIONS FOR EACH SCENARIO

First, what signs from Handout A are present? Secondly, what could the judicial officer realistically do, in this jurisdiction, this term? Thirdly, what should the institution do, and which of those measures would cost little or nothing? Fourthly, what would have to change for it to be safe for this judicial officer to ask for help, and who in this room can change it?

Personal well-being plan

This page is private; it will not be collected, and no one will ask to see it.

My earliest personal warning signs, the ones I have noticed before, are:

The aspect of my current work that draws most heavily on me is:

One practice I will protect each week, and the day and hour I will protect it, is:

The colleague I could telephone, and whom I give myself permission to telephone, is:

The confidential professional support available to me, with its contact details, is:

One thing I will raise with my head of court, judicial association, or training institution is:

I will review this page on (suggested: three months from today):

Adaptation, evaluation, and the African evidence base

16. Placement. In induction, the module sits naturally alongside ethics and core skills, and its presence in the founding curriculum tells every new appointee that these are professional competencies; in continuing education, it pairs well with sessions on judgment writing under workload pressure or on the handling of sexual-offence lists. It may be compressed to sixty minutes by shortening Segment 3 and allocating a single scenario, though the small-group work should never be the segment sacrificed.

17. Language and register. The module should be delivered in the working language of the judiciary, and member institutions are encouraged to translate the handouts. Local idiom matters: the facilitator should replace the illustrative station, court names, and institutional titles with their domestic equivalents before delivery.

18. Sensitivities. In some judiciaries, Scenario 2 will be too close to live events; facilitators should exercise judgment and may substitute a scenario on an anonymous threatening letter. The module is not group therapy, and the facilitator should gently and privately redirect any participant whose material is visibly raw, with the counselling contact to hand.

19. Evaluation. A short form should ask three things: what participants will do differently, which segment was most useful, and whether they would recommend the module to a colleague. Nothing else is needed, and anonymity should be preserved.

20. The African evidence base. Institutions delivering the module are invited to anonymously put the two 2022 UNODC questions to participants in Segment 2 and to return aggregate results, including the numbers polled and nothing that identifies any individual, to the Executive Secretary of the AJTN. In this way an African picture of judicial well-being, whose absence the international literature repeatedly notes, can begin to be assembled by the continent's own training institutions.

PART X

Further reading

Framework instruments

Nauru Declaration on Judicial Well-being (25 July 2024)

https://track.unodc.org/track/en/track/resourcehub/2024/nauru_declaration_on_judicial_well-being.html;

United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/79/266 (4 March 2025) <https://docs.un.org/A/79/L.52>;

UNODC, Commentary on the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct (2007), paragraph 194

https://www.unodc.org/conig/uploads/documents/publications/Otherpublications/Commentry_on_the_Bangalore_principles_of_Judicial_Conduct.pdf;

UNODC Global Judicial Integrity Network, study on judicial well-being (2022); UNODC Global Judicial Integrity Network, Exploring Linkages between Judicial Well-Being and Judicial Integrity

https://track.unodc.org/track/en/track/resourcehub/ji/2022/exploring_linkages_between_judicial_well-being_and_judicial_integrity.html.

African research and practice

P Muchemi and J K Kiumi, 'Secondary Traumatic Stress Levels among Judges and Magistrates in Rift Valley Region, Kenya' (2017) 3(1) Journal of Social Sciences, Education and Humanities (Laikipia University),

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329391206_Secondary_Traumatic_Stress_Levels_among_Judges_and_Magistrates_in_Rift_Valley_Region_Kenya; with a companion paper on age differences in (2017) 7 Research on Humanities and Social Science;

M Rossouw and S Rothmann, research on the well-being of judges in South Africa (2020); <https://scielo.org.za/pdf/sajip/v46n1/12.pdf>;

Judiciary of Uganda, 'Judicial Wellness: A Tool for Effective Case Management', paper presented to the Annual Judges' Conference (January 2026) <https://judiciary.go.ug/files/downloads/FINAL%20DRAFT%20OF%20GROUP%20ONE%20PRESENTATION%20ON%20JUDICIAL%20WELLNESS%20FOR%20THE%20AJC%2028-01-2026.pdf>;

C Rickard, 'Major New Global Research Shows Judges under Stress and without Help to Cope' (AfricanLII, 2022) <https://africanlii.org/en/articles/2022-07-08/carmel-rickard/major-new-global-research-shows-judges-under-stress-and-without-help-to-cope>

International literature

C James, *Vicarious Trauma and Burnout in Law: Managing Psychological Stress to Promote Safety, Performance, and Wellbeing in Legal Practice* (Routledge 2025); A Brafford and R W Rebele, 'Judges' Well-Being and the Importance of Meaningful Work' (2018) 54 *Court Review* 60; C Schrever, C Hulbert and T Sourdin, 'The Psychological Impact of Judicial Work' (2019) 28 *Journal of Judicial Administration* 141; C P Edwards and M K Miller, 'An Assessment of Judges' Self-Reported Experiences of Secondary Traumatic Stress' (2019) 70 *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* 7; P G Jaffe and others, 'Vicarious Trauma in Judges' (2003) 54 *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* 1; I L McCann and L A Pearlman, 'Vicarious Traumatization' (1990) 3 *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 131; L van Dernoot Lipsky, *Trauma Stewardship* (Berrett-Koehler 2009).

Comments on this consultation draft are invited by 31 August 2026 and may be addressed to the Executive Secretary, African Network of Judicial Trainers.