Mel Alexander works at the frontline of domestic and family violence, providing legal support to people during some of the darkest days of their lives.

For more than two years, she has represented women in court, arguing for legal protections such as apprehended domestic violence orders to protect them from violent or manipulative partners and family members.

The work as a senior solicitor with the Legal Aid NSW Domestic Violence Unit is not for everyone, but it can be deeply satisfying.

“I get asked why I specialise in this area a lot, and I must say that I never thought that I would be a family law solicitor,” she says.

“It can be depressing sometimes, but the really bad days are far outweighed by the better days.”

A matter, for instance, in the Family Court where she had to sit in and watch as three children were told that they wouldn't see their mother for three months.

That was a bad day.

At another clinic, Mel helps a client avoid the mistakes of an early Family Court hearing, where she didn't fully understand the conditions imposed on her, and ended up losing custody of her children.

“It is reassuring that someone's listened and been truthful and honest about my position,” the client says.

“You do really need advice on how to handle things. It's like jumping in a deep pool and not knowing how to swim.”

Self-care is vital, and Mel will often debrief with her Legal Aid NSW colleagues and occasional professional counselling.

She always comes to advice clinics for clients with tissues, and she jokes that she always makes people cry.

“What we're dealing with sometimes is really serious, really traumatic things that clients have been through, so we try to bring a bit of humour when we can to make things easier,” Mel says.

She provides advice across all family law areas, but the main issues tend to revolve around parenting, property and apprehended violence order matters. Occasionally, there are clients who have been arrested so some basic criminal law knowledge comes in handy.

“THE REALLY BAD DAYS ARE FAR OUTWEIGHED BY THE BETTER DAYS.”

Although Mel's job is to provide legal advice, she knows that she can only be effective if the client is calm enough to be focused, and can relate to her on an emotional level.

“When I come to an outreach advice clinic, I generally try to dress casually. It can be overwhelming for people to see a lawyer.

“I try to be casual speaking and not use too much legal jargon.

“I don't have any counselling training, but I do have trauma-informed specialist domestic violence training.”