

Symposium

How Law Students Can Cope: A Student's View

Ben Gibson

Law students today face mental health challenges at increasingly alarming rates.¹ However, at the same time, there is greater awareness of mental health issues and there are more resources available than ever before for those struggling. Many studies have addressed the mental health of law students by looking at the legal education system as a whole.² These studies argue that we must fix the “system” because it hurts individuals.³ While I do not disagree with the pursuit of these long-range goals, I believe these efforts to reform the system do little to help students now walking the halls of America’s law schools and struggling within the system. We must tell law students that they, when empowered with the appropriate knowledge and tools, have the greatest ability to prevent mental health issues from consuming their life in law school.

In my roles as a law student, a law school student body president, and co-chair of the American Bar Association’s Law Student Mental Health Initiative,⁴ I have interacted with law students across the country and have been overwhelmed by the response from students when they are told their peers struggle with the same issues they do. This news gives them the hope they long for, especially once they learn that they have the ability within

Ben Gibson served as co-chair of the ABA Law Student Division’s Mental Health Initiative in 2008 and as President of Florida State Law School’s Student Bar Association, which was named “SBA of the Year” by the American Bar Association in 2008.

1. See Susan Swaim Daicoff, Lawyer, Know Thyself: A Psychological Analysis of Personality Strengths and Weaknesses 113-43 (Am. Psychological Ass’n 2004) (discussing empirical studies on mental health challenges in the legal field).
2. See generally Robert P. Schuwerk, The Law Professor as a Fiduciary: What Duties Do We Owe to Our Students?, 45 S. Tex. L. Rev. 753 (2004).
3. *Id.*
4. The American Bar Association Law Student Division Mental Health Initiative was led by Daniel Suvor, chair of the division, and Ben Gibson, vice-chair of Student Bar Associations within the division. This Initiative was made possible through collaboration with law students, faculty, administrators, and mental health professionals from across the country. The Initiative included the publishing of a tool-kit for administrators and student bar association presidents as well as the establishment of a National Law Student Mental Health Day. For more information please visit: www.abanet.org/lsd/mentalhealth.

themselves to change their lives immediately and be transformed from victim to victor. The good news is that struggling law students do not have to wait for the system to be reformed. They have the power today to take the necessary steps to change their thoughts and behaviors and, as a result, live happy and healthy lives with the broken system. Based on leading research,⁵ this essay describes three of the main causes of law student mental health anguish and then goes on to describe steps that the individual student may take to cope within the stressors of law school.

While talking with law students nationwide in preparation for the launch of the ABA Law Student Division's Mental Health Initiative, it quickly became apparent to those of us involved that there are three root causes of mental anguish that lead, more often than not, to law student burnout and a host of other common mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

Let it be clear that I am primarily referring to mental health issues that are acquired as a result of law school itself. Surely, the stressors of law school can further intensify pre-existing disorders. However, to reach and affect the broadest audience, I will focus on the vast majority of law students who come into law school with no major pre-existing mental health issues, and, yet, develop problems as a result of their law school experiences. Many times, suffering individuals try to treat their symptoms without taking the time to uncover their root cause. To prevent mental health issues, a law student must first be aware of these.

Root Causes of Law Student Mental Health Issues

1. The Loss of Hope, Passion, and Purpose

Why is it that so many law students come to law school filled with excitement, passion, and purpose, and then leave, three years later, bored, apathetic, and cynical? These apathetic and cynical law graduates then go on to practice as stressed, burned out, and passionless attorneys. Many students arrive at law school with a passion and purpose that they hope their legal education will fulfill, whether it is a desire to serve as a voice for the poor and underprivileged, to help abused and neglected children, or perhaps to even land a high-paying associate position at a big-city firm. But at some point during law school they realize that they will not be able to fulfill their dream, perhaps due to high debt they incur, low grades, or poor job prospects. However, the end-result remains the same: a sense of loss and emptiness inside that comes with the destruction of their purpose for coming to law school.

The typical example comes from the student who goes to law school wanting to represent the poorest in our society but realizes that with more than \$150,000 in student loan debt, he must turn down his dream job with Legal Aid and instead take a higher paying job that provides no passion or

5. Daicoff, *supra* note 1, at 116-30 (citing Kennon M. Sheldon & Lawrence S. Krieger, Does Legal Education Have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values, and Well-Being, *Behav. Sci. & L.* 22.2, 261-286 (2004)).

excitement for him but simply “pays the bills.” We also know the student who starts law school wanting to work for the largest, best firm in the state, and then realizes after he gets his first-year grades, or because of the economy, that he will be lucky to land any job, period, much less with that dream law firm.

Many students enter law school with a strong sense of right and wrong. Over time, however, their professors teach these students to “think like a lawyer.” Many times, there is no right answer and the answer is simply “it depends.” It does not depend on whether the defendant committed the crime; more often than not it depends on who the judge is, the mandatory sentencing requirements imposed, whether the police preserved the evidence, or whether the key witness was secured by the state. These students must come to conclusions not because they believe something is right or fair or just but because it is “what the law says.” Law students are trained to ignore their heart and to go with their head in all situations. They are taught that there are no real “right” answers. The right answer is determined by who can make the best argument. This can lead to cognitive dissonance for law students and result in their losing the passion and purpose that originally brought them to law school.⁶ Students are taught to ignore their heart, which many times was what motivated them to enter law school. The result is a loss of passion and purpose, and a loss of values and core identity.

The decision to come to law school is life-altering for many students. It is a decision carefully weighed and considered. Students may move their family, quit their job, or put off other employment to pursue a law degree. Usually, personal passion causes students to do this. But if students let law school take away that motivation and passion, depression soon will be lurking around the corner. Depression is even likelier in the student whose life is out of balance and only filled with long nights in the library.

2. A Life Without Balance

Law students are notorious for living “unbalanced” lives and many take great pride that law school consumes such a great deal of their time. Especially in the first year, this attitude is not viewed as the beginning stages of burn out but simply as the signs of a hard worker. Law school is known for late nights, high doses of caffeine, ignoring one’s family, and embracing seclusion and isolation for the month prior to exams. Many students hope to live a balanced life, but the reality is that few law students are able to develop a plan to pull it off.

Living a life that is out of balance can make it extra hard to excel in law school. Those living an unbalanced life no longer have time for hobbies that used to act as stress relievers and that added fun and excitement to their life. The neglect of one’s health while dealing with a heavy course load and busy schedule can make it more difficult for the body to fight off stress as well. Add

6. *Id.* at 122–23.

to that a constant “on the go” eating routine, lack of regular exercise, and poor sleeping habits, and quickly one can see why law students are easy targets for stress and anxiety.

The neglect of one’s spiritual needs can contribute to mental health issues, as well. For many law students, their faith in something greater than themselves gives meaning and purpose to their lives.

Neglecting one’s social life can also add stress and anxiety. It is vital for law students to maintain relationships with spouses, significant others, friends, and family who can provide support and encouragement during difficult times. Those law students who consistently neglect their spouse or children while they study late into the night at the library are likely to experience extra stress and tension at home as a result of this behavior.

To cope with the stressors of law school, it is important to maintain balance in all areas of life—spiritual, physical, mental, and social. Many practicing attorneys fail to achieve any sort of resemblance to a work-life balance. Balanced individuals are more productive at work and better able to cope with the changing demands of a career in the legal field.⁷ If law students fail to learn this important skill while they are in law school, they risk letting it affect their future career and ultimately their personal fulfillment and happiness.

3. Law School Becoming One's Identity

Another root cause of law student mental health issues occurs when law students allow their success in law school to define their own personal value and worth as a human being. For many students, the pressure to succeed in law school is enormous. This pressure can come from family members, friends, professors, or even from within. It is often believed, albeit falsely, that unless a student performs well in law school she never will be able to land that high-paying dream job, and her life, as a result, will end up in her mind as a complete and total failure. With so much on the line, there is no wonder that law students experience high amounts of stress and anxiety. An exam is no longer just a tool to measure a student’s level of knowledge about a particular subject matter on a particular day. Exams become measures of the student’s own self-worth. Talk about high stakes!

When students allow their success or failure in law school to define who they are as a person, they are in a no-win situation. Statistics alone mandate that 90 percent of law students will not be in the top 10 percent of their class. Most law students will never make it on to the law review either. Yet, many lawyers who had mediocre grades in law school end up enjoying highly successful careers practicing law. Law students must realize that their performance in law school alone will not define their career or future happiness in life. Law school must be viewed as simply one of many possible steps on the road to a long and successful life and career.

7. *Id.* at 128–30 (citing Edwin S. Shneidman, Personality and “Success” Among a Selected Group of Lawyers, 48 J. Personality Assessment 609 (1984) (discussing the Terman study on gifted children)).

Coping With and Preventing Law Student Mental Health Issues

1. Maintain a Balanced Life

Law students can do a number of things to ensure that they do not fall prey to common mental health issues. One of the keys to prevention is the ability to maintain “balance” in all areas of one’s life. Learning how to cope with the stressors of law school in a healthy way, and not attaching one’s identity to an examination grade or a moot court team tryout is essential. Common mental health issues often arise while in the pursuit of something that is inherently good (law review, a high-paying job with a firm, etc.). Many students fail to recognize that stress and anxiety have become a major issue for them because when students around them are simultaneously experiencing these same issues,⁸ abnormal behaviors and symptoms seem to be normal.

Usually, the high levels of stress do not occur in the middle of the semester when finals seem a long time away. The stressors, instead, usually become most apparent at the end of the semester when students are in the midst of finals. Not surprisingly, this is also the time when students are least likely to be maintaining any sort of semblance of a balanced life. It also is the time when they are about to confront the ultimate “tests” of their worth as a human being. Law students might momentarily feel they can get away with living an unbalanced life, but, eventually, if not addressed, an unbalanced life will cause an individual to wear down and burn out both physically and emotionally. Each person is unique and some need to pay more attention to certain areas than others. But it is important for each student to set aside time every day for each area of his life—the spiritual, physical, social, and personal.

2. Cope With Stress in a Healthy Way

All law students will experience stress; it is a part of life. The key indicator of success, though, is once individuals experience stress, how do they cope with it? If a law student’s standard way of dealing with a long, stressful day is to grab a bottle of Jack Daniel’s, then he is not really coping with but avoiding his woes. Law students and lawyers in general are notorious for their drinking habits. The legal profession seems to revolve around happy hours and cocktail events. Many times law students even rationalize their heavy drinking, saying law school is “so stressful and demanding.” This is a dangerous road that can lead to a host of other problems.

Beyond high levels of alcohol consumption, law students also tend to cope with stress by engaging in other compulsive behaviors, such as overindulging in eating, gambling, sex, drugs, and work. They often will withdraw from friends, families, and hobbies—actions that also make them prime candidates for depression. Avoiding stressful situations, such as studying, is a common way for law students to cope with anxiety, as they choose to suffer from the stressor rather than dealing with it. Many law students also will engage in

8. *Id.* at 115 (citing Stephen B. Shanfield & G. Andrew Benjamin, Psychiatric Distress in Law Students, *J. Legal Educ.* 64, 69 (1985)).

procrastination to cope with their stress. That leaves them with greater levels of anxiety toward the end of the semester as deadlines and finals approach and their workload cascades because of their procrastination.

But students do not have to choose failure when success is an option. They have the ability to immediately change their lives by making positive, healthy choices in the way they respond to stress and anxiety. Instead of choosing a few cocktails to help wind down after a tough week, why not choose to hit the gym and allow the body to fight off stress and tension naturally? Instead of a hangover, students will be left with increased endorphins in the brain that will improve their mood and leave them better equipped to handle other stressors. Instead of studying late into the night and using fast food and caffeine to provide energy, why not make eating healthy and getting adequate sleep a priority? Students can find moments of peace during a hectic day through journaling, meditation, deep breathing or yoga. And finally, students can make the positive choice of developing a strong community of family and friends that will provide love and support when life becomes difficult and overwhelming. Law students might not have a choice in the stressors they encounter, but they can choose their response to the stress.

3. Hold on to Your Identity and Passion

When students tie their self-worth to their success in law school, they set themselves up for stress, anxiety, and disappointment. It is important for a law student to know who he is and to know that his value as person is not dependent on how he fares in law school. Thoughts such as, "If I do not make Law Review, land a great summer clerkship, and secure a top job at a large high-paying firm, I will not be successful," do nothing but create unnecessary stress and anxiety. Defining one's life and identity by performance on a few exams is not only irrational, it also further burdens an individual with stress and anxiety that helps to actually create a self-fulfilling prophecy, preventing the student from performing her best.

It is vital for law students to remember their purpose, what makes them passionate, and why they came to law school. If a student is passionate about practicing maritime law, she should not settle for another, more comfortable job somewhere else. If his purpose for his going to law school was to serve as a voice for abused and neglected children, he must remember that. A loss of purpose is a first step towards depression.⁹

9. *Id.*

Conclusion

It is important for law students who are experiencing mental health issues to understand that they are not alone and there is help available. Law students have the tools to experience hope and healing on their own; they can transform their lives from victims to victors. And though some of their mental health issues may be caused by a broken legal education system, students can learn how to cope effectively within that system. They can leave law school the way they came in: happy, passionate, and excited about their future legal careers.