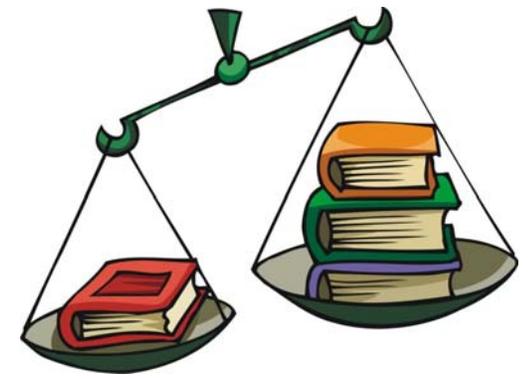


# Navigating the Stresses of Law School

Excerpts from 'How Law Students Can Cope: A Student's View' by Ben Gibson (August 2010); Journal of Legal Education

Many law students struggle with mental health issues at some point during their time in law school. Mental health challenges can affect law students' abilities to perform well and can affect their social relationships.



## SOME CAUSES OF LAW STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES:

### The loss of hope, passion, and purpose

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 sever 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.

Many law 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." 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 go with their head in all situations. The result is a loss of passion and purpose, and a loss of values and core identity.

### 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.

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 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.

### Law school becoming one's identity

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 he or she will never be able to land that high-paying dream job, and his or her life, as a result, will end up in his or 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!

Mental Health Services at the Colonial Health Center offers workshops, an online self-help library, and other online resources as well as individual and group counseling. To access services, come in or call us at (202) 994-5300.

# COPING WITH AND PREVENTING LAW STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES:

## 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 arise when while in 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, 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 a time when students are least likely to be maintaining any sort of semblance of a balanced life. 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 or her life— the spiritual, physical, social, and personal.

## Cope with stress in a healthy way

All law students will experience stress; it’s 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 coping with but avoiding his woes. Law students and lawyers in general are notorious for their drinking habits. The legal professions 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 and overindulging behaviors. They often 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.

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 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 become difficult and overwhelming. Law students might not have a choice in the stressors they encounter, but they can choose their response to the stress.

## 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 or she is and to know that his or her value as a person is not dependent on how he or she fares in law school. 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 his or her best. It is vital for law students to remember their purpose, what makes them passionate, and why they came to law school. A loss of purpose is a first step towards depression.

