

The Stress Test: Searching for WELLBEING IN LAW SCHOOL

By Annie Swift

Law school is hard—ask just about anyone who has been through it.¹ Certainly, there is that rare student who eats law school for breakfast; acs the exam, wins the mock trial, lands the top job, and has a fabulous time doing it. Then there are students like me, who occasionally feel great in law school, and occasionally feel like law school eats our lunch.

I had no idea what to expect when I started my legal education. I had some goals—namely to do my best, learn a lot, and get a degree that would allow me to help people. I also promised myself that I would prioritize my happiness and my family, and that I would not get caught up in the stress. While I am on track with most of my goals, I still have trouble with the stress. Apparently, I am not alone.

During our 1L student orientation, an administrator introduced us to the law school counselor. The counselor conveyed a clear message—you will feel overwhelmed, anxious, uncertain, and even desperate. The counselor told us that the school had recently lost a student to suicide and asked us to seek help if we needed it.² Another person came to talk to us about addiction in the legal profession,³ and left pamphlets with additional resources.⁴ I was startled by the implication that I would need their services at some point. Could law school would really be that bad? I took their business cards, just in case.

Throughout that first semester, I learned a lot about law school stress. With hundreds of pages to read each week, I found out how unnerving it can be when a professor cold calls you to present a case.⁵ Despite hours of study, I rarely felt certain that I had understood the cases, much less that I could explain them. As finals approached, I began to fear the sharp edge of the exam curve. I questioned why I had to compete with my colleagues for everything from grades to a spot on a journal. I struggled to understand why the doctrinal classes often seemed far removed from the ends of justice.⁶

Meanwhile my colleagues, at least on the surface, appeared to absorb and recite the doctrine intuitively. I wondered how I fit in with these brilliant and talented people. I met boxers and bridge players, organizers, art historians and authors, scientists, soldiers, and singer-song writers. Some of my peers even had law degrees in foreign countries—imagine learning the law in a second or third language! Most impressive were the superhero parents tending to their children before, after, and during class.



I had no comparable superpower to speak of, but I did have my reasons to be in law school, and they kept me grounded. I was also lucky to make dear friends with many remarkable classmates. I feel so grateful for the ways we have kept one another afloat.

The pressure has hardly waned since that first year. The course load has increased, and the stakes remain high as we look towards employment. I am surprised by how the little things continue to affect me. It still stings to feel lost in class, bomb a quiz, or fall behind on an assignment. I sometimes wonder if I will find success as an attorney, or if I still have time to become an artist or a firefighter. . . . I have found that many of my classmates struggle with similar anxieties.

School can feel even more daunting when life throws a curveball. On top of the academic and economic stresses most students face, many of us have endured painful circumstances in our personal lives. In my own time of need, I felt relieved to have picked up the school therapist's business card.⁷ I have seen other peers lose family members and friends, get diagnosed with serious illnesses, go through divorces, accidents, and assaults. Students have experienced financial crisis, food insecurity, and homelessness, all while trying not to worry about grades.⁸

The recent student cohorts have faced unique stressors. The pandemic took a particular toll on our educational experience. We have been isolated from the law school community, with limited opportunities to pick our professors' thoughts and commiserate with our classmates. On top of the persistent anxiety brought on by the virus, we have had to adapt to class online.

Learning over Zoom is patently exhausting. Our brains work harder to connect latent audio with facial expressions, and we miss important cues we would normally pick up through body language.⁹ It seems impossible to maintain focus through hours of Zoom class, particularly if the internet fails intermittently. Home life can be distracting, with chores to tend to, roommates working close by, and family asking for help.

Many students have faced additional hardship. Beyond the pandemic, the past year has brought political turmoil and a nationwide reckoning with racism and police brutality. Not every student has experienced this collective trauma to the same degree.¹⁰ I cannot know the pain of my colleagues of color who have had old wounds reopened by racialized violence. I can, however, stand in solidarity, get informed, and lend support.

How else can we take care of ourselves and one another through adversity? How do we cope with the pressure and make it to the

finish line? Maybe it is in the little things. We can offer ourselves and others patience, compassion, and congratulations for our resilience and success. We can learn that letters on a transcript do not define us—that we can pursue the legal education that inspires us if the traditional path does not fit. We can turn to what makes us happy (like friends, family, pets, and rest) to avoid the emotional pitfalls of law school.¹¹ Perhaps most importantly, we can seek help and we can offer it to those in need.¹² With any luck, we will feel good about our personal and professional growth—even if we have not yet found our superpower. ■

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Endnotes

¹ You can also consult authors who have written at length about the difficulties of law school. See, e.g., KATHRYNE M. YOUNG, *HOW TO BE SORT OF HAPPY IN LAW SCHOOL* (2018); ANDREW J. MCLURG, *1L OF A RIDE* (3rd ed. 2017); ROBERT H. MILLER, *LAW SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL: A COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE LAW SCHOOL EXPERIENCE* (3rd ed. 2015).

² Suicide is painfully common in the legal community. See Chris Ritter, *What Law Students Must Know About Suicide*, <https://www.texasbar.com/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=36460>. For more information on depression and suicide in law school, please visit <http://www.daveneefoundation.org/>.

³ According to a 2014 national study of law student wellbeing, about one in four law students screened positive for possible alcohol dependence, and about one in seven had used prescription drugs without a prescription in the previous year. Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe, & Katherine M. Bender, *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, *J. LEGAL EDUC.* 66, 116–156 (2016).

⁴ Find the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program resources at <https://www.sbnm.org/Member-Services/Judges-and-Lawyers-Assistance-Program>.

⁵ For more information about the pressure law students experience under the Socratic method, see Todd Peterson & Elizabeth Peterson, *Stemming the Tide of Law Student Depression: What Law Schools Need to Learn from the Science of Positive Psychology*, 9 *YALE J. HEALTH POL'Y L. & ETHICS* 357, 376 (2009).

⁶ For more discussion on why legal formalism can result in “a form of education that emphasizes doctrines and cases and minimizes external factors, such as justice, social policy, and politics[.]” see JEAN STEFANCIC & RICHARD DELGADO, *HOW LAWYERS LOSE THEIR WAY: A PROFESSION THAT FAILS ITS CREATIVE MINDS* 35 (2005).

⁷ Many barriers stand in the way of law students seeking help for mental health challenges, including social stigma, financial limitations, lack of time, and potential threat to bar admission. For more information, see Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe, & Katherine M. Bender, *Helping Law Students Get the Help They Need: An Analysis*

of Data Regarding Law Students' Reluctance to Seek Help and Policy Recommendations for a Variety of Stakeholders, *THE BAR EXAMINER* (Dec. 2015).

⁸ To learn about academic accommodations, contact Bonnie Stepleton at stepleton@law.unm.edu.

⁹ Brenda K. Wiederhold, *Connecting through technology during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic: Avoiding “Zoom Fatigue”* 23 *CYBERPSYCHOLOGY, BEHAVIOR, & SOCIAL NETWORKING* 437, 437–438 (2020).

¹⁰ For a general overview and links to more information about mental health challenges for students of color, see Abby Quirk, *Mental Health Support for Students of Color During and After the Coronavirus Pandemic*, *CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS* (June 28, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2020/07/28/488044/mental-health-support-students-color-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

¹¹ For more information, see Lawrence S. Krieger & Sheldon M. Kennon, *What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success*, 83 *GEO. WASH. L. REV.* 554 (2015); Lawrence S. Krieger, *The Hidden Sources of Law School Stress: Avoiding the Mistakes That Create Unhappy and Unprofessional Lawyers* (2014).

¹² Professional counseling services are available for law students. Schedule with Antionette Kuehn through the UNM SHAC Health Portal; <https://shac.unm.edu/shac-health-portal.html>, or through the Employee Assistance Program; <https://www.sbnm.org/Member-Services/Judges-and-Lawyers-Assistance-Program/Employee-Assistance-Program>. For additional resources, visit https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/articles_and_info/law_student_resources/.

