

These thoughts are distilled from a meeting with new law students at the Florida State University, fall, 2004. I thank the students for raising many thoughtful questions about sources of stress and coping mechanisms, and hope this summary will help other law students make a strong start toward a great life as a lawyer. For additional readings and related information visit the Humanizing Legal Education website:
http://www.law.fsu.edu/academic_programs/humanizing_lawschool.php

Roasting the Seeds of Law School Stress

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Law school is a highly demanding experience; that is no surprise. But the toll which law school can exact on the well-being and life satisfaction of many students is a surprise. It is often much more severe than can be explained by the heavy workload alone. I discuss here the most common things that can multiply your distress as you go through law school, and suggest ways to affirmatively deal with each factor.

Topics include: ***healthy and unhealthy stress** *** the heavy workload**
***stronger competition** ***pressure to succeed, and fear of failure** *** top ten percent and law review**
***hidden stresses of thinking "like a lawyer"** ***concerns about job prospects**
***satisfying the expectations of parents and others** ***why some lawyers are unhappy, and how to not join them**
***partying and other outlets for stress.** ***school loan debt**

What is stress? The originator of the term, Dr. Hans Selye, defined stress as any demand upon a person that elicits a response¹. Since life constantly places demands upon us, most stresses are normal and quite healthy. This is the case when they require our energy and emotional reserves, but within healthy limits. Moderately damaging stressors go further, by presenting more intense or more sustained demands on our physical and emotional selves, while the most threatening to our health and well being present demands that simply can not be met with reasonable effort and attention. They overtax our systems acutely or persistently, causing fatigue, depression², and, ultimately, burnout and functional breakdown.³

To maintain physical and emotional health, then, we need to learn to recognize pressures on us and to eliminate or moderate those that are particularly persistent, intense, or unattainable. For law students this is quite doable, because the really taxing stresses of law school all involve either wrong information, a lack of information, or skewed priorities. Hence, *these stressors can*

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¹ Hans Selye, THE STRESS OF LIFE, at 64

² Depression is a definite concern in law school. The most focused study to date found that new law students begin with normal levels of depression (about 9% of the sample), but rise to about 30% incidence of depression in the first year. By the end of law school about 40% of the students were measurably depressed. G. Andrew H. Benjamin, et. al., *The Role of Legal Education in Producing Psychological Distress Among Law Students and Lawyers*, 1986 AM. B. FOUND. RES. J. 225.

³ Stress is the most highly correlated predictor of depression. William Eaton, et. al., *Occupations and the Prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder*, 32 J. OCCUPATIONAL MED. 1079 (1990)

be eliminated or greatly reduced by addressing the attitudes or false information that fuel them.
Let's take a look

1. Heavy workload This is a realistic stressor, especially for first year students. Law school is likely to live up to its reputation for challenging assignments – and many of them. However, *all of us have engaged in hard work before, and usually with positive rather than negative results.* Strong, focused effort typically produces positive feelings like satisfaction, achievement, and self worth, while normal rest neutralizes the fatigue we might feel.

So what is the problem with law school? If school work seems excessively wearing, something beyond hard work is going on with you. The likeliest candidates are unhealthy attitudes and confused priorities, which commonly combine with law studies to produce excessive stress. For example, studying is often accompanied by anxiety, and/or overdone to the point of ignoring more basic personal requirements like rest, exercise, sensible diet, and social/family time.

Antidote: If you feel persistently fatigued or stressed, know that it is likely not the heavy workload. It is more likely your attitudes (and anxieties) about the possible results, coupled with life style distortions that wear you out physically and emotionally. Do not abandon common sense about your personal needs just because there is more competition from better students in your class than previously. Keep your priorities straight, and identify beliefs that make you anxious or tend to overwork. (See the next section for some likely possibilities!)

2. Stronger Competition, Others' Expectations, and the Fear of Failure You are all accustomed to relative success in the previous chapters of your life, and you may feel more *pressure to succeed* now than ever before. There has been so much attention on your admission to law school; your parents and friends (not to mention yourself) have *high expectations* for you and *you don't want to disappoint* them or yourself. You have that vision of an exciting legal career just in front of you, but it may be clouded by your *uncertainty about getting the necessary grades to land that job.* At the same time, you know *competition will be intense* because the students competing with you are, on average, more capable than before. Your entire class shares the pressure to be in that exclusive *Top Ten Percent* (and to be invited to law review), and you all *know* that *ninety percent of you can not succeed* in this endeavor.

The preceding paragraph identifies many of the common attitudes that create unnecessary stress and depression throughout law school (you may want to reread it). Without these attitudes, the hard work of your law studies creates only reasonable demands on your personal reserves, while it provides the natural enjoyment and satisfaction inherent in learning. But with these attitudes, law studies are fraught with anxiety and unease about grades and job prospects – major new stressors in their own right. And this persistent insecurity in turn can create much more stress, by causing you to overwork and abandon your life balance in the pursuit of a better future. Fortunately, all of these feelings and beliefs are based on *bad information and false assumptions about life and career satisfaction.* For example, it is practically a "given" that great success -- top grades, high salary or a prestigious job - represents the fast track to happiness. This pervasive belief is false. Both scientific research and knowledge of the practicing bar show that

it is false. If you accept this it will immediately reduce the stress you experience, and it will help you avoid major mistakes in your life and career.

Scientific research for the past 15 years has consistently shown that a primary focus on external rewards and results is unfulfilling, and is correlated with unhappiness. Instead, people who have a more personal/interpersonal focus – on personal growth, close relationships, helping others or improving their community -- turn out to be significantly happier and more satisfied with their lives.⁴ Common sense and a good look at the legal profession confirm this. The great majority of lawyers obviously came from the middle of their law school classes, and many who are highly successful were "average" in law school. It is true that very high grades will get you more on-campus interviews more easily, but the jobs those interviews produce are often far from desirable – assuming that you desire to be a happy and ethical lawyer.⁵ They often require ungodly hours with no outside life, sometimes also requiring you to do work you won't enjoy.

Antidote: recognize that the shared frenzy for high grades and salaries is based on false information and is unlikely to produce happiness, even for the most "successful"⁶. When you feel it taking over, remind yourself that it is a false belief, even if classmates, family, etc. believe it. Then focus on doing your best, in order to learn as much as you can. That is achievable and will provide you with satisfaction rather than anxiety. Remind yourself regularly: lean toward values like developing yourself, your relationships, and your communities of interest rather than emphasizing rewards and material results. Those results will come of their own accord but they are not useful ends in themselves.

Pressure to do well in school or get a prestigious job can come from family, friends, or peers, as well as from yourself. The research again suggests that you put little attention on this. It turns out that there are only two good reasons (meaning reasons that will provide you life satisfaction) to do work or take a particular action: you either inherently *enjoy* the process of doing that work, or the work *supports a fundamental value* or makes a higher goal possible. Whereas these two motivators produce happy, satisfied people, primarily seeking for other common motivators produces dissatisfaction and frustration. Those other motivators include: money or other rewards, pleasing or impressing those other people, avoiding feelings of guilt or fear, and

⁴ See, e.g., Tim Kasser and Richard M. Ryan, *A Dark Side of the American Dream: Correlates of Financial Success as a Central Life Aspiration*, 65 J. PERS. & SOC. PSYCHOL. 410 (1993), and *Further Examining the American Dream: Differential Correlates of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals*, 22 PERS. & SOC. PSYCH. BULL. 281 (1996). We have extended these studies of general populations to entering law students, with the same finding. Kennon M. Sheldon and Lawrence S. Krieger, *Does Legal Education Have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values, and Well-Being*, 22 BEHAV. SCI. & LAW 261 (2004)

⁵ Every law student should read this article to understand how the wrong work environment (most commonly found in large firms, can corrode your life quality and personal integrity: Patrick J. Schiltz, *On Being a Happy, Healthy, and Ethical Member of an Unhappy, Unhealthy, and Unethical Profession*, 52 VAND. L. REV. 871 (1999). See also Thomas D. Morgan, *Creating a Life as a Lawyer*, 38 Valp. L. Rev. 37 (2004).

⁶ In fact, our empirical findings predict that the higher ranking students will have the least satisfying careers. These students initially entered law school with the most intrinsic, community-oriented values, (which, as in this sample, typically correlate with strong academic performance). However, these students then shifted toward career preferences that are more likely to produce dissatisfaction and frustration. Sheldon and Krieger, *supra* note 4, at 281.

obtaining power, influence or fame.⁷ You need to spend your life figuring out and living your own dreams, not those of someone else. So, be loving toward those parents and friends, but work to stay clear within yourself about your own values and sources of work satisfaction.

Reframing goals and values: I've explained that the personal/interpersonal values and internal motivators are associated with well-being. There is another reason for choosing such values and motivations: *they produce much less stress*. This is true in part because they result in more satisfaction, so you don't feel frustrated, and it is also true because these goals and values are generally non-competitive. This means they are within your control to achieve with reasonable effort. Everyone can seek to do your best, improve yourself and your community, and be caring or respectful towards other people. Goals for such things are attainable and hence create manageable demands on your system. In contrast, the need to be at the top of the class, outperform other very intelligent students, get a certain job, etc., are not readily within your personal control. Those outcomes will depend on what other people do and think at least as much as on your own actions. While it is fine to work towards such things as preferred outcomes, if you make them your primary goals you will create anxiety, stress, and an emotional roller coaster for yourself.

There is yet a third reason to choose personal/interpersonal motives and values over external, competitive goals: *you are likely to perform better academically*. For example, if you set learning mastery goals instead of grade goals⁸, and work in well-structured collaborative study groups instead of exclusively on your own, you will experience less stress, derive more satisfaction from your effort, and will learn more effectively, all leading to a probable improvement in your grades as well.⁹

Antidote: Reframe your goals and motives so that they are based on true information (that which will actually produce happiness in your life) and are attainable by you with reasonable effort. It is wiser to focus on doing your best (a non-competitive, achievable goal) than on doing better than others or pleasing/impressing other people (goals not necessarily within your power). Identify your core values and work toward them, don't try to fulfill someone else's values or desires for you. And when it is time to look for a job, remember that this is your life. The only demonstrated bases for choosing work that will satisfy you are: will I *enjoy* doing the work itself? And does this work mean something to *me* -- does it fit and further my core values?

⁷Lawrence S. Krieger, *Institutional Denial About the Dark Side of Law School, and Fresh Empirical Guidance for Constructively Breaking the Silence*, 52 J. LEGAL EDUC. 112 (2002)

⁸Michael Hunter Schwartz, *Teaching Law Students to Be Self-Regulated Learners*, 2003 MICH. ST. DCL L. REV. 447, 479-480 (2003).

⁹In law school as well as other educational settings, students who participate in effective study groups learn more, learn better and enjoy learning more. Two keys to group effectiveness are: the members of the group invest themselves in the success of the others in the group, and members hold themselves and each other accountable for contributing to the group work. Michael Hunter Schwartz, EXPERT LEARNING FOR LAW STUDENTS at 141-145 (2003); and see *supra*, note 6. Professor Schwartz's text provides many strategies for reducing distress, maximizing your performance, and improving your experience of law school. They include, for example, ways to establish a sense of control over your learning, getting desired feedback from professors, and establishing an effective schedule for study.

Failing as a lawyer Some students feel stress around the awesome responsibilities of lawyers, and worry about the possibility of failing a future client. This is another form of perfectionism, and is not very different from the concerns for high grades and the like. As humans we are all going to make mistakes and have bad days; a law degree does not change this. And you will always think of a better way to have done something when it is over; hindsight gives all kinds of opportunities for self-critique.

Antidote: have reasonable expectations for yourself, both in law school and beyond. Mistakes are rarely critical to the outcome of a case, but they can be and they do happen. Accept that possibility, while developing a strong work ethic to minimize errors. It can also be a great help to develop faith in something beyond your own intelligence and ability, because you (like everyone else) will certainly have times when your own faculties are simply not sufficient to achieve a desired outcome. Learn to trust that once you have done your best, stressing on the rest is simply that – stressing. And if you're not doing your best, start now.

3. Thinking Like a Lawyer as a huge potential stressor Few of us realize the several levels of stress that learning to 'think like a lawyer' (TLL) can present. Most immediately, many of you will feel the natural tension about learning anything new and challenging, perhaps compounded by "Paper Chase"-type fears of the Socratic Method, harsh instructors, or overly intense classes. This level of angst usually recedes quickly as you become accustomed to law classes.

A variety of more subtle and more fundamental challenges to your comfort and well-being lurk around this process. Thinking "like a lawyer" requires that you master the analytical function, recognizing legal principles and applying them to factual situations. Your pre-existing beliefs, values, preferences, and your feelings and emotions will not be engaged in this analysis, and much of your apparent success in class will depend on displaying this relatively narrow skill (often to the exclusion of everything else). The first potentially major problem is that students begin to discount or ignore those beliefs, feelings and values, as if they no longer matter. This is a huge mistake, because it eliminates the sense of who you are that has developed throughout your lives. The result is that law students often feel "lost", or that something is missing, and indeed it is if you become disconnected from your values, preferences, and feelings.

The second potential stressor is related to the first. As classes proceed, you may feel disillusioned as you begin to see that the law is far from fixed in its meaning, and can be used to reach results you feel are wrong or unjust. Indeed, you will be learning the precise skills that lawyers can use to manipulate the law in favor of virtually any position your client might present. Here again, if you begin to ignore your sense of outrage or of what you think is right and wrong in order to be "like a lawyer", you risk the dampening of the ideals and values that brought you to law school in the first place.¹⁰ When lawyers act without conscience, it is

¹⁰ This loss of values is documented empirically. We found that our sample of law students decreased in values consistently throughout law school, with the largest initial drop in the healthful "intrinsic" values. Sheldon and Krieger, *supra* note 4, at 282

generally the result of this disconnection.¹¹ We have already seen that values and value-based motivations are crucial to life satisfaction, and when these diminish, anxiety and depression will naturally increase. If you fall into the trap of literally becoming a lawyer in this narrow sense -- acting as a "hired gun" by manipulating the law to further values you don't respect, it will create huge distortions of your personality with the proportional experience of distress.

In addition, TLL trains you to find and exploit weaknesses, attack your opponent's position and defend your own. Thus thinking or acting "like a lawyer" is often negative and adversarial. It is easy to become absorbed in learning and displaying these new skills, and you may find your personality shifting in this way as well. Be alert: Are you becoming more critical, intolerant or aggressive in everyday activities and in your personal relationships? If so, these relationships will erode, and another key foundation of your satisfaction and well being will disappear.

Antidotes: while you are learning to think "like a lawyer", be very clear that this is a legal skill but not a life skill. In situations that don't call for strict legal analysis, continue to be who you were when you came to law school. Maintain a lively appreciation for your instincts, values, conscience, and feelings in your dealings throughout each day. They matter, even in class or other situations where you often might not articulate them – stay connected to yourself! And be attentive to leave the critical, adversarial style in the classroom or practice court. If you "become" this person you will suffer the degradation or loss of important relationships and your life satisfaction will fall. Instead, liken your learning of analytical and debating skills to learning to weld (or to use some other powerful tool). Use the torch only when actually welding, and leave it in the shop to cool down. Anywhere else it will be destructive.

4. Partying, Drinking, and similar outlets Some students look to partying (or overeating, overspending, etc.) to relieve the tension of the law school "grind". Others become increasingly devoted to television, video games, gambling, and other distractions. Be alert and take action if you see these behaviors increasing: they actually increase your stress level and they generally are masking other problems. There are common-sense, positive ways to relieve stress, including walks, hobbies, sports, yoga, massage, or meals with friends. Remember: if this much tension is building up during the week, the work of law school is not the cause -- it is more likely the attitudes and self-imposed pressures discussed previously. Without changing those attitudes, no amount of 'blowing off steam' or ignoring the problems will work.

There are two other key concerns about partying and substances. First, are you using law school to rationalize drug use or excessive drinking? If so, you have company. Substance abuse is the most common reason that lawyers lose their licenses, so catch it now and deal with it. Second, there is a close relationship between substance use and depression, basically a cycle in which each exacerbates the other and causes a spiral of increasing substance use and depressed moods.

¹¹ Professor Ann Iijima has written an article explaining many of the problems discussed here in terms of loss of intrapersonal (internal) and interpersonal connectedness. *Lessons Learned, Legal Education and Law Student Dysfunction*, 48 J. LEGAL EDUC. 524 (1998)

If you think you might have a depression or substance problem, seek confidential help through a counselor, 12-step program, or Lawyer Assistance program.¹²

Antidote: Do not distract yourself; you are just preserving the problem for another day. Try to take a hard look at your behavior, and the attitudes and priorities that underlie them. Amend those that cause useless pressure or that will fail to produce happiness even if you live "successfully" by them. It is much smarter, and easier, to eliminate counterproductive beliefs and behaviors than it is to "manage" your stress for a lifetime through distracting behaviors. Get confidential help if you need it, don't waste your time.

5. High loan balances The high debt load of most law students is similar to the heavy workload of law school. Both are genuine factors to be reckoned with, but neither, of itself, will prove to be an unmanageable stress. The facts are that many of you will have significant law school debt, and that you will pay it off in time. But if you don't keep your priorities clear, debt (like the workload) can become a constant source of worry and stress. Many students then use their debts to justify abandonment of the desires to help people that brought them to law school in the first place. If that happens, debt can skew your entire life in the wrong direction by pressing you toward a career you simply will not like.

Antidotes: (1) first do everything you can to be frugal during law school; keep your debts to an absolute minimum. Ideally, get financial counseling early for this and other purposes.¹³ Lower debt will produce less worry now and will keep your job options open after graduation; (2) once you are doing your best to be responsible, decide to not worry about the future. Worry accomplishes nothing, but it will wear you down; (3) when it does come time for the job search, remember what creates happiness: doing what you enjoy, and doing what is meaningful within your value system. If you allow school loans to push you into higher-paying work that doesn't fit you, you will essentially be wasting your life. Keep debts as low as possible, and if your choices turn out to be enjoyable, meaningful work or a shorter loan payback period, choose enjoyable, meaningful work.

¹²Like substance abuse, depression is potentially very serious. You should seek professional help immediately if you do feel more than occasionally depressed, or if you experience other symptoms of excessive stress (persistent fatigue; sad, tense or anxious mood; feeling isolated from friends, family, or others – including professors or other students); physical symptoms like headaches or tension in head, chest or abdomen; change in body weight or eating habits; problems sleeping; persistent worrying about school, health, or 'the future'; irritability; breakdown of personal relationship(s); loss of self-confidence or trust in others; loss of interest in, or enjoyment of, school or personal activities; increasing use of alcohol or drugs.

¹³ To eliminate a great deal of unnecessary worry, get real information early in law school about ways to manage your current finances and options for paying off your debts after graduation. The payoff options are surprisingly flexible; one student here with combined college and law school debt of \$100,000 is paying \$250 per month and pursuing his dream of public interest work as a new graduate. He always smiles when he talks about his work. I know many other graduates who earn much more and have suffered greatly from their decision to forego their service desires for financial reasons. One told me flatly, "I loved getting up every day to go to work in the (public agency) clinic. Now I hate getting up every day, knowing I am going to this (other) job."