



PSYCHOLOGY OF A LAW STUDENT

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ABSTRACT

Law school forges intellectual prowess but exacts a heavy psychological toll, cultivating traits like analytical rigour, perfectionism, and resilience alongside heightened anxiety, depression, and cynicism. This manuscript explores the emotional burdens of legal education—evident in 96% stress rates surpassing medical students—driven by the Socratic method, opaque grading, debt, and competitive isolation. First-year "1L" shock triggers clinical distress in 30-70%, chronic cortisol elevation impairs memory, and personality shifts prioritise status over empathy, amplified by cultural pressures like family expectations in India. Delving into core challenges, identity transformations, peer rivalries, and motivation patterns, the analysis draws on Self-Determination Theory to explain distress via eroded autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Yet, resilience emerges through mindfulness, CBT, and purpose-driven pursuits, with positive outliers leveraging empathy in mediation and grit in litigation. Contrasting pathology with potential, the paper outlines traits of effective lawyers: interpersonal mastery in communication, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making, informed by psychological research on perception, motivation, and "grit." Strategies like wellness programs, peer mentoring, and policy reforms (e.g., pass-fail grading) mitigate long-term impacts like Big Law attrition. Ultimately, law school battle-tests the psyche, blending steel-like tenacity with compassionate growth, equipping graduates for ethical, fulfilling practice.

Keywords: Self-Determination Theory, CBT, Anxiety, Big Law Attrition.

INTRODUCTION

Law school demands intense intellectual rigour, fostering unique psychological traits in students, from resilience to anxiety. Law students develop sharp analytical skills at a very early stage, dealing with complex statutes and cases under pressure. This Socratic method training

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involves probing, open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking, which becomes dangerous sometimes and often leads to over-analysis, where simple decisions feel like courtroom arguments. Pressure of Perfectionism, correlating with elevated stress, often leads a student to fall into depression, which is reported in legal education studies. The brain is a crucial part of our body; it helps to understand the message which our body or its cell is trying to convey. The brain functions on strengthening prefrontal cortex functions for logic and debate. However, constant antagonistic thinking can rigidify perspectives, and it will lead to a reduction of empathy in non-academic interactions. High-achievers flex on this, while others face imposter syndrome, doubting their capacity and intellect despite taking admissions on merit.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG LAW STUDENTS AND LAWYERS

Emotional Toll Anxiety and depression rates among law students exceed those in other disciplines, driven by opaque grading curves and debt burdens. First-year "1L" shock hits hard: 30-40% report clinical anxiety, per surveys, as optimism yields to cynicism. Sleep deprivation from all-nighters exacerbates mood swings, mimicking bipolar patterns without the diagnosis. Isolation grows in competitive environments; peers become rivals, eroding support networks. Substance use rises—alcohol as a coping mechanism—mirroring lawyer statistics where 20% face addiction. Yet, intrinsic motivation for justice sustains many, countering burnout through purpose.

CORE PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Law school demands constant high performance, triggering widespread mental health issues. Studies show 96% of law students experience significant stress, far exceeding medical (70%) or general graduate students (43%). This stems from the Socratic method, heavy reading loads, and cold calls that amplify fear of failure and imposter syndrome. Anxiety and depression surge notably in the first year. Entering students often report strong mental health, but by year's end, 40-70% exhibit distress symptoms like obsessive-compulsive behaviours, hostility, and isolation. Stress and Resilience Chronic stress activates the HPA axis, flooding systems with cortisol, which impairs memory consolidation vital for exams. Law students report higher PTSD-like symptoms from moot court losses than combat veterans in some metrics, though adaptive coping varies. Resilient personalities—marked by conscientiousness and ego-resiliency—predict better outcomes, buffering low grades. Public speaking demands and

analytical writing differ sharply from undergrad, leaving many unmoored. Mindfulness programs in schools like Yale reduce symptoms by 25%, teaching emotional regulation. Self-efficacy builds via small wins, like mastering torts, fostering grit. Low-achievers often withdraw, per adolescent studies, mistaking perseverance for futility.

PERSONALITY SHIFT OF A LAW STUDENT

Identity Shifts Entering law school, students shed prior selves for "lawyer mode"—detached, hierarchical. Values pivot: selflessness drops 15% by graduation, replaced by status-seeking, as institutional culture reshapes priorities. This "depersonalization" boosts billable-hour mindsets but erodes happiness. Postgrad, many reclaim identity through pro bono work, reconciling public service ideals. Gender dynamics amplify: women face stereotype threat, men suppress vulnerability.

CULTURAL DYNAMICS AND PEER PRESSURE

Cultural factors, like in India, add family expectations, intensifying guilt over work-life imbalance. Parents had their own dreams which they could not fulfil, but they want their son/daughter to become one of the successful leaders as per their expectations. Social Dynamics Peer interactions evolve from collaborative undergrad to cutthroat rivalry. Cultural stigma hinders help-seeking. Cliques form around outlines shared (or hoarded), breeding paranoia. Romantic relationships strain under study marathons, with breakup rates spiking in year one. Professors wield God-like influence; cold-calling terrifies introverts, and extroverts dominate. Diversity enriches debate but highlights biases—minority students navigate microaggressions, building advocacy resilience. Positive psychology interventions, emphasising strengths, boost well-being 20%. Online forums like Reddit's r/ Law School vent frustrations, fostering virtual communities. Motivation Patterns Extrinsic drivers—prestige, salary—dominate, but intrinsic passion for equity fuels top performers. Goal-setting wanes amid curve pressures; SMART goals revive focus. Peer mentoring pairs veterans with 1Ls, normalising struggles. Policy shifts, like pass-fail options, mitigate toxicity. In India, where bar exams loom large, cultural therapy taboos slow progress, but apps like Your DOST bridge gaps. Mental Health Strategies Universities mandate wellness checks, yet stigma persists—"tough it out" ethos. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) reframes "failure" as feedback, cutting rumination. Exercise and meditation lower cortisol 30%, per trials. Long-Term Impacts Graduates carry "learned helplessness" into practice, prone to vicarious trauma from client

plights. Big Law attrition hits 80% by year five, chasing work-life balance. Judges and academics retain intellectual joy, less eroded by billables.

Positive outliers enrich psychology: mindfulness for negotiations, empathy for mediation. Career satisfaction pivots on alignment—litigators love adrenaline, transactional lawyers seek stability. Growth Opportunities Law school forges resilience; stressors build superior coping. Ethical training involves moral reasoning, aiding life decisions. Alumni report heightened purpose, advocating for climate justice or human rights.

Reflective practices—journals, therapy—amplify gains. For low-achievers, reframing as "slow processors" unlocks persistence. Ultimately, the psyche emerges battle-tested, blending steel with compassion.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFICIENT LAWYER

Lawyers spend substantial amounts of time and energy working with people. These people include clients, adversaries, judges, witnesses, government bureaucrats, business partners, or colleagues.¹ Thus, it is no surprise that effective lawyers are not only skilled intellects, but also excel at questioning and interviewing, communicating and persuading, planning and managing, resolving conflict, entrepreneurship, working with others, and making ethical decisions.² And it is not surprising that legal employers and clients desire lawyers who can communicate well, are able to collaborate effectively, are motivated and hard-working, can work independently but know when to ask for guidance, and are able to effectively plan projects.³

¹ For one study of how lawyers spend their time, see David M. Trebek et al., *The Costs of Ordinary Litigation*, 31 UCLA L. Rev. 72, 91-102 (1983) (detailing that litigators spend most of their time on client conferences, discovery, factual investigation, settlement discussions and pleadings); see also Paul Brest, *The Responsibility of Law Schools: Educating Lawyers as Counsellors and Problem Solvers*, 58 Law & Contemp. Prob. 5, 8 (1995) (urging that counselling "lies at the heart of the professional relationship between lawyer and client").

² Marjorie M. Schultz & Sheldon Zedeck, *Final Report: Identification, Development, and Validation of Predictors for Successful Lawyering* 24-27 (2008); see also Erwin N. Griswold, *Law Schools and Human Relations*, 73 Chi. B. Rec. 199, 201 (1956); Douglas O. Linder & Nancy Levit, *The Good Lawyer: Seeking Quality in the Practice of Law* (2014).

³ Marcus T. Boc Caccini & Stanley L. Brodsky, *Characteristics of the Ideal Criminal Defence Attorney from the Client's Perspective: Empirical Findings and Implications for Legal Practice*, 25 Law & Psychol. Rev. 81, 101 (2001); Stephen Feldman & Kent Wilson, *The Value of Interpersonal Skills in Lawyering*, 5 Law & Hum. Behav. 311 (1981); Susan C. Wawrose, *What Do Legal Employers Want to See in New Graduates? : Using Focus Groups to Find Out*, 39 Ohio N.U. L. Rev. 505 (2013). It is telling that the most common disciplinary complaints made against attorneys involve neglect and lack of communication. See Jennifer Gerarda Brown & Liana G.T. Wolf, *The Paradox and Promise of Restorative Attorney Discipline*, 12 Nev. L.J. 253, 259–60 (2012).

Recent law graduates recognise that they would benefit from more and better education in the interpersonal and decision-making skills needed for effective lawyering.⁴ Psychology—the science of how people think, feel and behave⁵—has a great deal to teach about a range of core competencies related to working with people and making good decisions. For example, psychologists have conducted extensive research into perception, memory, communication, individual and group decision-making, conflict, goal setting and planning, self-assessment, motivation, “grit,” and many other matters that are central to effective lawyering.⁶

RELEVANCE OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-Determination Theory links independent learning to well-being via autonomy, competence, and relatedness. People’s reasons for engaging in activities — affect well-being? According to Self Determination Theory (‘SDT’), external motivations and values tend to reduce or impair people’s experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness to others. Experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness are known to be basic psychological needs, essential for positive well-being.⁷ Sheldon and Krieger’s research was designed to test SDT’s capacity to explain high levels of psychological distress among law students, and their findings confirm the soundness of the underlying theory: that ‘psychological need deprivation appears to be a principal source of human distress.⁸ Self-Determination Theory explains thriving via autonomy (electives), competence (clinics), and relatedness (study groups). Low-motivation students disengage, viewing irrelevance in abstract doctrine.

⁴ Hon. Randall T. Shepard et al., Report and Recommendations American Bar Association Task Force on the Future of Legal Education 26 (January 2014) [hereinafter ABA Task Force Report], available at http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/professional_responsibility/report_and_recommendations_of_aba_task_force.authcheckdam.pdf

⁵ Psychology has recently been identified as a “hub science.” Kevin W. Boyack et al., Mapping the Backbone of Science, 64 *Scientometrics* 351, 368 (2005).

⁶ See generally Jennifer K. Robbennolt & Jean R. Stern light, *Psychology for Lawyers: Understanding the Human Factors in Negotiation, Litigation, and Decision-making* (2012). Understanding psychology is very important to informing the tasks lawyers have historically done, but also to tasks central to a broadened view of lawyering that includes problem solving, decision-making, group dynamics, and dispute systems design. See Carrie Menkel Meadow, Crisis in Legal Education or the Other Things Law Students Should be Learning and Doing, 45 *McGeorge L. Rev.* 133, 155 (2013).

⁷ Sheldon and Krieger, ‘Negative Effects of Legal Education’, above n 10; Kennon M Sheldon et al, ‘What is Satisfying About Satisfying Events? Testing 10 Candidate Psychological Needs’ (2001) 80 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 325

⁸ Ryan and Deci, ‘Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation’, above n 12, 74

IS LAW SCHOOLS WORKING IN FAVOUR OF LAW STUDENTS?

While these experiences may be universal to the law school experience, research shows that students' mental health has reached historic lows. According to a 2021 survey, 68.7% of law students reported needing help with emotional or mental health problems over the past year, with women being significantly more likely to seek and receive help. This figure reveals a 26.7% increase from the last survey conducted in 2014. In comparing the two studies, researchers also found that respondents reported increased levels of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. These numbers are similarly reflected in surveys from practising lawyers. According to the American Addiction Centres, over 45% of attorneys experience depression during their career, with nearly 12% experiencing suicidal ideation.

While one could easily blame the challenges and isolation imposed by COVID lockdowns and transitioning to remote learning and living over the last several years, other barriers to law student well-being include the inaccessibility of mental health resources and professionals, the absence of mentorship and support during law school, and the perception that one's challenges are exclusive to their own experience. This is where law schools play a special role.

Law schools have the privilege of introducing and integrating students into the legal field. For many historically underrepresented and first-generation students, law school may be their first exposure to the legal profession. Moreover, law schools are in a unique position to proactively address and aid students' mental health concerns before they evolve into more dangerous territory.⁹

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⁹ Sharma r. February 09, 2023

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