

# How to Succeed in Law School ...and Beyond

## Staying ON TRACK in Law School

Law school is not just another educational experience, not just a step toward a career - that begins after graduation and admission to the bar. Your professional career begins now, in law school. Ideally, it will be challenging, interesting, stimulating, character building, and fun without being overwhelming, intimidating, demoralizing, or depleting. This newsletter is directed to all new law students who are likely to experience all of the above at one time or another. Stress is definitely part of the experience. That need not be a bad thing, as stress, in moderate amounts or when adequately managed, provides motivation and drive. However, it is not unusual for law students, especially 1Ls, to feel quite overwhelmed and debilitated by stress. In fact, studies have demonstrated that "law students experience precipitous declines in their mental health during their first year."\*

We would like to offer some tidbits of advice to help you stay on track and to remind you that a variety of resources are available to law students (as well as lawyers and judges) who may experience short- or long-term stress in law school and beyond.

- Seek to learn and to acquire skill rather than to achieve a certain rank in your class.

Career success and satisfaction are not highly correlated to class rank.

- Affluence, fame, and power are seductively alluring but are correlated with relative unhappiness.
- Your worth and happiness ensue from your personal qualities (your character, loving relationships, contribution to your community) and are not defined by external measures of "success," (money, prestige, recognition).
- Let go of perfection. True, the consequences for mistakes in law practice can be tough, even damaging. But you are human, and you will make mistakes. Own up to them, learn from them, and avoid drawing self-defeating conclusions about them.
- Keep common sense engaged: do not sacrifice sleep, nutrition, exercise, time with friends and family, moments of silence, and other self-renewing activities.
- Invest time in organizing and planning your work. It's an investment with payback, including peace of mind.
- Live within or below your means, both in law school and beyond. You are most likely incurring significant debt, and managing and minimizing it

wisely helps reduce stress now and after graduation when loans become due.

- Hold on to your values; do not forget who you are, despite law school's emphasis on objectivity, rationality, and winner-take-all competitiveness.
- Prepare for that particularly stressful first year by reading helpful literature. We strongly urge you to read, if nothing else, *The Hidden Sources of Law School Stress*, by Lawrence S. Krieger.
- Avoid illegal drugs and excessive use of alcohol. The temporary relief some may experience can create a self-defeating and self-destructive cycle of dependency.
- Seek professional assistance when anxiety, depression, substance abuse, or other troubling behaviors persist. Going it alone is neither necessary nor wise.

Depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are disproportionately high in law school. Summon the courage to recognize a problem and deal with it proactively. There is no shame in having a problem - just in not doing something about it - so that you can get back on track and move forward with enhanced probabilities for success.

\*Pers Soc Psychol Bull 2007; 33: 883. *Understanding the Negative Effects of Legal Education on Law Students*. Kennon Sheldon and Lawrence Krieger, originally published online 5/4/07. See online version at: <http://psp.sagepub.com/cgi/vontent/abstract/33/6/883>.

## Recognizing Stress

It's a fact; law school is stressful. And stress can be good. In small doses, it may motivate and provide you with the focus you need to be successful in law school. However, stress can also be unhealthy and counterproductive. Here are ten warning signs that you're under too much stress:

- Changes in your appetite
- Inability to concentrate
- Increased use of caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, or drugs
- Restlessness or anxiety
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Headaches
- Digestive problems
- Fatigue
- Teeth grinding or jaw clenching
- Increase in nervous habits (nail biting, etc.)

If you are experiencing any of the above, DO recognize it and take the time to address it. DO NOT passively hope it will magically resolve. Try to identify specific sources of stress, write them down, and then consider possible adjustments (in workload, expectations, activities, self-care, etc.) that would ease your stress. *Something* has to change. Times arise for all of us when figuring out what or how to change may be impossible without assistance. So, just do it – seek assistance. Your dean of students might be a good place to start. LCL can also help.

### **Amy, 1L at Boston University:**

"I heard about LCL at orientation and kept the brochure just in case I needed help later in the year. After first semester grades were posted, I freaked out because my rank was not as high as I had hoped. I began to worry a lot, couldn't sleep, and lost weight. I called LCL anonymously and spoke to someone on the phone. She really listened and understood exactly what I was going through. I called again a week later and made an appointment to see someone who referred me to a therapist that I am still seeing."

*"I went to LCL after feeling depressed when my relationship ended and I didn't get a permanent offer from my summer clerkship position. The career center staff recommended that I call LCL, and I am so glad that I did. I received a referral to a therapist who helped me formulate and implement a new plan to move forward with my life."*

– George, 3L at Northeastern

## Know Thyself

You've heard of Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher. During the coming year, many of you will develop a love/hate relationship with him. You should always thank Socrates, however, for two words of advice often attributed to him: *Know thyself*. These are the most important two words to remember as you begin your legal career.

It sounds simple enough. And it can be, provided you periodically re-examine where you are and what you want from your life. You may be in the habit of doing this already, and, in fact, you may have done so on your path to law school. However, now more than ever, it is important to continue this process.

Law school has a way of changing you, slowly and unnoticeably. The reasons for this are not necessarily bad, but, instead, are arguably inherent in learning to “think like a lawyer.” For example, law school teaches you to view human problems objectively and impersonally. Such objectivity, which is necessary, may cause you to ignore your own feelings, which may result in an emotional conflict of sorts.

In learning to think like a lawyer, your pre-existing values, beliefs, and ideas will be cast aside as you learn to think analytically. In addition, the inherent competition pervasive in law school can cause you to lose sight of why you're there. Doing better than everyone else becomes the reason you work so hard – instead of learning more about law and the reasons you want to practice it.

However, you must remember that you, and you alone, are responsible for the quality of your life, both personally and professionally. You are entitled to set your *own* expectations. You define what expectations are reasonable to you, based on the model that is best for you, not what is objectively considered “right.”

Take a few minutes early in the semester (the earlier, the better), and consider the following:

- Why did I come to law school?
- What do I want to do with my law degree?
- What is important to me?
- What do I need to feel successful?  
To be happy? To feel challenged?
- What interests me, and why?

A particularly tech-savvy professor once framed this issue by suggesting that at the beginning of law school each student should make a back-up disk of him- or herself. Answering the above questions is one way to do this. Then file the answers away. Look back at them periodically throughout your law school career. And don't be afraid to discover that you may need to reboot.

### **Mark, 3L at Harvard:**

“I was referred to LCL by someone at the counseling center for help with my anxiety about the bar application. Prior to law school, I was arrested for an OUI and was concerned about questions on my bar application and how this might affect the character and fitness. The folks at LCL were very helpful; they saw me right away and helped me work through my fears.”

“My Dean of Students suggested I visit LCL after she noticed I was floundering academically and saw me intoxicated at a school function. The counselor I saw at LCL was very helpful and introduced me to a practicing lawyer who had also gotten into trouble with alcohol while in law school. She was a lifesaver.”

– Mary, 2L at Boston College

# LCL

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, Inc. is a private, non-profit corporation. As the state's sole lawyer assistance program, LCL assists lawyers, judges, and law students who are experiencing any level of difficulty or stress in their professional or personal lives, providing support, assessment, referral, education, and other services.

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## A Few Words from Deans

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers has been an invaluable resource. Several of our students have seen counselors at LCL about a variety of issues, including stress, anxiety, addictive behavior, and about questions concerning what to report to state bar authorities in their bar applications. They appreciate LCL's strict confidentiality and substantial experience in working with lawyers, judges, and law students.

**Christine Marks**

**Dean of Students, Boston University Law School**

LCL has been a great resource for our students. The staff at LCL understand what it is like to be a law student, and students appreciate having an outside resource whose sole purpose is to support members of the legal profession. Students have had good things to say about LCL, and the fact that LCL is supported by the Massachusetts Bar gives it even greater credibility.

**Ellen Cosgrove**

**Dean of Students, Harvard Law School**

As Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, a primary responsibility is to assist law students who have academic and personal difficulties. This often requires assessing the situation and referring students to appropriate services. For several years, I have referred students with many diverse problems to LCL. LCL staff understand the myriad components of the legal world and have provided excellent confidential guidance and support. I am grateful that LCL exists, and I appreciate their outreach to area law schools.

**Bettye C. Freeman**

**Assistant Dean for Student Affairs, Northeastern University School of Law**

For additional information and resources, visit LCL's website at [www.lclma.org](http://www.lclma.org) and select "Law Students" from the menu.