Law School: The Most Depressing Three Years of Your Life

Summary: Law school is the only college graduate program where stress and depression are expected among its students.

Google law school and depression and you’ll get a slew of topics. Between law firm job search recruiter websites that claim if a person is in law school, they more than likely are suffering from depression, to major web publishers, such as Huffington Post that states law school quadruples the chances of depression for tens of thousands, and Washington Monthly which highlights how the California bar actively asks prospective attorneys if they’ve been diagnosed or treated for a medically recognized mental illness, depression in the law school is unlike any other type of depression found in other study areas on American college campuses. In fact, law school is the only college graduate program where stress and depression are expected among its students.

Washington Monthly cites that when students enter law school, they are no more depressed than the general population which is about eight percent. However, by the end of a law school’s first year, nearly one in three students show signs of depression. The article goes on to highlight that around 40 percent of law students get depressed by the end of law school, and are nearly four times more likely to become depressed and six times more likely to kill themselves than those making up the adult population.

So now we know that when a law student complains “law school is making me depressed” we understand this fact to be completely plausible. Account after account appears in the form of law school dropouts, law students who are incapable of coping with the stresses of law school, law-school related alcohol and drug addiction, penchant to consider suicide or in other cases law-school related violence.

While it’s easy to understand a law student’s feeling of anxiety about law school, there nevertheless have been countless blog posts that take the issue of law school anxiety further regarding its acute stresses and outcomes. Online forums have blown up about the rigors involved while attending law school. Law school and depression have even made an appearance on social media sites such as Reddit.

With that, it must be true: Law school can depress its students.

The question is why law school can such massive amounts of depression in law students. What are the implications of law school and mental health? And what are the overall implications that mental health and law students can have over the law profession in general.
What causes depression in law schools?

Many of us who have attended graduate school realize the stress that obtaining an advanced degree can cause. From the overbearing professors and lecturers, the long-suffering classes that while interesting to us as students, can still be overwhelming, particularly when one has assignments due, and on the horizon, the stress of producing a flawless thesis and dissertation.

Graduate school, of course, is serious business. Within any major, graduate school is used to prepare a student for a profession related to their major.

- A graduate from film school will more likely have a career involving the television and film sector.
- An Education graduate is expected to take what they’ve learned while on their way to an MA degree, and apply it in a classroom to students that can range from elementary school through to college.
- A graduate with a DVM degree, depending on his or her field of study, can treat any class of animal from dogs and cats upward to farm animals and wild animals.
- If a person holds an MS degree in mathematics, they may have their choice of going into academia, engineering or the science fields, which goes to show how a variety of professional applications always helps a student retain a positive attitude toward their advanced studies.

The problem with law school is that in most cases, law school leads only to the law practice. Law school doesn’t solicit itself as might a MA in English, history or politics, in which students have options as to what they will do once they graduate.

They can teach, write, research, work for the corporate world, or even seek a position out with a nonprofit which believes it can make use of a graduate’s knowledge.

Law schools, however, aren’t so sophisticated or forward thinking. And with law firms being so slow to deal with law school anxiety and stress among its students, the problem tends to exacerbate and escalate. The exceptions to this are JD programs such as Yale’s, which teaches its law students of alternative uses for their law degree other than practicing inside a law firm. But programs like Yale’s are far and few for the prospective lawyer.

To know that your post-graduate degree points to only one outcome, which in itself has very few options, can create an enormous amount of depression. In short, once you graduate law school, your destiny is already plotted out for you. It’s the sort of realization in which a law student might give up and begin to distantly ask themselves, “What will you do if you fail out of law school?”

An All-consuming Focus on Grades

Law schools, to a large degree, are designed to not just grind down a law student, but also humiliate them.

The grind of are grades. To get high marks in law school, one has to work tremendously hard throughout the day and into the night. Reading, writing and ongoing studying are staples of the three years spent in law school, whereas the end result can be nothing less than an exceptional GPA.

And why is this? Because law school tends to cater to the lone wolf mentality in which everyone competes for the meat of the hunt, which is ultimately a job with a large and prestigious law firm. Of course, one way to get that sort of post-law school job is to achieve high grades and honors, as well as having a successful clerkship.

But the price to reach that goal can be detrimental. This is because law school students tend to be:

- Extremely competitive
- Distrusting of their fellow law students; a suspicion that is often fostered in law school itself
- Solitary; simply because studying is a solitary engagement in and of itself

Add together these three distinctions of law school, and it can be very easy to discern why law students are some of the most depressed souls on today’s college campuses:

**Competition:** Competition has a way of isolating people, particularly those who don’t quite have the top notch grades. Competition can cause ill-will between students who may have become friends throughout their time in class. Being alienated because of one’s grades is a surefire way for a law student to find themselves alone and worse yet, depressed because of being alienated and alone.
**Distrusting:** Because your fellow students have bought into the notion that in law school, one’s contemporaries can’t be trusted due to mutual competition to graduate at the top of their class, you may find yourself in a position in which you return that distrust. Everything said, read or overheard has to now be taken with a grain of salt, or better yet (according to what the law firm pitches) not trusted at all. Apply this theory to your law school bestie, or have this theory applied onto you, and it will be easily seen how distrust can spawn a friendship breakdown and consequently a loss of that friendship.

**Solitary:** Just by the nature alone of being competitive and distrustful can cause a person to lose more friends than gain them. But even without competition and distrust, law school students will still exist as solitary based solely on the workload of law school. Law school in no way teaches a person to have relationships beyond their studies. Their faces are always in books, or leaned over a laptop’s keyboard and screen, boning up on this or that ruling. No one wants to hang out with someone embroiled in that throughout their post-undergrad college career.

**What is the Socratic Method of questioning and how is it used in law school?**

The Socratic Method of questioning is defined as an approach to questioning based on the practice of disciplined and thoughtful dialogue. Socrates, the early Greek philosopher/teacher, believed that disciplined practice of thoughtful questioning enabled the student to examine ideas logically and to determine the validity of those ideas.

How the Socratic Method of questioning is applied to law students is through a professor who asks difficult and often embarrassing questions at random of his or her students.

In short, the Socratic Method is another instrument designed to bring prospective law students and/or future attorneys to their knees. Not only do they have to answer the question posed to them, they have do so correctly, accurately and within the bounds of argument, as if this students’ answer is more of a throw down to a challenge than a complex answer to a complex scenario.

And yet it’s the humiliation that gets to a law student more so than whether or not they gave the correct answer to a law professor’s question. What needs to be shown here is simply the fact that the classroom can be as dangerous and depressing as the law library, study hall, dorm room or lunch table to an embarrassed and alienated law student.

While in law school, no place is safe from humiliation, loneliness and finally depression.

**News from the Law School Front**

The popular blog, Inside the Law School Scam suggests these four points as to why so many law students are depressed in today’s law schools:

1. Law students are no more prone to depression than anyone else before starting law school. In the course of law school they develop both clinical and sub-clinical depression at extraordinarily high rates, so that by the time they are 3Ls they are roughly ten times more likely to be in these categories than they were prior to entering law school.
2. Rates of depression among practicing attorneys are also very high. For instance, a 1990 Johns Hopkins study looked at depression in 104 occupational groups. Lawyers ranked first.
3. These findings are remarkably consistent across studies, and have remained so for several decades.
4. Although there is as of yet little work on what effect recent changes in the legal profession are having on these outcomes, the primary environmental cause of depression appears to be stress, which suggests an already serious problem is likely to be getting worse.

The fear throughout the legal community as it evolves into a potentially more worker/employee-friendly atmosphere is that American law schools aren’t properly prepping lawyers for today’s emerging type of law firm in which practice area specialization, not depression, is taught to law students.

In other words, some law firms will argue that while law school can be a rather harsh and unapologetic experience for a young attorney, a majority of law firms aren’t necessarily arrayed in the same way.

Law firms like to project fairness and understanding to their new associates. They are welcoming and very open about giving instruction to their newbies. Not all firms are ass-kicking, backstabbing hovels of deceit. And law schools shouldn’t convey to their students that this is the notion all law firms follow.
It’s simply not the case.

**How to prevent depression in law school?**

To avoid increasing cases of depression occurring in our country’s law schools, law firms need to revamp their entire approach toward cultivating potential practitioners of law. After all, the last person the world needs is a lawyer suffering from post-law school depression.

Firstly, law schools need to stop the glorification and trumpeting of good grades and prestigious high-end law firm jobs as the be all and end all of why someone wants to become a lawyer. Law schools instead need to touch upon what can internally motivate a prospective lawyer through the help and support that they should be taught in law school.

Breaking down a law student to the point where he or she is isolated throughout their three-year law program creates a negative that funnels through the entire law school process. Such negative tutelage even has the ability to reach the law profession itself, giving it a bad rap as well as discouraging new potential law school students from even considering the practice of law.

Law professors need to encourage prospective lawyers to tap into their purpose and autonomy toward being a positive source for people, the community, a corporation as well as the rest of the world. Yes, lawyers, in a positive light, can be that influential.

Law professors and law schools need to make a stand against embarrassing their law students; which, needless to say, can be a guaranteed way for colleges to lose their law school funding as college undergrads consider professions other than the negativities they hear and read regarding law school.

A law school’s courses should emphasize positive actions that empower clients and causes. Beyond the concern for high grades, clinical settings such as additional mock trials should be further incorporated into a law student’s education. After all, in a recent study of over 6,000 lawyers, it was shown that there is no correlation between receiving high marks and long-term job satisfaction, or even personal well-being.

**The Importance of a Happy and Satisfied Lawyer**

Arguably, one of the happiest and most satisfied looking attorneys of our time is former President Barrack Obama. Even as president, there was never a moment when he seemed down or crushed by all that was expected of him and his office.

As Commander and Chief, and even more so as a private citizen, the former president seemed to not just find, but understand the need for a work-life balance, which always left him in a positive place regarding his budding legacy.

Lawyers are some of the highest profile people we as a nation know of. They rank up there with high-profile athletes and celebrities. It is therefore tantamount that law schools change their ways and produce lawyers who straight out of school have a positive approach to their future profession, and not a warrant for just money and fame. Law schools have to stop robbing us – yes, us – of the potential good that attorneys can provide in our society, and not create post-grad brats who begin fighting each other as soon as the tassel’s turned on their mortarboards.

At that point, the negativity will filter out of not just the teaching of law, but the practice of law as well. These days, particularly with all the world strife we face, lawyers need to collaborate and be creative, not combative. They should of course listen, care and connect with their clients. But attorneys should also listen, care and connect with their surrounding society.

This notion, decidedly, has to begin with the attorney themselves. Sure, they may have to sacrifice some aggression and a need to verbally spar – which can still happen in one’s law practice, but in the long run, law is bigger than just the attorney him or herself. And to care for the law, an attorney has to undoubtedly care for him or herself first.

The fortunate aspect is with the increase in attorneys who do believe in this type of positive self-preservation, law schools have begun to follow suit by offering student well-being programs.

So, it’s a start; a very good start at that.
Law school shouldn’t be depressing. It instead should uplift a person, and challenge them to bring forth the best person they are to assist those in desperate need of their services.

See the following articles for more information:

- What Being A Lawyer Is Really Like
- Should You Go To Law School? Here Are A Few Reasons Law School Is Right For You
- Law Students Receiving Better Value
- Lawyers Suffering from Depression Can Get Help Here
- The Inner Life of Lawyering: Three Critical Tools That Can Help Lawyers Facing Depression
- 25 Reasons Most Attorneys Hate the Practice of Law and Go Crazy (and What to Do about It)
- When They Make It & Hate It.
- Studying at Law School: Tension, Stress, and Pressure
- Alcoholism and Depression Among Practicing Attorneys
- A Tale of Sleep Apnea Destroying Professional Practice
- The Legal Industry as a Breeding Ground for Depression
- Depression in the Law Profession