Top Tips for Mental and Emotional Well-Being While in Law School

Stay grounded, set your schedule and boundaries, stay connected, and be good to yourself.

By Angela Nieves

Nurture yourself while you ride this law school roller coaster, and become the best lawyer you can be.
Law school is an exhilarating rollercoaster. Even though the steepest inclines and sharpest drops seem to happen in that first year, every subsequent year brings new challenges that can make us feel the excitement and adrenaline that come with the high-speed twists and turns of an old-school roller coaster. As amazing as that may sound, this roller-coaster ride lasts three years and is incredibly taxing on the mind and body, which can give rise to feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and depression. The following are suggestions on ways to nurture your mental and emotional well-being while you ride this law school roller coaster.

Stay Grounded

A JD Is Just the Beginning

It becomes all too easy to be all-consumed by your law school experience. In addition to the academics, there are many opportunities for participation through school organizations, journals, training sessions, internships, and extracurricular activities designed to be networking opportunities. Law school has a way of creeping into every nook and cranny of your day. Do not wait until you reach your breaking point to remember that the law degree you seek is not your whole world—it is but one step in your life, albeit a big one. Other life events and priorities are equally important and should not be forsaken. They are our connection to the outside-law-school world and help us keep everything in perspective. So do not skip your friend’s wedding or your niece’s birthday party—you can find a way to attend without irrevocably affecting your studies.

Keep Your Eye on the Ball

Are you a type A personality? An Olympic multitasker? Have you struggled knowing that you are surrounded by other multitasking type A personalities racing to set the curve for everyone else? It is imperative to remind yourself every now and then that the end game is to get a JD, not be valedictorian or president of any club or graduate sooner than everyone else. Overloading on
credits and responsibilities can set you on a downward spiral that will lead to dissatisfaction with your performance no matter how hard you try. When this happens, focus on the one thing that is most important to you at that point—you may not get another shot at that specific research assistant job or that internship at the appellate court, for example, so purposefully prioritize to keep yourself in control. Remember that it is but one semester in your law studies, and you will get through it to come out on the other end after excelling at something important to you. And then it is on to the next semester!

**Remember: You Are In Law School!**

It is inevitable that there will be times during your studies when you will feel down on yourself. Perhaps you received a “below median” score on a quiz or—gasp—a C for a final grade. Perhaps you had applied to 50 internship opportunities and the rejections have just begun to pour in. When you are in the thick of your law studies, it is easy to forget the fact that *simply getting into law school is an accomplishment in itself*. Your journey there likely involved months of study and preparation to take the LSAT, and your acceptance into the school followed a careful evaluation by experienced admissions officers who found you to be a better candidate that many other applicants. Most law students are unaware of just how many applications are denied. The national average law school acceptance rate is around 45 percent. Look at your school’s acceptance rate, which may be lower. Recognize that you made the cut where so many others did not. You earned a coveted spot in your class, and that alone is something to be very proud of!

**Set Your Schedule and Boundaries**

**Create a Reasonable Schedule**

Law schools will repeat *ad nauseam* that you should schedule your day, including your free time. That’s because it works, especially in that 1L year when we are figuring out how to study and how much time to allot to each task. Create a schedule that keeps you on track with your studies but also sets aside time for other important things like exercise or family. Once you have tweaked it to your liking and reality, stick to it. Following a good schedule will keep you on track with everything and help avoid the inevitable feeling of falling behind with schoolwork or neglecting other priorities. In addition, setting a schedule will help you set up boundaries that are clear to you and everyone else. Speaking of which . . .

**Set and Maintain Necessary Boundaries**

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/committees/jiop/articles/2020/winter2020-mental-emotion-health-law-school-students/
Sometimes you have to enforce those boundaries against well-meaning loved ones and friends. Your concentration is broken by offers of coffee or snacks, or text messages your friends include you in, or relatives sharing news with you that they think you should hear right away. If you need something from them (like zero interruptions or controlled noise volume), ask for it. These are your loved ones. They of all people know what it took to get this far and how hard law school is for you. They should be willing collaborators, and you have a right to request that from them during this time. You also have a right to enforce a “no drama” rule. Perhaps your best friend is going through another breakup, or your mother is upset that you refuse to hold Thanksgiving dinner at your house this year. Recognize that you are a law student at this moment and you cannot let other people’s drama throw you off your game. The inability to adequately attend to everything at the same time could cause you to lose faith in yourself, and a “drama llama” will often find whatever efforts you make to be insufficient anyway. Set those boundaries and stick to your guns!

Stay Connected

Remember the “You” before Law School

While law school requires that you spend significantly less time on activities unrelated to school, it is imperative you find ways to stay connected to your interests and to your loved ones. It not only helps clear your mind of law school clutter when you need a break; it is a connection to your pre-law-school you, and when your life has been turned upside down in your first semester, it feels good to do something familiar. Do not give up a beloved hobby (especially if it involves exercise); however, make adjustments. You may need to take fewer spinning classes, watch a shorter TV series, or visit family less frequently, but do not cut it out entirely.

Do Not Lose Touch

Staying connected to your loved ones also becomes a difficult task while in law school. Find creative ways to keep in touch. For example, use your commute to catch up with someone on the phone. Oftentimes it can even be scheduled: Wednesdays at 7 p.m., you chat with your best friend; Fridays, you chat with Mom. Use your lunch breaks to catch up on social media, or group-text your family or friends to check in and see what is new. Take breaks from long periods of study by hanging out on the couch with your significant other or children; sometimes your mere proximity to each other will be comforting (for you both). In short, make sure you do not unknowingly
disconnect and isolate yourself from the people you love. Their presence in your life is an emotional support you do not want to do without.

Be Good to Yourself

Celebrate Milestones

By the end of the first year, we learn that law school is an exhausting journey, and no matter what we do, we always seem to be playing a never-ending game of catch-up. Each winter break that comes around, we try to catch up on everything we neglected throughout the semester. Summer breaks for law students often mean more classes or an internship, or both. Before you know it, you got your JD and now you are preparing for the bar exam. Along the way, you had some notable accomplishments: Celebrate them! How about that first A? Or the successful completion of your 1L year? Did you make law review? Or snag that coveted clerkship? Take a moment to acknowledge you did something special, and pat yourself on the back with a night off from studying, or a trip to the nail salon, or however you like to treat yourself. You earned it!

Avoid Comparing Yourself to Other Students

This is especially true in the 1L year. Every student is different and has his or her own character and set of experiences. Other students' performance (whether real or assumed) is not your measuring stick. Wondering why someone else seems to always have it together or always scores the highest is not an effective use of your time and energy, and the concern that you should be like someone else can quickly devolve from a competitive spirit to extreme disappointment in yourself. No two students are the same. Push yourself to be the best you can be, and look to others only for inspiration.

Use School Resources

Your law school likely has resources designed to help you cope with the stress of law school. Use them! Go to the school-sponsored events that discuss how to maintain a healthy mind and body. If you are anxious about the future, meet with a career counselor to discuss your path and options. If you are going through a difficult moment in your life, talk to a mental health counselor if your school has one. Do not just acknowledge that your mental and physical health are important; do something about it. Go to the school gym, take advantage of any yoga or meditation sessions the
school may offer, and try to attend some of the school socials. These resources are meant to help you maintain the balance and positive outlook you will need get through every semester.

Avoid Self-Destructive Behavior

What is bad for the body is also bad for the mind. While things like all-nighters, caffeine supplements, energy drinks, sugary snacks, and alcohol will fulfill a temporary need, they lead to erratic shifts in our moods and energy levels. Try to avoid relying on anything that gives you an extreme high or alters your state of mind. Also, try to avoid anything that brings you down, which can mean limiting contact with people you care about who may encourage unhealthy behaviors or negative thinking. Sadly, sometimes someone we love is a walking vortex of negative energy and we are not able to cut that person out of our lives. However, allowing such a person to drain you of your time and positive energy would be self-sabotaging. Find creative ways to limit your contact with that person, and do not give in to his or her manipulations. This strength of character will serve you well when you are a lawyer!

Conclusion

These are just some of the ways to stay mentally healthy and focused to ensure your law school experience is the best it can be. When the ride is over, you will look back on your studies and marvel at the number of the challenges you faced and how you were able to meet them head-on. Be sure to employ the strategies that work best for you once you are a lawyer and start a whole new ride!

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