



Exploring the Psychological Impact of Law Schools on Student's Mental Health: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

Depression in the legal profession is widespread, with far-reaching impacts. For attorneys struggling with lawyer depression, the illness can have devastating personal and professional repercussions but it also affects clients, partners, staff, and business. This study aims to explore the psychological impact of law school on student mental health, focusing on stress, anxiety, and depression levels among law students. Using a comprehensive questionnaire, the study investigates the primary stressors, coping mechanisms, and the role of social support in mitigating these challenges. The findings will contribute to understanding the unique mental health needs of law students and provide recommendations for improving mental health support within legal education.

Introduction

The journey through law school is often characterized by rigorous academic demands, intense workloads, and high expectations. These challenges, while designed to prepare students for the demanding nature of legal practice, can significantly impact students' mental health and well-being. Understanding these impacts is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems that enhance student well-being and academic success.

Background

While there isn't one direct answer for the pervasive nature of depression in the legal industry, the following factors likely contribute to the issue:

- Lawyers tend to be perfectionists.** To succeed in their legal careers, lawyers have to be high achievers. While this level of perfectionism can be useful when working on a client's case, it can also cause consistent stress.
- Lawyering is a high-stress, high-stakes, high-performing profession.** Working in a competitive industry under constant pressure to perform also primes lawyers for mental health struggles.
- Law school does not fully prepare lawyers for a career in law.** A legal education prepares lawyers to practice law. But a career in law requires top-notch communication, financial, and management skills. Law school does not properly equip lawyers with these skills and few lawyers inherently possess them.
- Many lawyers are not equipped with self-care, resilience, and mental wellness strategies.** But lawyers and legal professionals need these critical skills to deal with the emotional stress and trauma that often comes with working with legal clients.
- The legal industry has a prevalent burnout culture.** Burnout is characterized by the World Health Organization as a syndrome resulting from unmanaged chronic workplace stress. Many lawyers suffer from ongoing, extreme physical and emotional exhaustion and stress that can leave them depleted. These symptoms of lawyer burnout can also overlap and with symptoms of lawyer depression.
- Mental illness stigma.** Legal professionals fear being treated differently or discriminated against because of mental illness. This is a serious issue that contributes to more than half of people with mental illness not receiving help and many more putting off or avoiding treatment.

Literature Review

Prevalence of Mental Health Issues

Numerous studies have documented the high prevalence of mental health issues among law students compared to their peers in other academic disciplines. Dammeyer and Nunez (1999) found that law students exhibited higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress than students in medicine and other graduate programs. Sheldon and Krieger (2004) reported that law students experienced significant declines in well-being and life satisfaction during their first year of study, which persisted throughout their academic careers.

Academic Stressors

The demanding nature of legal education is a major source of stress for law students. Heavy workloads, frequent assessments, and the competitive atmosphere are commonly cited as primary stressors (Glesner, 1991). The Socratic method, often used in law schools, can also contribute to anxiety due to its confrontational style and the pressure to perform publicly (Heins et al., 1984).

Personal and Social Stressors

Beyond academic demands, personal and social factors play a critical role in the mental health of law students. Financial stress, balancing school with personal life, and lack of social support are significant contributors to psychological distress (Liu et al., 2020). Law students often report feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers, which can intensify feelings of stress and anxiety (Organ et al., 2016).

Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks have been applied to understand the mental health challenges faced by law students. The Diathesis-Stress Model poses that individuals have varying levels of vulnerability to stressors, which, when combined with high stress levels, can lead to mental health issues (Monahan & Steadman, 1996). The Cognitive Appraisal Theory, proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), highlights the importance of how individuals perceive and interpret stressors.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

The coping strategies employed by law students significantly influence their mental health outcomes. Adaptive coping mechanisms, such as problem-solving, seeking social support, and positive reframing, have been associated with lower levels of stress and better mental health (Stewart et al., 1999). Conversely, maladaptive strategies, such as avoidance, denial, and substance use, can exacerbate psychological distress (Park & Adler, 2003).

Role of Social Support

Social support is a critical buffer against stress and a key determinant of mental health among law students. Support from family, friends, peers, and institutional resources can mitigate the impact of academic and personal stressors (Hirsch & Ellis, 1996). Peer support programs, mentoring, and counseling services have been shown to improve mental health outcomes by providing emotional support, practical advice, and a sense of community (Wilson, 2014).

Research Questions

1. What are the primary sources of stress among law students?
2. How do these stressors impact the mental health of law students?
3. What coping mechanisms do law students employ to manage their stress, and how effective are these mechanisms?
4. What role does social support play in mitigating the psychological impact of law school?

Participants

The study involved a sample of 67 law students from various years of study at a selected law school. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Measures

The study used a comprehensive questionnaire to collect data, including:

- i. **Demographic Information:** Age, gender, year of study, living situation, employment status.
- ii. **Academic Stressors:** Measured using a Likert scale to assess the extent of various academic stressors.
- iii. **Mental Health Status:** Measured using standardized scales such as the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD-7), and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS).
- iv. **Coping Mechanisms:** Assessed using the Brief COPE Inventory.
- v. **Social Support:** Measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS).
- vi. **Quality of Life:** Assessed using the WHOQOL-BREF scale.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through email invitations and announcements in classes. The questionnaire was administered online, and responses collected anonymously. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics to examine relationships between variables.

Data Analysis:

In India there are law schools which are Five years where students enrol after Class 12 and Three years for students after graduation. The data is mix of the students and is based on 6 questions primarily year of Study, Expectations from law school, Reasons for expectations not met, problems in law school, Stress levels and Expectation from the Institutes. The Following 5 charts reflect the Data of the students and the Table 1 lists out the expectations of the students for coping with their stress.

CHART 1

Which year of law school?
67 responses

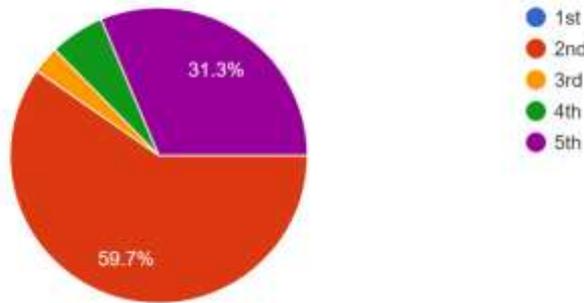


CHART 2

Were your expectations met after getting admitted in the law school of your choice?
67 responses

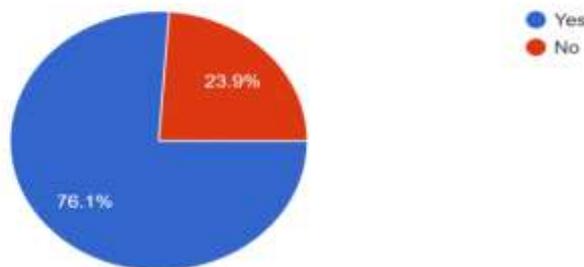


CHART 3

If No, then why?
67 responses

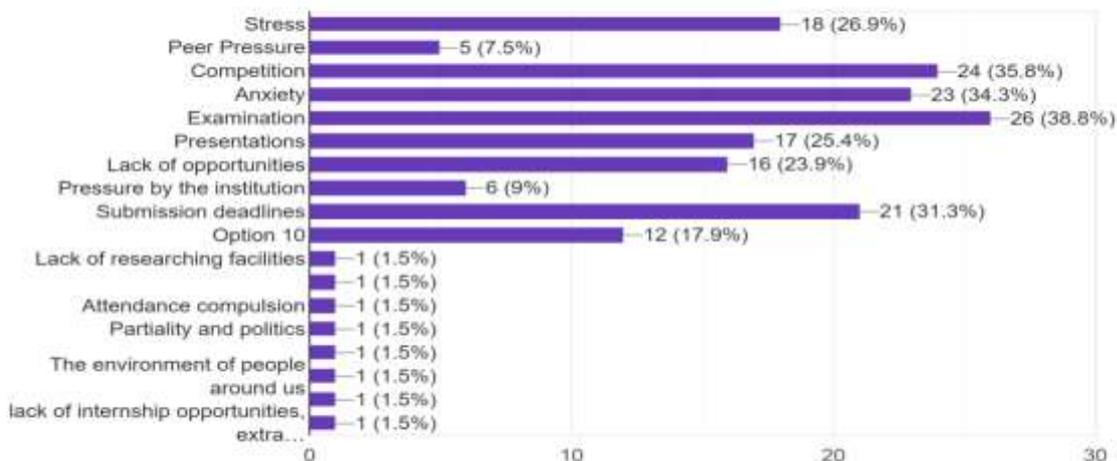


CHART 4

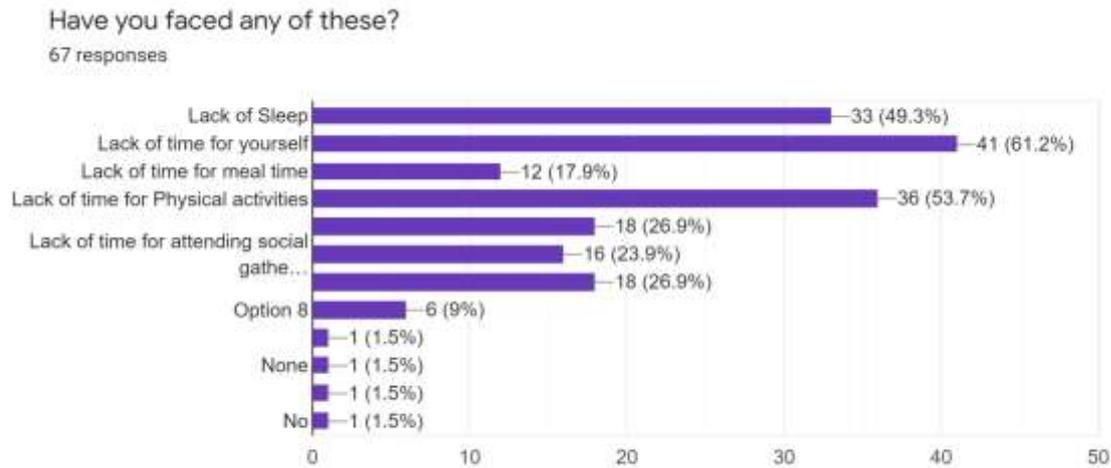


CHART 5

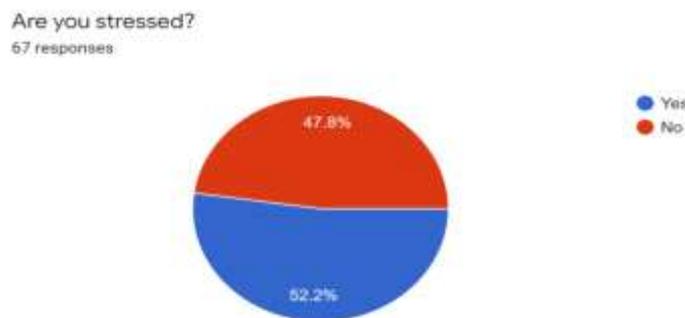


TABLE: 1 Anything you would like the institution to contribute to your well-being?

Sr. No	Expectations
1	more encouragement in physical activities like sports
2	The institution needs to value the students time because we have other commitments as well. It is difficult to juggle with internship with the uncertain college timings and that causes a lot of stress and anxiety. The opinion of the students' needs to be taken into consideration.
3	Conduct more mental well-being sessions
4	Apart from studying area institution should try to get open space so that students can play games like basketball, cricket, football etc. because these games enhance the effectiveness and also freshens the mind.
5	Keep a psychologist for the students
6	Discipline needs to be maintained
7	More sports activities opportunities
8	Allowing us students to sleep a little longer
9	I don't know. I think stress is normal part in this profession. I think faculty must be feeling equally stressed.
10	Awareness at a very initial stage and support for the preparations of opportunities.
11	The college should be more considerate especially when they encourage students to work but for young adults they should help them manage work and life.
12	Create positive environment for students in general and keep any sort of opportunities open for any student interested in it and not only for the students who are eligible to do it.

Results

The results presented findings on the prevalence of mental health issues among law students, the primary sources of stress, the effectiveness of different coping mechanisms, and the role of social support. The expectations of the students are from the institutes itself and the same are most of the time achievable by the

institutes. The findings are in the context of existing issues, highlighting the unique stressors faced by law students and the implications for mental health support. Recommendations for law schools is provided, including strategies for reducing stress, enhancing coping mechanisms, and strengthening social support systems.

Suggestions

Law schools play a critical role in fostering a supportive environment that mitigates the inherent stress of legal education. By moving beyond a purely academic focus and adopting a holistic approach to well-being, institutions can implement systemic changes that address the cultural and structural factors contributing to student anxiety and burnout.

- 1. Offering robust support services** Law schools should provide a wide range of accessible and effective support services that address student mental health needs. Like Mental health counselling which provide confidential counselling services with mental health professionals who have experience working with law students to students free of charge.
- 2. Peer support groups:** Facilitate peer support groups and forums where students can share experiences and coping strategies in a supportive, judgment-free setting.
- 3. Workshops and training:** Offer training on topics like stress management, resilience, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence. These skills can be taught from the first year to equip students with healthy coping mechanisms early on.
- 4. Academic support programs:** Provide comprehensive academic support, including workshops on writing, research, and study strategies, to ease the pressure of a demanding curriculum.
- 5. Mentor programs:** Implement mentorship programs that connect students with alumni, faculty, and legal professionals. These relationships offer guidance, career insights, and an outside perspective on work-life balance.
- 6. Reforming institutional culture** Addressing the unique stressors of legal education requires reforming the culture within law schools, from pedagogical methods to assessment practices.
- 7. Promoting a balanced perspective:** Challenge the "toughness" and overwork culture by promoting the importance of work-life balance and a healthy mindset. Faculty and administrators can model these behaviors to destigmatize self-care.
- 8. Addressing the competitive environment:** Manage the pressure of performance by emphasizing progress over perfection. Some schools use grading systems that reduce the focus on fierce peer-to-peer competition.
- 9. Adjusting the curriculum:** Integrate well-being directly into the curriculum through courses on mindfulness, resilience, and professional values. Some law schools have even incorporated "well-being practices" as a concrete part of their coursework.
- 10. Improving feedback mechanisms:** Optimize feedback systems, particularly for high-stakes assessments, to be constructive and supportive rather than demoralizing. For example, incorporating audio visual feedback can help create a more relational and positive experience.
- 11. Creating an inclusive environment:** A more inclusive and empathetic environment can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and inadequacy among students.
- 12. Raising awareness of mental health:** Destigmatize mental health challenges by openly discussing stress, anxiety, and burnout. Law schools must communicate to students that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness, and that it will not affect their future career prospects.
- 13. Recognizing diverse experiences:** Acknowledge that students come from diverse backgrounds and face different life circumstances. Coursework can explore issues of social exclusion and access to justice, which can foster empathy and broaden students' perspectives.
- 14. Facilitating social connections:** Encourage a greater sense of community by supporting student organizations and social events. Strong social networks provide vital emotional support and help students maintain relationships outside the academic bubble.
- 15. Establishing clear policies:** Beyond services and culture, institutions must establish clear and supportive policies that protect student well-being.
- 16. Confidentiality:** Ensure that mental health services are confidential and that seeking help will not jeopardize a student's standing or future career opportunities.
- 17. Mental health leave:** Implement clear policies for mental health leave, allowing students to take time off to address their well-being without academic penalty.
- 18. Accessibility:** Guarantee that all mental health and academic resources are fully accessible to students with disabilities, as required by the Equal Opportunity Cell.
- 19. Anti-harassment policies:** Maintain strict anti-ragging and sexual harassment policies to ensure a safe and respectful campus environment
- 20. Grassroots projects** Grassroots peer-support projects bring lawyers together, offer support, and help destigmatize mental health struggles. The Lawyer Depression Project, for instance, offers online peer-to-peer support specifically for legal professionals. These remote group meetings let's one to share anonymously experiences and support for lawyers with depression.

Limitations

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain. **First**, there is a need for more longitudinal studies that track mental health outcomes throughout law school and into legal practice. Most existing studies are cross-sectional and provide only a snapshot of students' mental health at a single point in time. **Second**, there is limited research on the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at reducing stress and improving mental health among law students. While some studies have evaluated the impact of mindfulness and stress management programs, more rigorous and comprehensive evaluations are needed. **Third**, the diversity of law students is often overlooked. Future research should consider how factors such as race, gender, socio-economic status, and prior mental health history influence the experience and impact of stress.

This study aims to shed light on the psychological impact of law school on students, offering valuable insights that can drive positive change in legal education and support the mental health of future legal professionals. By understanding the specific needs of law students, educational institutions can foster a healthier, more supportive environment that promotes both academic success and personal well-being.

Conclusion

Law Student depression is a real, common, and treatable illness. But too many people are silently struggling with it alone. By learning to recognize the signs and symptoms of depression, they can be better equipped to seek professional mental health treatment when it's needed. It's also essential for legal professionals to learn the steps they can take to support their mental wellness.

Students need to seek professional help to manage their depression. But the institute can also take steps to create an environment that promotes and prioritizes mental wellness and destigmatizes mental illness. This is because the responsibility is not *only* on students but also on Institutes, law firm owners and everyone in the legal industry.

This shift can occur over time through actions like modelling mental wellness behaviors from the top down. Law firm owners also need to take steps to challenge norms and build a strong law firm culture that promotes mental health and work-life balance. With a combination of individual management and cultural shift, the legal profession can cease to be an inadvertent hotbed for depression. The goal is for lawyers to thrive in an industry that supports mental wellness.

"It always seems impossible until it's done" – Nelson Mandela

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