

Help is available for law students struggling to cope with high stress



B: Laura Brown

Talk to anybody who has attended law school and there is a good chance that, even years later, they have a nightmare about being cold-called in class not having reviewed the materials. Stress and law school are synonymous. As law students move into the final exam period, those of us who have been in their shoes can only be glad it isn't us. Add in a global pandemic, and it's amazing that law students are doing nearly as well as they are.

Last month, the Law School Survey of Student Engagement—part of Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary—released a report titled “The COVID Crisis in Legal Education.” A staggering 85% of law students surveyed suffered through depression, 87% had anxiety that interfered with daily functioning, and 69% reported increased loneliness. Why do law students suffer so badly? Part of the reason is that law school attracts perfectionists and overachievers. While the profession benefits from having the best of the best, it is, at best, humbling and, at worst, demoralizing to go from always having been at the top to the middle or bottom of the pack. The pressure to be the best drives already-driven people to be the best in every aspect of law school—from winning a CALI to getting a coveted internship. The pressure is ever present, both inside and outside the classroom.

Law students have always quietly dealt

with this side of law school. Fortunately, there is help.

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) will help law students get the resources and services that they need to address their concerns—whether they need tips for self-care or treatment for drug use. Chase Andersen is a case manager at LCL who works directly with the students and administration at Minnesota's law schools. “The biggest thing I want students to know is that it is OK to get the help you need,” he said.

Andersen connects with law students in a variety of ways. Students can contact the LCL office via phone or email. He will also sometimes serve as a guest speaker in law school classes, specifically professional responsibility classes, to speak about issues facing law students and lawyers alike. Andersen prefers to be at the law schools and see students in person. But while he does his share of speaking directly to law students about the services that are available for them, Andersen also likes being a quiet presence.

Having a table available at the law school, Andersen said, “helps to remind students that help is always available.” Sometimes students will engage with Andersen but sometimes the student just slows down and he “gets a look as they walk by.” Maybe in the future, that student will have the courage to get the help that they need.

The pandemic has also acutely affected law students and exacerbated a lot

of the stressors that were already present. There has been a sharp increase in mental health and substance abuse issues amongst law students, Andersen said. Each class has had to deal with its own issues in handling uncertainty with where they are in the law school process. Students farther along in the program have had to deal with different procedures with regard to securing internships and employment. Students who are at the beginning of the program have reported feeling a little bit disconnected from school. Then there are just the day-to-day logistical uncertainties: questions about whether class will be held in person or whether an event has had to be canceled. Other students have had to deal with food insecurity and homelessness.



Chase Andersen

The solution to law school stress—or at least a way to make it more tolerable—is both proactive and reactive, said Andersen. Students need services when they are experiencing mental health and substance abuse issues, but ideally, they would not need the services at all. Promoting well-being in law school, Andersen said, is key to the proactive side. Professor Jerry Organ, University of St. Thomas professor of law and co-director of the Holloran Center for Ethical Leadership in the Professions, has written on

law student well-being. In a 2016 article titled “Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns,” Organ presented findings from a multi-school study. Up to one-third of law students surveyed self-medicated with drugs and alcohol to deal with stress. He will soon be releasing results of a new study conducted during the pandemic.

The biggest thing that Andersen wants law students—and lawyers—to know is that it is not a sign of weakness to get the help that is needed.

“There is a definitely a stigma if people don't pretend to have it all figured out,” Andersen said.

While everyone in law school jokes about how long the nights can be, there is much less conversation about the toll that can take. LCL would like to reduce the stigma of having those conversations. There is no communication between LCL and the Board of Law Examiners, said Anderson, and so those conversations will not be reported to the BLE whether it is a law student or lawyer. Getting to the point where law students feel free to ask for help may take tremendous shifts in the culture of the profession. In 2017, the American Bar Association released a report titled “The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change.” In the report, there were recommendations for all facets of the profession, including law schools. One initiative cited was requiring law schools to create well-being education in order to be accredited. It also stressed providing training for faculty members to detect students' mental health or substance abuse issues.

Before the pandemic, Andersen would attend law schools once a month. He now tables at law schools every couple of weeks. This gives students more chances to get the help that they need. In the meantime, let's commend the resilience and sheer grit law students have shown.