

HOW TO *sort of* BE [^] HAPPY IN LAW SCHOOL



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YOU ARE NOT ALONE

LET'S ACKNOWLEDGE THAT LAW SCHOOL KIND OF SUCKS

If you hate law school and find it difficult for a whole host of reasons, academic and otherwise, you are not alone. Much of the time, law school sucks. Sure, it has its moments—some riveting professors, some fascinating ideas, and the Hairy Hand case. But facts are facts, and right now, the facts of your life likely include two or more of the following:

- You often feel like you are back in high school, down to the lockers and gossip.
- At least a few of your professors—maybe all of them—employ the Socratic method, which instills in you copious amounts of fear, loathing, and/or resentment.
- You have little or no free time.
- You have more debt than you can wrap your head around.
- Some of your peers are the most irritating people you have ever met.
- You would like to get decent grades, but cannot force yourself to slog through your eye-glazingly dull casebooks.
- Reading has never taken you this long before, and you are starting to wonder whether there is something wrong with you, or whether law school is actually making you less intelligent.

- Spending so much time staring at books and your computer screen makes your back and neck hurt. Your eyesight has worsened. You are developing a preternatural understanding of the phrase “old before your time.”

I am not listing these facts to make you feel bad, but to confirm that despite your off-and-on feelings to the contrary, you are neither crazy nor alone. There are many things in law school that merit annoyance and displeasure. If you experience annoyance or displeasure, there is no need to feel guilty or inferior about it.

Not only is it totally normal to hate law school a good deal of the time, but hating big chunks of law school does not mean you will hate legal practice. Sure, you might hate legal practice—more on that later—but practice is sufficiently removed from law school training that you should not equate hating law school to hating *law*.

The reason I am making such a big deal about law school’s propensity for inducing discontent is that it is easy to get trapped in the law school vortex and start seeing everything through law school’s lens. Your professors become cult personalities you need to impress, your lackluster grades confirm that you were never that smart to begin with, and you stress over every decision from skipping law prom to splitting your summers. This kind of obsession is neither healthy nor necessary.

If law school sucks, and you see everything from within the law school bubble, then other things in your life become dysmorphically stressful. With an outlook like that, it is no wonder so many law students are disgruntled, sleepless bundles of anxiety. This whole “law school vortex” phenomenon is one of the reasons law school is such an effective breeding ground for depression (more on that in Chapter 11). But you need not fall prey. You can be *in* law school without being *of* law school. You can get what you came for and hang onto enough happiness to see yourself through to the end. That, my friend, is the point of this book.

Exercise: Make a chart with three columns like the one shown here. In the first column, write something about law school that you dislike. In the second column, write how it makes you feel (I know this seems cheesy, but do it). In the third column, write about whether this hated thing existed in your life before law school. I have filled in one row as an example; you fill in the rest.

Aspect of law school that you strongly dislike	How this thing makes you feel	Was this an issue before law school?
The Socratic method, being called on at random	Insecure, inarticulate, put on the spot	No; this is not how people talk to one another

1. Look for patterns in the second column. Do you hate things that make you feel unintelligent? That make you feel insecure? That bore you? For some reason, these aspects of law school are poking at the unresolved crap floating around in your skull. That’s okay—we’re all carrying around unresolved crap. The trick is identifying it and seeing how various aspects of your law school life affect and provoke it.
2. Look at the third column. I’m guessing most of the things you listed were not issues for you before law school, right? That’s because the pre-law school version of yourself probably had more autonomy and interacted with a wider variety of personality types. This will likely be true after law school as well. In the grand scheme of your life, law school is the aberration, not the norm. Overall, your life does not suck, and after these three years, you will never have to deal with 80 percent of the things you find so unpleasant. Ideally, this is a reassuring—if not altogether revelatory—piece of news.

IT IS NORMAL TO FEEL LIKE THE WORKLOAD IS IMPOSSIBLE

Your law school workload may be the biggest workload you have ever had, and if you are like most students, it feels like a bigger one than you can handle.* I hate it when law students complain about the workload and people respond, "Hey, welcome to the profession." Don't get me wrong—being a lawyer is a huge amount of work, and in some ways, law school is great preparation. But when students lament the workload, they are usually lamenting the stress caused by the combination of workload size, type, and environment—in other words, a confluence of factors, only one of which is the sheer amount of work.

Why is law school so stressful? For one, even if you had a hefty workload as an undergraduate, there were deadlines along the way. You turned in papers or problem sets and studied for quizzes or midterms. For each intense burst of learning or work, you had to show something for it. But in most law school classes, nothing is due until the final. Sure, there is assigned reading, but you do not turn anything in. You are not accountable, except during cold calls, and even if you ace those, in most classes it does not help your grade. The disconnection between your day-to-day preparation and traditional outcome measures feels disconcerting. It is not necessarily the *amount* of stress that impedes people's happiness in law school; the types and causes of stress are the bigger problem.¹

In addition to a lack of gold stars for demonstrating your knowledge and work ethic as you progress, most law school courses provide no helpful feedback before the final. As an undergraduate (and in the workplace), your demonstrations of skill or knowledge are usually assessed by people with expertise. They offer feedback, which allows you to recalibrate. Not so in law school. Did you do well when you were called on last Thursday? Who knows. No matter how you perform, the professor will not say anything, your friends will encourage you, and a few assholes will shoot you glassy, judgmental looks. Are you applying the Administrative Procedure Act correctly? Who knows. You will be offered no chance to have your practice answers critiqued. This all leads to constant uncertainty and perceived (and actual) lack of control, which causes more stress.

* There are exceptions. One student in her 40s told me that before law school, she had worked full time while raising three kids as a single mother. She said that law school felt "like a vacation." This, however, is not most people's experience.

By most measures, the usual delayed assessment, one-final-at-the-end method of law school evaluation is lousy pedagogy. It makes you feel like you are laboring in a vacuum. Unless you have worked on a huge solo project, like writing a novel, you may never have experienced such an untethered feeling. Imagine if you began at a company and your boss piled your desk with work and said, "I'll check back in with you in four months." That would be nuts—it would risk setting you up for failure and give you no guidance for improving. But that's exactly what's done to law students.

Still, until you can opt out of classes that use teaching methods you do not like, you will need to adapt. I'll talk more about how to do this, but for now, just know that it is normal to feel like you are trying to sip from a fire hose that's turned on at full blast.

YOU ARE NOT THE CRAZY ONE

"There was a red button on the wall labeled EMERGENCY, but no button labeled BEWILDERMENT."

Michel Faber, *The Book of Strange New Things*

Law school and high school have an unsettling amount in common. You are assigned a locker, gossip spreads like the flu, and you use honorifics to address your superiors. Everyone chuckles about the infantilizing weirdness, but most of your peers eventually settle into it—even seem to embrace it. I remember feeling like a mouse that had been dropped from a great height and was lying stunned, trying to figure out what had happened. Was everyone from a completely different universe? Why were they acting like it was okay when a professor verbally abused a student? Why were people snickering and instant messaging each other when another section member had trouble fielding questions in Torts? *Who were these people?*

The sense that I had landed on the wrong planet was compounded by a feeling that I was not appropriately internalizing the significance of what seemed to be the Big Goals of Law School: firm jobs, law review membership, and associated desiderata. I didn't think these things were bad—I just didn't understand why we were supposed to want them. It was strange to see people I knew and liked become so obsessed over things that, weeks earlier, they might not have known existed.* Classmates I considered sensible began spending inordinate

* Or maybe they did, and that's why it felt strange—like I had missed the memo about what I was supposed to want.

amounts of time on Vault.com. I found a few comrades who felt similarly unsettled, which helped a lot. But I think most of us were secretly ashamed, assuming something was wrong with us for not “getting” it.

As law school progressed, more people seemed to become consumed by its goals, norms, and idiosyncrasies. They gossiped about professors, speculated about law review elections, and obsessed over who got which clerkships. I’m not suggesting that these aren’t valid things to think about—they are—but hearing *only* about these things depressed me. I was more interested in discussing the merits of the substantive law. Was anyone else bothered by *DeShaney v. Winnebago*? Did social class or political affiliation determine how people reacted to *Kelo v. New London*? For this kind of conversation, I had no idea where to look.

After a while, I decided there was something wrong with me. Maybe law school was a poor fit. Maybe I was not smart enough. Maybe I was not learning to think like a lawyer. Maybe my self-esteem could not handle grades below an A. Eventually—and later than I should have—I realized that none of these things was true. I just didn’t fit in. I was too absurd, too introverted, too quirky, too sullen, too silly, too obsessed with social justice, and too interested in non-law school pursuits for law school to fit me like a glove. And not only was all that true, but (1) it was still okay that I was in law school, and (2) many of my classmates were quietly experiencing something similar.

YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO FEELS OUT OF PLACE

You may think you are the only 1L who hasn’t done a lick of reading since the semester started, or the only one in your class who is outraged by experiencing constant sexism or racism, or the only 3L who still has to consult a law dictionary, or the only one who doesn’t want to practice, or the only depressive, or the only one who isn’t adapting, or the only one who loves the substance of the law, or the only one who hates it. You are wrong. All around you, your classmates are suffering from debilitating anxiety, considering dropping out, and having personal crises. But law students work fervently to hide things they fear others will perceive as weaknesses, which makes everyone feel more alone than they really are.

A law student’s misery can have manifold causes. I asked law students and alums to name their biggest source of law school stress. Here are the most commonly recurring themes:*

Not fitting in socially

- *Feeling like I need to pretend to be someone else in order to not be totally ostracized.*
- *The most stress I’ve faced is finding friends in law school after transferring schools. . . . [P]eople shy away from allowing new people into their circles.*
- *Being ostracized by peers for not doing drugs or partying with them and, in turn, losing opportunities because of it.*

Disliking classmates

- *The most stress comes from your peers. It was like living in a cave with poisonous vipers. I have never experienced anything like it.*
- *My fellow classmates. I don’t think any (many?) of them were actively malicious people, but stress can make you into an asshole.*
- *Endless debates with smarmy assholes.*

Romantic relationships

- *Getting engaged and planning a wedding.*
- *I got a divorce during law school. It threw everything off. I didn’t want to talk about it to my peers and so I just kept away from people and was frankly alone and depressed most of the time.*
- *Being dumped during finals.*

Family-related stress

- *Being a good mom and a good student. If my kids end up being flunkies who smoke weed in my basement until they are 40, none of this will have been worth it.*
- *My younger brother is an addict. He has attempted suicide multiple times while I have been in law school.*
- *I try to call [my family] and talk to them daily to make up for fact that I can’t always be around anymore. I remind my parents and siblings that I’m investing so much time in my future so that one day we can live as comfortably as we want.*

* Throughout the book, bulleted lists appearing in *italics* are direct quotes from survey respondents.

Friendship-related stress

- *Not being able to attend my closest friends' weddings and I'll never be able to get those moments back.*
- *A friend and study partner at school became increasingly abusive and eventually threatening.*
- *People don't understand when you don't really have time to spend with them.*

Losing your sense of self

- *Life happens when you're in law school. Just kind of how it works out. Everything falls apart because you change. Law school changes you.*
- *Law school can make you into the worst version of yourself.*
- *Law school takes away a lot of time that used to be dedicated to being a well-rounded, interesting human. I'm way less fun on dates because my life is so consumed by law school that no matter how hard I try I can't help but spend most of my time talking about law school and legal issues.*

Insecurity about future prospects

- *Having no element of the future secured.*
- *It's just scary to lay awake at night, thinking about all the debt you've taken on, and hoping that you beat the curve so you're still eligible for a high-paying firm job.*
- *It's a combination . . . debt, finding a job I like . . . wanting to have a family, wanting to buy a house, wanting to be able to afford putting my kids through school, wanting to be able to save to retire, wanting to be able to spend time with friends and family [and] being too introverted for any of this to actually matter in the long run, because if I am shy and work all the time, I will never meet someone and have a family, so most of these concerns go away, but that's even worse, because the only thing I have ever been sure that I wanted in life is a family, so if I can't do that, then I will feel like I have failed myself.*
- *[A]nything where I have to think about life after law school makes me stressed and somewhat panicky.*

Commitment to public interest work and/or lack of interest in law firm work

- *I am extremely progressive and from a relatively poor area in rural Maine. Most students [at my top-20 law school] do not fit that description. . . . It was obvious these students and I could not relate with one another.*

- *I can't bring myself to give a shit about OCI, and it seems like that's all people care about or value. I feel I am in the wrong setting. Not that I necessarily want to do public interest, but I sure as hell don't think working for a law firm is anything to get excited over.*
- *I felt like there weren't a ton of folks who wanted to do basic legal services (some interested in judicial clerkships and ACLU-like impact litigation but fewer interested in working directly with under-resourced communities).*

Final exams

- *I have never been so stressed about a test in my life. Sample exams are no substitute for the real thing. . . . [P]rofessors give no meaningful insight into how they will grade the exams.*
- *Knowing that my entire grade comes down to one exam!!!*
- *[Y]ou have one grade, one chance to prove yourself. It represents all of the work you did for an entire semester in every class. If you have a bad week of sleep during exams, forget it.*

Cold calls in class

- *I absolutely HATE cold calls in class. I get so much anxiety thinking about it.*
- *[Cold calling] terrifies me more than anything. My brain freezes up and I cannot answer. I'm a great student. I know things. But I cannot speak in class.*
- *Cold calling. I had one professor who terrified the crap out of us. Every day before his class I would fend off a panic attack—I was so worried he would call on me and belittle me in front of everyone.*

General academic stress

- *Working my ass off and not seeing the A's I'm used to in my final grades.*
- *Law school was a very bad fit for me. The dyslexic mind is often creative and not that good as far as memory or linear reasoning.*
- *I felt like I never had enough time to really absorb everything I was supposed to read and learn. . . . I had this vague dread all the time that, while I could parrot back the words, I couldn't be totally sure of their real implications.*

Mental health struggles

- *My usually manageable depression became much worse, to the point that I was considering suicide. The combination of classes, an externship, relationship problems, and extreme doubt about my future was a toxic mixture and caused my mental health to decline sharply.*

- *It's easy under all the stress to let your old demons jump into your life again.*
- *My mental health has been quite a journey. It's a jumbled mess. . . . I've dealt with anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, potential bipolar, and ADHD.*

Physical health struggles

- *Gaining weight caused me the most stress because it lowered my self-esteem and therefore lowered my ability to work hard each semester.*
- *In the first two weeks of school I became very sick, was in the hospital for five days, and ended up with a nasty illness for two months before having surgery shortly before finals.*
- *I worry for my long-term health and well-being because I live in a constant state of stress and sleep deprivation.*

Sexism and sexual harassment

- *The sexual harassment I have received from my male peers, and the administration failed to offer real assistance.*
- *There were guys in my section who would literally only speak to the "hot" women. They ignored me completely. If anything, it was worse because I was willing to talk in class.*
- *Women who talked voluntarily in my section were treated like pariahs by the majority of male section members.*

Racism

- *Having to spend 99 percent of my time with students who are very different from me . . . [and] hearing racially and sexually degrading comments almost every day has taken a significant toll on my happiness.*
- *[The most stressful part of law school is] racism.*
- *Constant racist microaggressions from other students in my section, and finding out that several white and non-disabled students routinely talk shit about me behind my back.*

Feeling out of place due to personal background

- *My family was not rich. I didn't have any lawyers in my family. Everyone else seemed to know a great deal more about law school and the legal profession, and how to navigate their time at law school. Also, they were fixed on going to a big firm.*

- *I'm the first person in my family to go to law school, so coming into a school where it seemed like everyone had parents, siblings, friends, etc. who were already lawyers or come from a legal background was so intimidating.*
- *I felt like a country bumpkin and [was] very naive about the backgrounds of the other students. I never heard of a tort until the first day of class.*

Losing faith in the law, or in law school

- *Learning to live with the fact that our legal system, in particular how we punish criminals (especially of color), is massively unjust.*
- *I went in feeling like law made life in America fairer, but by the end of 1L year felt like law was set up to disadvantage poor people—and even worse, it seemed like I was basically the only one who saw this as a problem.*
- *Law school has made me feel like justice doesn't exist.*

Financial stress

- *I'm about to graduate. Despite working full time at two paid internships for the last semester . . . I don't have enough money to pay for rent, bills, bar prep, AND food and daily expenses this summer. And the bar loan companies won't give me a loan because of the amount of student loans I already have. . . . I literally have no idea how I'm going to make it until I start working.*
- *I go days without eating because I can't afford it.*
- *The "best" jobs are internships, which I can't do because I have to earn money this summer. The system is set up in an extremely classist way.*

Feelings of inadequacy

- *The pressure of feeling as if you have already failed in life.*
- *If I don't do X, does that mean I'm screwing myself over? That includes what classes to take, if I should join a journal, should I do OCI or fellowships instead, etc.*
- *The fear of academic dismissal.*

Coping with tragedy

- *Losing three of my grandparents and two aunts was the worst.*
- *There were several deaths in my family and one painful breakup between me and the person I believed I would marry.*
- *One of my best friends, in my graduating class, committed suicide.*

Holy shit, right? And this is just a tiny portion of the answers. I am sharing them en masse to underscore that although it may seem like most of your law school peers are getting along fine, and that you are unusual in feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, discontented, or desperately sad, this is not so. Many law students all over the country, and almost certainly dozens in your own school, feel the same way you do. After law school you will learn (as I did) that a lot of people you thought were happy in law school were miserable and that a lot of people who seemed to know what they were doing were struggling worse than you were.

Why is there so much pressure not to talk openly? For one, law school is a professional school. There is a sense that being honest about your troubles will make you look weak and that this will harm your career. There is also a sense that law school is *supposed* to be hard—that your angst comes with the territory. I disagree. Yes, law school is challenging. But it should not be de rigueur for these three years to wreak havoc on your mental and physical health, relationships, or sense of self-worth. And they don't have to. Keep reading.

2

YOU ARE GOOD ENOUGH TO BE HERE

A PRIMER ON IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

You have probably heard of impostor syndrome: the persistent, nagging sense that you aren't equipped to be in your current position, that you're faking it, and that if everyone knew how clueless you were, you would be exposed as a fraud. Impostor syndrome is not a diagnosable mental disorder; it's more a constellation of thought patterns. Here is an example of how impostor syndrome might cause you to respond to particular circumstances in law school:

What happens: You get a C on an exam you thought you aced.

You think: What a terrible grade—I used to get A's! I knew I shouldn't be here.

What happens: You are offered a summer job. In your offer email, the hiring attorney mentions she was impressed with your writing sample.

You think: My writing sample was only good because I went over it three times with my Legal Research and Writing professor. I basically faked my way into this job offer.

What happens: You are chosen as articles editor of your school's business law journal.

You think: Probably no one else wanted it.

What happens: You are *not* chosen as articles editor of your school's business law journal.

You think: See, I'm not good enough to do well here.

These examples typify impostor syndrome thinking. Successes are attributed to flukes, lack of competition, or deficits in the selection process. Non-successes are interpreted as evidence of a lack of ability or intelligence (one that the person suspected was there all along). Basically, there's a tendency to over-internalize failure and see it as evidence of who you are, plus a tendency to under-internalize success and *not* see it as evidence of who you are.

Research suggests that impostor syndrome is especially common among high-achieving women, but plenty of men experience it as well.* And there's a weird cyclical phenomenon wherein people who feel like impostors work extra hard to hide their supposed inadequacy. If their effort begets success, it raises the bar, so they feel like they have even more fake successes to cover for. If their effort does not beget success, they see it as confirmation that they don't measure up. Impostor syndrome is a lose-lose situation. Your best bet, if any of this sounds familiar, is to try to fight impostor syndrome itself.

Combating such an entrenched thought pattern is no easy task, but there are a few cognitive approaches that can help pry you out of impostor-syndrome thinking:

- *Understand that you are learning a new skill set and don't yet have the tools to tackle every question.* Your inability to parse contracts with ease does not make you stupid. Would you call a first-grader stupid because he can't do long division? Of course not; it's just something he doesn't know yet. Same for you with contracts. Your inability to understand everything instantly does not make you unintelligent.
- *Think about how you would interpret a good friend's experience of a particular success or failure.* If your friend snagged an editorship of a journal, would you think, "There must not have been much competition"? And if your friend did not get the position, would you think, "I guess she doesn't belong in law school"? I hope the answer to both questions is no. There is zero reason to judge yourself more harshly than you judge others.†
- *Anxiety comes with the territory.* It is not evidence of impending failure or current inadequacy. Later in this book, I discuss mindfulness practices that can teach you to observe your anxious feelings rather than viewing them as proof of your incompetence.

* If you just questioned whether you count as high achieving, that's some fairly strong evidence of impostor syndrome.

† If you thought, "Yeah, but I know I don't know what I'm doing, and my friends *do* know what they're doing," just remember that you have no idea what's going on in anyone else's head.

- *Concentrate on other people.* C. S. Lewis said that true humility was not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. Focusing on external projects—putting together a conference, helping a friend with an outline, working at a clinic—will help you be less preoccupied with assessing your intrinsic self-worth.
- *Reframe the physical symptoms of fear and anxiety.* This sounds silly, but there is empirical evidence that it works.¹ If you see your hands trembling with nervousness, or you feel your throat straiten with anxiety, consciously reframe it to yourself: "Wow, I am *really* excited," you might think. "I am trembling with anticipation and eagerness." It's a proven coping technique.
- *Remember that you do not know about anyone else's failures, just their successes.* Even our heroes have a silent trail of disappointments and rejections behind them. For example, did you know that Justice Sonia Sotomayor got no-offered at Paul Weiss as a law student? It does not appear to have impeded her advancement in the profession.
- *Agree to a bigger challenge than you suspect you can handle.* This is counterintuitive—if you feel like a fraud, why would you try to do something beyond your ability? But that's the whole point. If you believe there is no way you can do Moot Court because you are petrified of public speaking, sign up for Moot Court. If you think Professor Cinnamon is a genius, and there is no way you can converse with her, apply for a job as her research assistant. Make a pact with yourself ahead of time that the thing you are doing is so hard that anything besides quitting counts as success.
- *Accept that chance plays a big role in your successes and failures.* A friend recently compared success to one of those county fair games where you roll a ball down an obstacle-filled incline and try to get it into a winning slot. There is skill and strategy involved, and experience helps, but all you can do is give it your best try. Do not overestimate the amount of control you have.
- *Avoid self-preservation through underpreparation.* This may sound counterintuitive, too, because impostor syndrome often leads people to over-prepare. But there is a corollary: People who feel like impostors sometimes underprepare to shield themselves against the feeling of impostordom. If you know you're on panel in Evidence and barely skim the reading, you can attribute your poor performance to lack of effort, which lets you interpret

yourself as a slacker, not an impostor. You'll feel better about yourself in the short term and disappointed in yourself in the longer term.

- *Acknowledge that you feel like a fraud, then move on.* Say, "Geez, I feel like I'm definitely going to bomb it, but I'll study hard for my Intellectual Property exam anyway." Or tell yourself, "I am petrified about interviewing and suspect I won't get a firm job, but nonetheless I am going to prepare for OCI." You may feel like an impostor, but your self-doubt doesn't need to dictate your actions.

YOU HAVE NEVER WORKED SO HARD TO BE AVERAGE

Some people don't find law school harder than undergrad, but most do—or, at least, find it hard in a different way. It is normal to feel like you have hit an intellectual wall. Most students told me that even though they worked their tails off, their grades fell somewhere in, or below, the middle of the pack. This especially surprises people who enter law school with impeccable academic histories. If you were already used to B's and C's (or worse) before law school, consider yourself lucky and skip to the next section. But you overachievers, strap in: I need a word with you.

We go through school being told that every level will be harder than the one before. In middle school, we heard how tough high school will be. In high school, we heard how tough college will be. And maybe this was true for other people, but it was not true for us. As long as we applied ourselves, we did well. So when we heard that law school would be hard, we thought, "Suuuure . . . just like everything else was."

Except that law school *is* tough. Not only is it packed with high achievers, but putting in huge amounts of work does not guarantee an A—or even a B. This is a staggering development for many people. Law students describe it this way:

- *There is always more work to be done. No matter how hard I study, I feel like I'm barely managing to tread water.*
- *I feel like I'm spinning my wheels. Working my ass off and not seeing the A's I'm used to in my final grades.*
- *I wish I would have known that . . . I could be smart, do everything right, and not get an A.*

- *Initially, I wanted to be at the top of the class. Now, I just hope I can perform decently.*
- *When I got back my first grades, I couldn't believe it. I was someone who rarely ever got C's, but I already had a few on my transcript. The worst part about it was that I knew I tried my best . . . and I felt pretty confident leaving my final exams.*
- *I was just used to doing very well in undergrad and then when I came to law school, I was suddenly in the bottom 75 percent of my class. It was a big shock . . . which ultimately made me begin questioning my adequacy as a person in general. I used to be a very happy-go-lucky person and now I'm always anxious and depressed for the first time in my life and can't seem to get over it.*

Some of these answers betray a pessimistic spin. The last student I quoted could have said, "Hooray, I'm in the top half of my class." But he framed his performance in a negative light—the "bottom 75 percent." When you are used to top-notch grades, anything short of perfection can feel like failure. It causes students to question their intelligence, aptitude, and work ethic and makes many of them second-guess the decision to attend law school. And it doesn't help when friends and family try to comfort you by recounting your record of high achievement:

You: "I think I failed my Torts final."

Your mom: "I'm sure you did fine, honey—you always say that and you always end up with the highest grade."

You: "No, I mean I think I literally failed."

Your mom: "I'm sure you'll get the best grade in the class."

You: [Head explodes].

But it is not that you shouldn't be here; it is that you have finally reached the top. Congratulations! You are with people like yourself, with similar aptitudes and levels of preparation. This should be a relief! Feeling like you are no better equipped than anyone else is a sign that you are exactly where you are supposed to be. It is a shock most people experience in college, but you missed out—likely due to some combination of your writing ability, raw intelligence, and studious avoidance of impossibly hard STEM classes. You, my dear high-achieving friend, are simply unaccustomed to being in your own competent company.

What does this mean for you? Mostly, that in law school, it is no longer productive to view your academic life through the competitive lens through

which you have been socialized to view it. Until now, consciously or not, you have likely grown accustomed to competing with others for a sense of success (and perhaps even self-worth). But now you are training to be a lawyer, and you need to adjust your internal drive so that your sense of success comes from things like communicating with a difficult client, understanding a new case, or collaborating on a tough appeal. For endeavors like these, it is not useful to think about whether you are a better lawyer than anyone else. It is only useful to think about whether you are a better lawyer today than you were yesterday.

Internalizing the material from this section and the previous section is made harder by law school's measuring sticks. Grades, internships, jobs, scholarships, positions on journals and in organizations—you had to compete to get in, and once you are in, it seems like you have to keep competing. It can feel overwhelming, especially because your ego has already been shaken. As one student told me, "Stress hit me the hardest when I received a series of rejection letters from internships or activities that I felt really confident about. It's hard to be told you're not good enough."

But you *are* good enough. Your inability to get Prize X or Prize Y is not evidence of your innate goodness or non-goodness; it is evidence that the prize givers were less enamored with your awesome qualifications than they were with the awesome qualifications of someone else. You feel traumatized, or at sea, or inadequate, because you can no longer rely on being perceived as more worthy than other people. This is a jarring life development, and it is no wonder that law school traumatizes high achievers.

The key is that in law school, it is not useful to derive self-worth from being on top. You need to make the shift from extrinsic motivation (doing things in the hopes that other people will recognize them and give you accolades or opportunities) to intrinsic motivation (doing things because you want to do them). Extrinsic success becomes merely an added bonus of living the life you want to live anyway. As a 2L told me, "You will almost certainly not be the 'smartest' person in the room anymore. People told me this, but I didn't really understand what a shift that would be. . . . Only do things because you *love* them—that's where your greatest happiness will lie."

Shifting your attitude and your outlook will take practice, especially if you are more accustomed to thinking in terms of what you *should* do than in terms of what you *want* to do. There will be an adjustment period, and you may be frustrated by your attachment to things like grades and prestigious externships. But little by little, you will learn to forge your own path. The better you get at

forging that path and assessing your incremental improvement, the less you will care about how, or what, everyone else is doing.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY IS A MYTH

Many students take a needlessly Sisyphean approach to law school. They do not want their peers, family, friends, or mentors to know that they feel uncertain, troubled, or stressed out. If you are in law school, you are probably a hard worker, used to pulling yourself up by your academic bootstraps. Maybe you even take pride in self-reliance. But here's a secret about the big endeavors in life, whether it is writing a book, planning a wedding, becoming a neuroscientist, or raising a kid: No one really does it alone.

Paradoxically, part of self-reliance is learning when to rely on other people. Self-reliance is not tantamount to self-sufficiency. Self-reliance does not mean sucking it up. Self-reliance means, in part, that you need to be smart enough to take advantage of the resources at your disposal, even when those resources are other people.

In 2014, the Yale Law School Mental Health Alliance published a report on the mental health of Yale law students.² Not only did 70 percent of respondents have mental health challenges in law school (more on that in Chapter 11), but the possibility of stigma made them reluctant to seek any help—even when their mental health problems were affecting them academically and socially.

Despite law students' fear of asking for help, practicing lawyers who look back on their law school years frequently wished they had sought more of it. When I asked alumni what advice they wished they could give their former 1L selves, dozens said they should have asked for more support: from professors, the law school's administration, their family, a counselor or psychiatrist, mentors or externship supervisors, or their law school peers. The subject matter of the help varied: mental health, job searches, stress, substance abuse, grades, cold calling, and more. But the common denominator was regret that they had tried to shoulder the burden alone.

And can you guess how many law school alumni wished they had asked for *less* help? Zero.