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# Tips to Help Stressed-Out Law Students Unclinch

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Many law graduates feel burned out. It's challenging finding motivation to clear one of the biggest hurdles between them and their careers—passing the bar exam.

During bar preparation this summer, law grads are isolated and their anxiety runs high, creating an experience that noticeably impacts their mental health, according to Chris Ritter, staff attorney with the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, which helps law students, lawyers and judges who struggle with mental health and substance abuse issues.

Texas Lawyer asked Ritter—who wrote a white paper of 10 tips to help law students find relief from stress, mental health and substance use issues—some questions about how law graduates, while studying for the bar, can take action to remain happy and healthy. Here are his answers, edited for style and length.

**Texas Lawyer:** At the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, what have you observed regarding law graduates' levels of stress and anxiety about the bar exam?

**Chris Ritter:** Graduates have expressed symptoms of burnout after finishing law school and then struggling to find the motivation to expend the enormous amount of energy and time needed to prepare for the bar exam. The isolation and effort and difficulty of the materials seems to really cause graduates to experience rumination, procrastination and fear about what is going to happen.

**TL:** What are some unhealthy ways that graduates relieve their exam stress?

**CR:** Some of the unhealthy strategies that graduates have used include binge drinking, prescription and other drug use, isolating, not getting enough sleep or exercise and not eating well.

**TL:** Why would you counsel them away from these methods?

**CR:** Most of the methods noted above actually contribute to the problem more than they help. Isolation can cause depression, and that results in less being accomplished due to lack of motivation and action. Drinking or using drugs may seem to help in the short term to treat the stress, but it actually increases anxiety and depression overall and creates an obstacle to learning the materials, causes the person to fail to meet goals or to work on the exam prep, and ends up becoming less and less effective with each use. Not only do these strategies fail to help in the big scheme of things, they end up causing a person's mental health to become much worse by affecting thinking, draining energy and exhausting needed time.

**TL:** What are some easy relaxation techniques graduates could use while sitting at their desks and studying?

**CR:** I would suggest two practices: gratitude and meditation. There is a growing body of research showing the powerful positive effects of thinking about what we are glad to have in our lives. This research shows that there are significant benefits psychologically, spiritually and physically that results from reflecting about the things for which we are grateful. Practicing gratitude by means of a gratitude journal—thinking of three things a person is grateful to have in his or her life each morning—has been shown to increase a person's happiness by 25 percent over 10 weeks.

Meditation, or doing breathing exercises, has been very effective for attorneys who need to relax, or "quiet the mind." One study showed that people in the 90th percentile for stress in their lives reduced their stress levels to the 57th percentile after only a couple of weeks of mindfulness breathing exercises just a few minutes a day.

**TL:** What advice would you give grads about eating, exercising and sleeping?

**CR:** I would strongly encourage grads to calendar a weekly plan for their bar exam prep to include not only set times for meals each day and for sleep at night, but also to include at least 20 minutes of walking or other exercise daily. Spending that time outside is a plus. Getting regular meals, exercise and sleep can make a major impact on a person's capacity to learn and retain information as well as being sharp and energetic enough to study and take practice exams.

**TL:** Why is it important for a recent grad to maintain perspective about the bar exam?

**CR:** Having a healthy perspective about the bar exam is important because it will allow grads to be able to prepare and work toward passing the bar without getting overwhelmed by it. If the focus becomes how the bar exam is difficult, monumental, life altering, critical to pass, and requires thousands of pages of information to be learned, it can become a torturous experience to endure preparing for and taking the exam. If a person considers a more positive perspective, such as the reality that most of the information has already been learned, that most people pass the first time, that it can be retaken if failed, that it is covering basic law, and that—pass or fail—it will not necessarily define a person or the person's future, it can be a much more pleasant experience.

**TL:** How can setting boundaries help someone through this tough time, and what might those boundaries look like?

**CR :** Boundaries are really important. This includes saying "no" to people when there is too much already on your plate. Learning to set boundaries in this phase of life will include making clear to employers or those around you that you need a set amount of time to work on the bar exam preparation rather than other commitments. This also includes asking for help from others to take care of tasks to provide the resources and time you need to focus on the bar exam. Having conversations about your needs with loved ones and employers is a good place to start.

**TL:** How could a graduate relieve stress by connecting with friends and family?

**CR:** Connecting with others who know first-hand what you are going through can help reduce the anxiety and fear related to bar exam preparation. A growing body of research shows that the need to connect socially with others is as basic as our need for food, water and shelter. Debriefing with friends that are also going through this experience can be very valuable. Likewise, being able to share with family some of the hardships and challenges can provide you with support to fill back up.

**TL:** In what way could a graduate's religious or spiritual practice help him through these feelings?

**CR:** Whatever the variety, research has shown that expanding this area of life makes a major impact on the well-being of people, and particularly those pursuing a legal path. Spirituality has many definitions, but expanding one's consciousness by means of connecting to something bigger than the self, whether that be a cause or a spiritual path, can make going through difficult times much easier.

**TL:** Where can a graduate go for help if facing more extreme levels of anxiety or depression?

**CR:** Graduates facing extreme anxiety or depression must take immediate steps to get help from a licensed professional. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available to help a person in a mental health crisis any time at 1-800-273-TALK. If the person is not in crisis, the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program is available to help law graduates connect to resources such as referrals to professionals, peer support, group support and informational resources for a variety of mental health and substance use issues. An abundance of wellness resources can be found on TLAP's website, [www.texasbar.com/TLAP](http://www.texasbar.com/TLAP).

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