

How to Maintain Your Health, Sanity AND Your GPA

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Suggestion 1. LEARN TO BREATHE.

Suggestion 2. BECOME YOUR OWN PERSONAL TRAINER.

Law school, like the practice of law, is a physically and mentally strenuous endeavor. It is physically demanding, requiring endurance, strength, stamina, perseverance and physical health. Keeping up with four or five classes and a part time job or extra activities each semester may tax your strength. Exams can be as physically demanding as participation in an Olympic event. Add these stressors to your continuing family obligations and existing financial commitments and there should be no doubt in your mind that you will need to train for the physical toll that law school places upon you. Here are a few ideas that will help:

A. PACE YOURSELF. The reality is that you are going to be studying a lot. You will not learn it all in one day, or one semester, or one year. However, you need to learn day-by-day, semester-by-semester, year-by-year. So, take it day-by-day, semester-by-semester. This is a marathon, not the 400-yard dash. And remember, you've done hard work before and have succeeded. Although law school may be different, it's not that different. If you find that the work load is overwhelming, make sure you are not ignoring the suggestions here relating to sleep, diet, exercise and balance. If anxiety or depression develop or persist, maybe it's time to seek help?

B. DO NOT PROCRASTINATE. Keeping up with course assignments and other life commitments is hard enough and falling behind can be anxiety producing. Study. Try to keep up. Go to class. Try not to skip classes. Do the assignments. If you fall behind, and most students will at some time or another, don't panic. Get some help, form a study group, talk to your friends about how they are getting along, consider their suggestions, or talk to the professor whose class is particularly difficult. Don't suffer in silence; there is a way out. Remember though, the sooner you get back on track or get to feeling better, the faster you get back into the game.

C) EAT WELL. Treat your body like a friend. Eat well. Eat breakfast. Avoid excessive fatty foods. Eat lunch. Avoid excessively sugared food. Eat your vegetables and fruit. Think about the amount of caffeine you are consuming. Find and keep to a diet or way of eating that fuels the processes of your body and that does not hurt or harm it. If you smoke, quit. Now!

D) GET ENOUGH SLEEP. Get enough of it on a daily basis. You all know what amount of sleep you need to be at peak performance. If you need 8 hours, you need 8 hours. Make it one of your priorities. It will pay off in the long and short run.

E) EXERCISE. If you don't already have an exercise routine, **GET ONE. INCORPORATE IT INTO YOUR DAILY SCHEDULE.** I think that this should be mandatory and required for every law student. You know, P.E. for law students. Because it is not required, try to think of incorporating exercise into your schedule as if it were just another class. Minute for minute, the benefits of exercise far outweigh any time spent away from your studies. It will help clear your mind for the times when you are studying. It will reduce and alleviate the daily accumulation of stress. Take advantage of the myriad recreational and exercise opportunities available through your law school. Join a gym. Play tennis, golf, racquetball, softball, basketball,

soccer. Swim. Run. Walk. Spin. Try out some new classes: Pilates, yoga, tai chi, indoor or outdoor rock climbing. Get moving!

Suggestion 3. CREATE BALANCE.

It is crucial to create and maintain a sense of balance and perspective in life with the law. Because law school and the practice of law can be such physical and mental endeavors, it is essential that you pay attention to the other areas in your life. This is necessary in order to be a good lawyer, but also a whole person, a kind person, a successful person, a healthy person, and a stress resilient person. Here are a few things to remember:

A) SPEND SOME TIME ALONE. All of us need some time alone—some need a lot, some only a little. You will be spending quite a lot of time alone studying, but that’s not what I’m talking about here. I’m talking about spending time to refill your emotional reserves and to give your mind a chance to quiet down and rest. The better you can learn (through meditation, relaxation, restful activity, or recreation) to quiet your mind of all the chatter about your studies, what you said (or didn’t say) in class, what you did, should have done, have yet to do, or should do, the more effective your solitude will be. Close your books; turn off the iPhone, the Blackberry or your cell phone. Go fishing. Go for a walk. Watch the clouds, the storm coming in from the north, the birds, other people or the stars. Breathe deeply. Let go. Enjoy the time by yourself. If you need some ideas about what to do, try some of the stress reduction stretches and other relaxation exercises at the end of this handout. Try meditation. The book, *The Relaxation Response*, by Dr. Herbert Benson is a time-honored classic about meditation and a good place to start. Or, check out mindfulness based stress reduction as explained by Jon Kabat-Zinn and see how this meditative practice can calm, refresh and enliven your lawyer brain.

B) TALK TO SOMEONE. Just as solitude is important, so is sharing your life, your thoughts, your emotions, your hopes, your fears and your highs and lows with someone else. Learn how to interact with others, particularly your family and close friends as a genuinely present human being. Connect with them by conversing *with* them. Try not to interrogate and try not to practice cross-examination techniques. Your friends, spouse and family members are not that interested so try not to talk too much about law or law school unless they ask. This will be hard - you will want to talk about law day and night. But law school and the law are really only interesting to other law students and lawyers. Practice listening to someone else and really trying to understand and hear what they are saying. Find a few people whom you trust enough to share the intimate details of your failures with as well as your victories, including successes and failures within law school. Your life is stressful enough without trying to do it all alone.

C) DEVELOP AN INTEREST OUTSIDE OF THE LAW. Try to develop or maintain interests completely unrelated to law school. This will provide you with opportunities to take a well deserved break from school, and quite frankly, helps make you a far more emotionally well-developed and interesting person. Recently, The New York Times featured the article, “Hobbies are Rich In Psychic Rewards” that states that, among other benefits, hobbies can actually help you think more creatively and give you confidence. If that isn’t enough incentive, you will also

meet a host of new friends and contacts who will help give some additional perspective about your own life and choices.

E) GIVE A LITTLE BACK. Try to do something kind for someone at least once a week. The more anonymous you can be about it, the better. Try something small. If you have the time, volunteer your time to help another. Develop compassion and take action. Whatever measure you take, large or small, remember that it will not only help others but will also serve to build your self-esteem, help put your own life in perspective and help to develop and maintain a vital connection with the community in which you live.

F) DEVELOP or MAINTAIN YOUR SENSE OF SPIRITUALITY. Spirituality doesn't necessarily mean religion. Nevertheless, I absolutely know that each one of you has an inner sense of something greater than yourself that provides a sense of peace, purpose, meaning and connection with others. It may also help you make sense of this world and provide you with guidance, direction and a sense of belonging. So, inquire within, find what works for you and then pay attention to it. If a particular religion or spiritual practice works for you, put it into action in your life. If getting out in nature is a spiritual experience for you, go regularly. Whatever you choose, let it give you some perspective on your life, helping to reduce anxiety, worry, and guilt.

G) RETAIN or DEVELOP A SENSE OF HUMOR. Don't take yourself so seriously. It doesn't matter how big and important you are, or would like to be, what your grades are, or what firm is granting you an interview, if you can't laugh at yourself, you're a heart attack waiting to happen. And seriously, life is a lot less fun. At least once a week, do something fun that involves no competition. Try something new - get out of your particular "comfort zone." Few things relieve stress and tension better than a good laugh.

Suggestion 4. IMPORTANT ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS.

A) SCHEDULE THESE ITEMS INTO YOUR WEEKLY CALENDAR. Try to make these suggestions a habit in your life. Provide yourself some structure in order to do all of the above. Reserve time in your schedule for silliness, exercise and time alone. The less time and energy you have to devote to simply trying to find the time and means to do the above, the more time and energy you can devote to *doing* the above.

B) BE AWARE OF HEALTH SERVICES AVAILABLE TO YOU. Sometimes the pressures of law school can become too much, despite all your best efforts. You can become physically run down or ill. Additionally, if alcohol or drug use is a problem, please seek help. Depression, anxiety disorders, panic attacks and other mental health issues are all treatable as well. Help is available. Here are some resources:

~ Your law school academic, physical and mental health counseling services.

~ **Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP) 800-343-8527** -Confidential help, referral and peer assistance for lawyers and law students dealing with alcohol, drug, and mental health issues.

~ **American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs**
– **866-529-5277** – Provides referrals to local lawyer assistance programs and other resources and information, including a confidential email list-serve for law students in recovery.

THE SEVENTH INNING STRETCH, MEDITATION FOR THE BUSY LAW STUDENT & DEEP RELAXATION

Whether you call it “stressed out,” “overwhelmed,” or just “a little crispy around the edges,” when the stress gets to be too much, you may find yourself in distress. You’re tired, you’re tense, you’re irritable, you’re restless, and you’re discontented. Sound familiar? We all get there, and unfortunately, some of us stay there. There are, though, some things you can do to reduce the stress response in your life and keep you on the healthy side of stress. The following are some suggestions that take very little time and tend to be quite effective:

The Seventh Inning Stretch. This technique is designed to help you relieve the muscular tension that comes with stress. Reduce the muscular tension and the mind will follow. This technique is made up of five muscle stretches you can do just about anywhere, anytime:

Sit up straight on the front edge of your chair with both feet on the floor. Rest your hands on your knees. Close your eyes and take two deep abdominal breaths. (When you breathe, your abdomen should rise and fall, but not your shoulders. This is called abdominal breathing. It is deeper and more relaxing than shallow chest breathing.) Open your eyes, and begin with the first stretch. While stretching each group of muscles, concentrate on the stretching and release of the muscles while still relaxing the rest of your body. Breathe through each stretch, holding each stretch for about three complete abdominal breaths. Between each breath, consciously relax your body for two complete breaths.

If you experience any discomfort or pain at any time during any of these stretches, discontinue the stretching and focus on relaxing the muscle.

1. With your hands still resting on your knees, let your head easily and slowly drop forward, resting your chin on your chest, and hold this stretch. Slowly and easily roll your head to the left, stretching your left ear down toward your left shoulder and hold. Then slowly and easily roll your head back with your face turned to the ceiling and hold. Slowly and easily roll your head to the right, stretching your right ear down to your shoulder and hold. Return your head to its normal position and take two deep breaths.
2. Join your hands together behind your lower back, entwining your fingers. Gently try to squeeze your shoulder blades together and hold for three breaths. Repeat.
3. Raise your arms over your head and entwine your fingers. Slowly and easily bend to the left, sideways at the waist, until you feel the pull of the stretch. Hold for three breaths and return to your normal position. Repeat to the right.
4. Carefully place your left ankle on top of your right knee. With your left arm draped across your leg (elbow on your left knee, hand on your left ankle) and your right hand

resting on your left foot, lean forward slightly until you feel the stretch in your back and legs. Hold for three breaths and then repeat with the right ankle on the left knee.

5. Extend your feet out in front of you with your knees slightly bent. Inhale deeply, and on the exhalation, slowly bend forward from the waist and reach your hands toward your ankles. Only go forward as far as is comfortable and rest your hands on your legs at that location. Hold for three breaths.

Meditation for the Busy Law Student. Often, when we are stressed, we tend to lose touch with the “here and now.” We even tend to lose touch with our body. Designed to be done anywhere, anytime, the *Meditation for the Busy Law Student* can help you refocus your attention, however briefly, on the present and thus, to refocus your energy and concentration on the issues at hand. You can practice this technique with eyes open or closed (although it is easier with eyes closed). First, direct your attention to the soles of your feet and try to feel the floor through your shoes. This reconnects you with your body and brings your thoughts “back down to earth.” After a couple of seconds, bring your attention to your breath. Again, consciously use the abdominal breath and focus your attention on trying to feel your breath as it flows through your nose and hits the back of your throat. It will feel cool on the inhalation and warmer on the exhale. Perform as many times as you can, bringing your attention back to the breath whenever it strays. Although you can use this technique even in the middle of a conversation, if you will try this twice a day for about 10 to 15 minutes each time in a quiet place, you will find that your mental energy and concentration overall is greatly improved.

Deep Relaxation. Obviously, when we are stressed, one of the first things we do is tense up physically. Unfortunately, as goes the body, so goes the mind (and vice versa). So, when we are tense physically, we will tend to be more mentally tense. This generally makes us more irritable and we find it more difficult to focus and concentrate. The Deep Relaxation technique is designed to give you a few moments respite from that tension, ease some of the attendant pain, and refocus your energy.

Find a quiet place where you can remain uninterrupted for at least 15 minutes. Sit or lie down. Close your eyes. Take three deep abdominal breaths through your nose. In your imagination, concentrate on your feet and ankles. As you continue to breathe, imagine your breath flowing down your body and into your feet, bringing warmth and relaxation to your feet. Continue concentrating on your feet for three breaths, each time, relaxing your feet a little more. With each set of three breaths, move up your legs, into your torso, your back, your shoulders, your arms, your hands, your neck, your face, and finally the top of your head. If you come to a muscle that is particularly tense, spend a couple of extra breaths releasing the tension. At the end, breath deeply again for three breaths and enjoy a moment of relaxation.

The Full Stress Shakedown. For the full benefit of the routine, practice each of these exercises in order (*Seventh Inning Stretch*, *Meditation for the Busy Law Student*, and then *Deep Relaxation*) one right after the other, at least once every day.