



# Developing a Mindfulness-Based Program to Enhance Student Wellbeing: Evidence Review and Conceptual Framework for Program Development

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## ABSTRACT

*The demanding nature of the legal education can provide a stimulating and challenging experience for law students. With this, various studies have documented elevated levels of mental health concerns and psychological distress among law students exacerbated by the adversarial and isolating nature of the system which may affect students' ability to cope and thrive. Meanwhile, mindfulness based programs could help law students acquire the skills to regulate emotions, be resilient and practice self-compassion. This concept paper aims to explore the prevalent challenges of law students affecting their wellbeing and how mindfulness-based strategies could help them deal with these challenges. The findings of the study would be supportive not only of institutional efforts but also of individual mechanisms of coping.*

**Key Words:** Program development, Mindfulness, Student wellbeing.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The legal profession is characterized by high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout (Uchiyama, 2020). As part of their training, law students will have to deal with intense academic pressures, long hours of studying, and a high level of stress in transitioning to a new environment. Existing research suggests that the pressures and demands of law school can have a detrimental impact on the mental health and well-being of students. These challenges may be exacerbated by the competitive, isolating, and adversarial learning environment in law school. This demanding nature of law school can pose significant challenges for first-year students, leading to increased levels of stress, depression, and other mental health issues (Armstrong & Sanson, 2012). Sheldon and Krieger (2007) reported that first-year law students show substantial declines in psychological well-being as they progress through their studies, driven by academic pressures, competition, and the nature of legal education.

Given this scenario, there is a need to recognize this concern in law school by coming up with not only structured interventions but also an evidence-based approach that could help law students manage stress and enhance coping skills. This study aims to establish a conceptual foundation for a mindfulness-based program specifically designed for law students. By recognizing the demanding nature of law school, this study will look into existing literature that would help explore mindfulness as a framework that would help law students support their well-being not only in law school but also in their future profession as a lawyer.

The findings of this study would be helpful for law schools, mental health professionals, and policymakers who are engaged in creating supportive environments in legal education. This would also be relevant for promoting positive student outcomes such as academic success, resilience, and long-term professional well-being. The proposed program would be aligned with not only individual student outcomes but also institutional goals in the legal education system.

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Law school has a demanding and competitive nature, which entails years of persistence and hard work. The rigors of law school can provide a stimulating and yet stressful climate. Law school is indeed a challenging experience given the kind of training that law students have to go through.

The University of Michigan law school found that students' level of depression is comparable to the norms of the general population upon their entry, but the level of emotional distress elevates and persists as they go on with their training. Therefore, persistence of emotional symptoms cannot be merely attributed to the transitioning life in law school which suggests that other factors might be involved. It is noteworthy that levels of distress reported are similar to those of people who experienced major life trauma such as death of spouse and marital separation (Reifman et.al, 2001). In a similar study by the Brain and Mind Institute, it was found that over one-third of Australian law students experience psychological distress, with levels 17% higher than those of the medical students and 20% higher than those of the general population (Field & Kift, 2010; Field, 2016).

Over the course of 3 years in law school, declines in psychological need satisfaction and well-being were also observed in a study in the United States. Perceived autonomy and social support buffered the decline in need satisfaction, accounting for better well-being, higher GPA, and better performance in the bar exam (Sheldon and Krieger, 2007). In a cross-sectional study of first-year law students, it was found that there is a significant correlation between mental health concerns and quality of life (Muntean et al., 2024). Elevations in psychological distress were also reported in their final year in an Australian university (Kelk et.al., 2010). The promotion of emotion regulation, resilience, and adaptive coping mechanisms are essential skills for maintaining well-being in high-stress environments such as law school. Resilience is particularly important for first-year law students as they transition into a demanding and often competitive academic environment.

Thompson & Waltz (2010) found that mindfulness training was associated with resilience and better coping mechanisms among university students. Zeidan et al. (2010) demonstrated that brief mindfulness training can improve cognitive functioning, such as sustaining attention and working memory capacity. Mindfulness contributes to stress reduction and improved well-being through self-regulation of attention, the promotion of emotional awareness, and the cultivation of non-reactive, non-judgmental awareness (Hölzel et al., 2011). Additionally, self-compassion cultivated through mindfulness has been associated with better psychological health outcomes and may serve as a buffer against the perfectionism and self-criticism that many law students typically find challenging (Neff, 2011).

Mindfulness training is a practice that involves paying attention to the present moment without judgment and has shown promise in reducing stress, improving emotional well-being, and enhancing cognitive function (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). By paying attention to the present moment without judgment, mindfulness can help in reducing stress levels, regulate emotion and enhance cognitive functioning (Shapiro et al., 1998). While there is growing evidence supporting the benefits of mindfulness, research on its effects on law students is rather limited.

Bamber and Schneider (2016) found that mindfulness reduced levels of anxiety, depression, and perceived stress in students. It also showed improvements in mindfulness skills, which is effective for managing stress. Braun et al. (2019) found that mindfulness training can reduce burnout and enhance the well-being of healthcare professionals. This is supportive of the idea that mindfulness can enhance both mental health and performance in demanding professions such as law.

Schwind et al. (2017) found that mindfulness can act as a preventative measure, reducing the risk of burnout by improving emotional resilience and providing tools for managing stress. Given that first-year law students are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges, introducing mindfulness early in their education can equip them with the necessary tools to manage stress throughout their academic and professional careers. Riskin (2002) pioneered the application of mindfulness to law students and legal practitioners, finding that mindfulness improves focus,

emotional regulation, and the ability to manage stress in legal work. These studies support the hypothesis that mindfulness-based programs can directly impact law students' well-being.

Given the unique challenges faced by law students, it is essential to explore the potential benefits of mindfulness training in this population. By cultivating mindfulness, law students may be able to better manage stress, improve their academic performance, and develop healthier coping mechanisms.

### **3. PROPOSED PROGRAM**

The proposed 6 session Mindfulness-based program aims work on the following: build students' capacity to increase focus, build the ability to tune in to the body and what is internally happening, build the ability to regulate emotions and the ability to choose one's response wisely.

#### **3.1 Mechanics of Change**

Sessions 1, 2, 3 target to build or strengthen the skill of attention by stepping out of automaticity by noticing with clarity what is happening in the moment, letting go and shifting the focus of attention. Session 4 targets the ability to decenter from thoughts by observing them before committing to act. This helps to see the possibility that there are other perspectives, that what we think may not be entirely true. Session 5 builds the ability to be resilient by staying with a distressing situation. Mindfulness attitudes and practices help to find ways to cushion the impact of distress by taking care of the self. Lastly, session 6 targets the ability to suspend judgment by noticing what is happening internally and capturing what another person is saying and what is happening at the moment. It hopes to plant the seed of empathy, working with and for others without draining, but instead building oneself up.

Mindfulness-based interventions are generally safe, but there is a small chance that participants may experience emotional discomfort as they reflect on difficult thoughts or emotions during mindfulness exercises. Before the program begins, participants will be asked to complete a brief screening questionnaire to identify any pre-existing psychological conditions (e.g., severe anxiety or depression) that may make mindfulness training distressing. Participants who report severe mental health concerns will be encouraged to seek professional support and may be excluded from the study if their participation poses a risk to their well-being. During the mindfulness sessions, participants will be encouraged to engage in the exercises at their own pace. If any participant feels uncomfortable or emotionally overwhelmed during a session, they will have the option to step out of the session temporarily or opt out of specific exercises without any negative consequences. The facilitators will conduct a brief check-in before and after each mindfulness session to ensure that participants feel emotionally safe and supported. Any participant experiencing discomfort will be given the opportunity to talk privately with the facilitator or seek additional support. After the mindfulness program concludes, participants will complete the post-test survey. Participants will be given the opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences and report any lingering emotional discomfort during debriefing sessions. They will also have access to a mental health professional if needed. Resources such as contact information for mental health services, mindfulness practice guides, and recommendations for further mental health support will be provided to participants at the conclusion of the study.

Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the data for all measures at pre-test and post-test. Paired t-tests will be conducted to compare pre-test and post-test scores within the group. Effect sizes will be calculated to quantify the magnitude of changes. The correlational analysis will examine the relationship.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

The demanding nature of law school can increase the likelihood of mental health concerns among law students. This conceptual study aims to explore the benefits of implementing a mindfulness-based program to enhance the stress management and overall well-being of first year law students. Current literature highlights the effectiveness of mindfulness training in reducing stress, anxiety, and burnout while fostering emotional resilience, cognitive

functioning, and adaptive coping mechanisms. By integrating mindfulness practices in law education programs, students could gain the capacity to navigate the rigors and demands of their academics. Mindfulness promotes emotion regulation, resilience, and adaptive coping mechanisms, which are essential for maintaining well-being in high-stress environments such as law school. It can have a positive effect on cognitive function, which is an important skill for law students who need to manage complex information and high cognitive demands. This is essential for law students who are often required to process large volumes of information under time pressure. Cultivating resilience is important for first-year law students as they transition into a demanding and often competitive academic environment. This study would benefit not only law students but also those who are engaged in working in the legal education system.

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