Hey everyone! My name is Alessandra Fritz. I’m a 2L at UCI Law, where I founded the Mental Health in Law Society. I recently became your Law Student Division Mental Health Coordinator. I am so excited to advocate for the 120,000 law students around the country! I have a lot to share, so stay tuned for more tips coming your way. For instance, I plan to write an article covering various books on mental health in legal education and the legal profession. I know, more reading, yay, you absolutely feel like you have time for that – but these are easy reads that will help open up new perspectives and, hopefully, give you a breath of fresh air.

Now, it may be clear by now that I’m not going to write this article like a legal memo, so hopefully my stream-of-consciousness, casual style of writing is interesting enough to hold your attention.

This summer, I had a chance to look back on my 1L year. I thought about things I wish I had really understood as I rode the wild rollercoaster of my first year of law school. So, I’m going to share with you some of those lessons learned, despite the fact that, before and during 1L year, I read many lists like the one I am about to provide, and I did what you were just about to do and skimmed the bolded headers. Which, yeah, I mean, you get the gist doing that, but are you really going to take it to heart? This is your first lesson...

**Read to Create, not to Memorize**

You’ll hear everyone talk about how learning law is like learning a different language, and they’re not wrong – but I think it’s a bit more like learning how to make sculptures out of blocks of stone.* Get ready for me to really push this metaphor, folks.

The difference between learning law and learning a language is that with a language, you simply have to memorize the characters, the translated words and conjugations and stuff, and you’re pretty much golden. But with the law, if you memorize the words, you’ve only just learned what a chisel is. You have to figure out how to use the words to form an argument that doesn’t turn to dust at the hint of a cool breeze.

Parsing dense legal text is sometimes like figuring out how Michelangelo sculpted David. At the end of a careful read and a helpful class discussion, you’ll learn the rules and the techniques. But even if you memorize those, when the time comes around for you to sculpt your own Michelangelo, your first try is likely to result in a hand cramp and a blob of rock that you’d like to claim resembles a legal argument.
After you practice and practice and ask for help and practice some more, your finely tuned legal writing is still unlikely to resemble that of whomever is the legal equivalent of Michelangelo (I’d rather not take a stance). Sure, your professors may try to beat the creative writer out of you: “Speak Plainly! Use the Formula! Be Serious!” But at the end of the day, your writing is still going to be your own. Maybe you’ll be akin Justice Kagan and reference Dr. Seuss to get your point across (like a Warhol or a Koons). Or hey, maybe you’re just naturally a more serious type. You’re cool too, friend. Sculpt your Venus de Milo of an argument. Go get ‘em!

*Disclaimer: I was a Theatre major in undergrad, not an Art or Art History major.

Redefine Success

This one is going to start out doom and gloom, but hopefully it will be inspirational by the end.

Like many of you, before I came to law school, I was used to getting good grades with basically a marginal amount of effort. One thing about law school, though, is that because GPA and the LSAT are emphasized so strongly in acceptance decisions, you’re likely to end up at a school with people who are right at your level. Folks will tell you law school is hard, so you’ll try harder than you’ve ever tried before. But that still might not be enough to get you to the top.

Because most law schools curve their grading, and final exams are often worth the majority of your grade, it might not matter much if you understand the material more than the person next to you. Law school grades don’t necessarily indicate whether you learned the rules and can apply them properly. Maybe you haven’t practiced your legal writing enough, or maybe you need to work on centering yourself before exams because your brain shuts down and you can’t think straight. Even if you’re at the upper tier of your law school’s median GPA and LSAT scores like I was (this isn’t a brag), you could still end up with average or even below average grades during your first year (I told you this wasn’t a brag).

You’re probably thinking to yourself, “oh, that won’t be me, I always get good grades because I work really hard!” And hey, there’s about a ten percent chance that you’re right and you will get all As. If you’re one of those people, kudos to you. (I thought I was one of you, but it turns out... nope.) Please consider studying in groups with folks who may not have as good grades as you. For one thing, teaching others is a great way to hone your own understanding, and for another, it’s always good to expand your network beyond your school’s small group of academic rock stars.

Okay, now, back to my friend who ends up getting average or below average grades after their first semester, or even first year of law school, despite asking lots of questions and understanding the material. Hey bud. I know what you’re going through.
Seriously. Despite being an active participant in class, despite the fact that my peers (and some of my professors) were all super confident that my grades would be spectacular, my 1L story was a sordid tale of B range grades and a C+ in the class I was least worried about (Civil Procedure: don’t take it for granted). Even after doubling my efforts my second semester, my cumulative GPA only rose by .125. I’ve all but given up my dream of going into IP straight out of law school, because my grades aren’t good enough.

But wait, I was going to talk about redefining success, right? Here is how I succeeded: I completed my first year of law school despite being out of academia for five years prior and despite experiencing a family tragedy right in the middle of the academic year. I made sure I understood the material by asking questions and joining in class discussion. And here’s the big success: resilience. I was resilient, and you can be, too. When I got knocked down, I got back up again. I recognized the need for improvement worked on my writing skills. Perhaps most importantly, I focused on the things that got me out of bed in the morning, like working to improve the mental health of my peers at UCI Law, as well as around the country. Which brings me to my next point...

**Look for Your Passion and Recognize Your Power**

Before I came to law school, I probably would have considered myself someone who cared about mental health issues, but who let other folks fight the good fight. When looking to heal, I mostly turned inward. In early 2013, I was diagnosed with and began treatment for Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. In fall of 2014, my dad was killed in a car crash. So yeah, let’s be fair, I had some stuff on my plate.

When I ultimately made the decision to go to law school (a long story for another day), I thought about what kind of law I might like to go into, and I landed on transactional intellectual property law. I was (and still am, prospective employers) excited about forming what I would call the “building blocks of innovation” in arts and entertainment. However, as a baby 1L, I emphasized to everyone that I was keeping my options open, because there might be some random area of law that I turn out to like and be really good at. Of course, instead, I ended up getting my heart set on a particular boutique IP law firm, only to discover that my grades were not competitive enough for me to even have a shot there. (Listening to advice is hard, even if it’s your own!)

The good news about my 1L journey is that I recognized the power I had to make a change in my law school and in law schools around the country. When learned about the poor mental health of the legal profession and those in legal education, and when I looked at my school and saw that past mental health clubs had all fallen by the wayside, I resolved to make a change. Since I founded the Mental Health in Law Society at UCI Law, we have made great strides with our administration to increase the mental health...
services our school provides. We still have a long way to go. In spring 2019, MHLS will host a symposium at UCI Law examining new and current methods to increase mental health in legal education and the legal profession.

As Mental Health Coordinator for the Law Student Division, I’m writing articles like this one in the hope that someone out there might have a laugh or find hope. I’m also drafting a petition right now that we hope to share with SBA presidents around the country in an effort to lobby law schools to adopt the recommendations from the National Task Force Report on Lawyer Well-Being. Will my work lead to a paying job for me after law school? I have no idea. But I am so proud of the work I am doing. In the meantime, I can keep an eye out for potential jobs I haven’t considered yet, that might be perfect for me.

Your power may be in your capacity to help out a student organization, to be active in the Law Student Division, and/or to do pro bono work. Or maybe your power your 1L year is simply your ability to be resilient as you tackle the onslaught of daily 1L challenges. Whomever you are, you are powerful. Believe it. Own it.

Take Care of Yourself and Take Care of Others

So, y’all, I’m still really working on taking this hot-off-the-presses tip myself. I’m still on ye olde bumpy path to recovery regarding my own mental health struggles. I really need to schedule a dentist appointment, probably an eye exam, a well women’s health checkup, I need to get a new therapist, and I need to reach out to friends more often. But again, resiliency: I recognize I need to do these things, and I’m working on it. There’s a bit of a tendency among law students to say, “I’ll take care of myself when law school is over.” But look, for a lot of people, that just isn’t the case. Bad habits formed in law school tend to carry over as bad habits outside of law school.

Here’s another thing about law school: there’s a high likelihood that it’s going to crack your head wide open (metaphorically) and exponentially expand your understanding of life and the world around you. It can be really scary, and maybe even psychologically damaging if you don’t take care of yourself. It doesn’t help that you’ll be studying all of these really distressing cases about murder, rape and discrimination, and torts like the one where one dude taunts a guy into jumping into a ditch full of water and the guy drowns in the ditch (can’t be bothered to look it up right now). The whole thing about litigation is that it rights some wrong that has been done to someone or something, and the majority of your first year is going to cover litigative topics.

Now, some of you might be like, “yay, I want to be a litigator, show me those horrors so I can be a part of fixing them!” Again, I’ll say, kudos to you, litigative rock stars. If your own struggle with resiliency is more of a thumb war than a nuclear one, please watch out for your friends whose mental bulwarks may not similarly withstand the flood of stress and tragic legal tales. This can be as simple as just spending time with them and letting them know that you care.
One way you can look out for yourself and look out for your friends is to schedule regular exercise sessions like “barre review” or “bar-sketball” (or something without terrible legal puns). Exercise with friends can be a lot more enticing than exercise alone!

Okay, it looks like I’m winding down to the end of this article and I need to write some semblance of a conclusion here. Hopefully my rambling will help to make your law school adventure a bit less traumatic. Or, I mean, in my wildest dreams, your law school adventure will not be traumatic at all and will be like riding a unicorn on a rainbow road of satisfaction and accomplishments. But if it’s not, there is always someone to reach out to. Know that you are not alone.