ENLIST YOUR TROOPS AND LOSE THE NAYSAYERS: IT TAKES A VILLAGE OF POSITIVE PEOPLE

- Admitting that Some People Will Not “Get It” and Are Not Helpful to You Now.
- Helping Those Who Are Supportive Help You
  - Think of analogies to explain your struggles to family or friends
- Saying No to Supportive People Who Still Want Your Time During Bar Study
- Watching Out for Saboteurs
  - Be wary of competitive classmates.
  - Be wary of negative people: friends and strangers.
  - Keep doubters at a distance: build a protective wall around your confidence.
  - Relatives and others who make destructive comments
  - Special problem in law school: professors who doubt you
  - Naysayers
"DO WHAT YOU FEEL IN YOUR HEART TO BE RIGHT, FOR YOU’LL BE CRITICIZED ANYWAY. YOU’LL BE DAMNED IF YOU DO AND DAMNED IF YOU DON’T."

— ELEANOR ROOSEVELT —

We talked in previous chapters about believing in yourself and your ability to pass, and investing in yourself so you have the resources to succeed. This is easier said than done, especially if you do not have a great support system. It is harder still if you must battle people who seek to undermine you.

Some of you contend with cultural, racial, or gender stereotypes that can be psychological barriers to success, or perhaps even a parent, grandparent, or other important person in your life who does not approve of your becoming a lawyer. Others battle financial pressures that cause you to doubt the long-term investment in a professional career when you are obligated (or feel obligated) to help by supplying needed short-term funds. Some face explicit or implicit comments suggesting you are not smart enough to pass the bar exam and become a lawyer. You may find yourself in a relationship with someone who resents the time and energy that bar success requires; he or she may either intentionally or inadvertently sabotage your bar-passage goals. (Some students, when they step back, recognize a pattern. Somehow they got into fights with their partner, spouse, or significant other before each set of final exams. If this is you, be careful. Plan to avoid this when you are getting ready for the bar.)
TAKE AN HONEST LOOK AT YOURSELF

Recently one of my 3L students e-mailed me, saying how helpful it had been to plan ahead to battle distractions and surround herself with positive influences. She discussed with her significant other the commitment bar studies would entail and realized they had to break up. He was not willing to support her in the way she would need to pass. She was grateful to have realized this before, rather than during, intensive bar preparation. In her words, "I am glad that you prompted us to take an honest look at how our lives were organized. I feel like I am allowing myself to have a true chance at achieving my goals. I want to truly be able to say I put everything I could into passing the bar."

You may not realize how helpful it can be to avoid those who are not supportive (at least in June and July). For readers who come from professional or academic backgrounds, it is hard to imagine that one’s family could prove to be more of an obstacle than an asset. But this is all too real an issue for many. Facing it now will help you not only to pass the bar exam, but to more confidently reach for and achieve all of your professional goals.

Not only do those facing family challenges need a boost, so too do those in the bottom half of their law school class. If you are in this group, the tools in this chapter will help you gain the confidence to rise above statistics and claim the success you desire. The strategies will help you build resistance to those who prey on your own doubts (low pass rates, fewer law jobs, etc.). It will be critical to get rid of or at least dilute negative influences, seek support that is truly useful, avoid "help" that hurts more than supports, and ask directly and explicitly for what you need during this stressful period.

Who makes up your supportive troops? Who is in your inner circle? How can you get them on board? The first part of this analysis involves some triage. Sort people into three categories:

- People who are supportive and "get it" right away
- People who need help learning how to be supportive
- People who are simply not helpful or are downright destructive

Learn to rely primarily on those who are already supportive and "get it": your mentor, other recent graduates who passed the bar exam, ASP faculty and other trusted professors, and lawyers or law clerks you work with. The following sections will teach you how to handle both people who aren't currently supportive but can become so and those you should avoid until after the bar exam.

ADMITTING THAT SOME PEOPLE WILL NOT "GET IT" AND ARE NOT HELPFUL TO YOU NOW

There may be people you cannot enlist for support in studying for the bar exam. These people may come around and even be huge supporters later in your life and career, but right now they don't get it and will not help you pass your exam.

You may have a parent who really didn't want you to go to law school in the first place and now doesn't support your becoming a lawyer. Even if you're financing this goal yourself, and not asking for a dime from that parent, he or she may disapprove of your career choice. Among the parents of students I have worked with over the years, these stand out:

- Jorge's dad, who repeatedly told his law student son to be a "real man," get a "real job," and "stop with the schooling already."
- Wanda's mom, who often wondered aloud why being a secretary "like Mom" was not "good enough" for her daughter.
- Tom's overachieving lawyer dad, who told his slightly laid-back son how much harder he had worked than his son in law school, and that all of his "lazy" friends in school didn't pass the bar exam.

At a recent gathering of students who had just finished taking the bar exam, they shared stories of the many friends who had "broken up with them" during law school and written them off completely during bar prep. These friends just did not understand why there was no time at all to hang out in June or July.24

Your best strategy may simply be not to seek help or support from such persons. You may be able to approach them again later, when you are closer to meeting your goal. But in the meantime, find at least one person who is supportive and reach out.

Once you triage and have identified a solid group of people or even one truly supportive person, unless those people went to law school and have taken the bar themselves, you will still have to help them understand the kind of support you need.

HELPING THOSE WHO ARE SUPPORTIVE HELP YOU

Some people mean well and want to help you, but don't know how. It can be beneficial to enlist the support of your immediate circle of family and friends, but sometimes you need to guide them. Unless they are lawyers, they will likely have a hard time understanding the intensity of your studies. Even other professionals, such as doctors and engineers, often don't get it.

Still another level of challenge may arise if you are living with someone who doesn't get it. Let's say it's your parent or partner. If you are not able to help that person understand what you need, your best strategy may be to study at a library, an empty room
in your law school, or any place conducive to focus that is outside your home. Find a place that will allow you to stay and comfortably spread out your books from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. every day. The less you are around home, the less likely you will be to succumb to distractions, frustration, or defeatism.

To help people understand your situation, take a look at the letters to family and friends below. There is a version directed toward traditional students and one geared toward nontraditional students. Find the version that seems more relevant and either adapt and personalize it or send it as is. Sign it as being from yourself, or feel free to say it came from a law professor. (They might find it more persuasive.)

If it’s easier to talk with someone in person or by phone instead of writing, or if you have to explain this to someone who doesn’t read or speak English, borrow whatever language or ideas are useful to explain how they can best help you. (There are suggestions for nonlaw analogies below that may help you in talking with those who have little familiarity with law.)

Note: These letters are intended for the people you expect to be supportive. Do not bother sending such a letter to naysayers. Stay away from those people until August (or March if you’re taking the February exam). It is not worth the energy and time it will take to bring them on board before the exam, and you risk their toxic influence permeating your confidence should you try. Again, if this is someone very close to you, the best approach may be something like this:

“I know it’s hard to understand. It may seem to you like I’m just taking another test. But to pass this bar exam, I cannot spend any time with you in June or July.” And every time you are asked, simply say, “Let’s plan something in August. Preparing for the bar will take all of my time in June and July.”

LETTER FOR NONTRADITIONAL LAW STUDENTS

Dear Friend, Family, or Significant Other:

Someone close to you is taking an upcoming bar exam; we’ll call him or her your B.A. or bar applicant (the “name” s/he will use on the exam). What does that mean for you? Obviously, each person and each family facing this experience differs, but there are often parallels. Here are just some of the challenges your B.A. faces and what has worked for people just like you who want to understand and be supportive. Think of this as both a success and survival note—you want your B.A. to pass the exam, and you want to survive this long haul!

Start with that last point; the bar exam is a long haul, a huge challenge. It represents each graduate’s “Mount Everest” climb. One does not reach the summit without proper gear and training. Your B.A. cannot give the bar exam short shrift. It requires total commitment, 100 percent focus, and a great deal of time!

- Expect your B.A. to be “gone” for the two months prior to his/her exam. If your B.A. is also working and has other demands, he or she may need to start early; the “distances” may thus be felt four or five months before the exam. Note: Your B.A. may be present physically, but if he or she is doing what needs to be done to pass, your B.A. will be “gone.”
- Your B.A. will be thinking about exam fact patterns while eating, showering, and sleeping—dreaming (or having nightmares) about the exam.
- The person you knew as perhaps a slightly crazed law student will be taken over totally by “bar exam-itis.” The good news is that this disease is temporary!
- Your B.A. is in a fierce and exhausting competition. Many of the students your B.A. must compete against come from generations of professionals who support them fully in their effort, pay for their bar studies, bring them food, and even do their laundry!
- Most people studying for the bar exam do not work at anything other than bar study in June and July. They quit, or take leaves from, their jobs to focus exclusively on the bar.
- People hibernate socially and make that clear either by calling everyone they regularly talk with to say, “Goodbye until August,” or by leaving outgoing voice-mail and e-mail messages in May saying, “Gone until the end of July. Will return all calls in August.” One former student added to her outgoing message, “If anyone wants to know what to do to help me pass the bar, please feel free to contribute to my bar fund. I am taking off two months from work, so I will accept any and all gifts and loans; no contribution is too small. Thank you for your support!” The message of another student, a religious person, asked callers to pray for him.
- Plan a fun after-bar trip, something your B.A. and you (and your family if you have one) can look forward to. After the bar, your B.A. will return mentally as well as physically; it will be a time for you to reconnect.
- Say no in advance to all social commitments for your B.A. (One student told me about an event he reluctantly agreed to attend where, lo and behold, he was seated next to a hotheaded, cocky lawyer who berated him the entire evening for being out rather than studying.)
- Be flexible and willing as much as possible to play every day and evening by ear. If at the last minute your B.A. has put in a productive enough study day that he or she is able to join in a social event, be welcoming. But understand that even if your B.A. has finished studying for the day, he or she may need to sleep, exercise, or just unwind.
- Preparing for success on the bar exam involves much more than just studying; it requires being ready in mind, body, and spirit. Think of your B.A. as a
warrior preparing to go off to battle. Help your warrior prepare to win this battle!
- Delay any important decisions, significant changes, major purchases, and arguments until after the bar. (June and July are not the time to buy a new house, refinance a home, or remodel.) Anything that can wait, let it wait.
- Make life during bar review as easy as possible. Some B.A.s who are parents of young children ship their kids off to grandparents for the summer. Many use paper plates for every meal. And, unfortunately, some choose to save time by eliminating showers. (Kidding there! But you get the point!)
- Help your B.A. get on and stay on a routine study schedule. If you have a family, it will often be helpful for your B.A. to be available on a consistent and predictable basis, even if his or her free time is limited. Encourage your B.A. to set and keep “office hours.” Knowing that “Mom or Dad is studying but will be there for me at 7.00 p.m. every night” will help kids immensely. Some B.A.s arrange to be at dinner or breakfast for at least one hour daily. For people who need your B.A. (children, spouses, significant others), it is usually much easier to know you can check in at a certain time rather than have that person unpredictably disappear.
- Study schedules also help your B.A. to make time for practice tests, simulated exams, and downtime when he or she can afford it.
- If there is any interactive studying that would help your B.A. participate. Be willing to test your B.A. with flash cards, if he or she wants that. Agree to play bar review lectures whenever you’re in the car together. And be open to listening if your B.A. needs to vent.
- Accommodate your B.A.’s needs during the week of the bar exam. If he or she needs to be alone, respect that. If he or she needs you there, try to be there.
- Note: If your B.A. is not clear about what will make him or her the most well prepared, well rested, and confident going in to the exam, ask. Remind your B.A. that family and friends may love him or her, but you are not mind readers. Especially if you have never taken a bar exam yourself, your B.A. must be clear in articulating how you can best help.
- Last but not least, do not take personally any of your B.A.’s moodiness and tension. Stress comes with bar exam territory. This too shall pass.

Sincerely,

LETTER FOR TRADITIONAL LAW STUDENTS

Dear ____________

As you know, I am taking the bar exam this July. What does that mean? Well, it means I need or at least would very much like your support, and I want to let you know how you can best help me.

Studying for this exam will be a huge challenge. My professor calls it “the law student’s Mount Everest.” I don’t know yet how hard the actual test will be, but I know that to walk in the door prepared I must totally focus in June and July. Total commitment. 100 percent focus. There is no way I can allow myself to go in knowing I have not done my best to get ready, and I know you would not want that for me, either.

So here’s what I’m thinking:
- Expect me to be gone for at least two months, June and July. Even when you see me, if you see me, I may not really be present. (If you ask me something, I may not hear you. Even if I respond, I may not know or remember what I said.) I’ve been told that students become consumed with thinking about exam questions while eating, showering, and even dreaming. The person you have known these past few years as a slightly crazed law student will come down with a disease: bar exam-itis. The good news is that it’s temporary!
- I’m preparing for a fierce, exhausting competition. Some compare the exam to a war. Pre-battle preparation is key. If you want to help me win, first and foremost understand that is why I’m gone. Not because I don’t care about or want to spend time with you, but because this is what it takes to win. I have to be “all in” for at least two full months.
- If you want to see me just to say hello, you can drop off meals so I don’t have to cook or get takeout. But unless you can stomach the idea of bringing food over and testing me with flash cards while we eat, we’ll have to put off spending time together until August.
- I will return, physically and mentally, after the exam and we’ll plan something fun.
- I’m officially RSVP’ing “No” in advance to all social commitments this summer. You can feel free to tell me when you are planning get-togethers, but don’t expect me to come. If at the last minute I feel I’ve put in a productive enough study day and can get away and it’s OK to show up, great. I know that I will miss things. And, I realize this may sound flaky, but it has to be this way.
Ever try baking a cake without measuring the ingredients? A lot of cooking, great cooking, can be done by eyeballing, estimating, truly winging it. Desserts typically are not that way, especially baked goods. Pastry chefs are more like chemists in their kitchens than Grandma, whose cooking thrived on a pinch of this and a dab of that. Performing well on the bar exam is more like baking a fancy, seven-tiered cake than simmering a forgiving soup or stew where you can throw a mess of vegetables and meats into some water, cook it long enough on slow heat, and something fabulously tasty will usually emerge. For a cake (and bar success), you must put in all the right ingredients (reliable study materials from a trustworthy bar review). You must measure them precisely, add them in the right order, and bake the mixture at the right temperature for the correct amount of time (study actively, take daily practice tests, and learn from every mistake, honing and refining, doing them over and over again) until you get just the right passing recipe!

If you or the person you are trying to explain this to is not into cooking, you might ask the person to imagine working at a high-pressure job that requires logging in to hundreds of different websites each day. Concerned with computer privacy and security, the boss uses passwords that are complex and insists they all be committed to memory. Imagine how alert one would need to be and remain all day long. One digit off, and access is denied. Lawyers are detail oriented. It takes an extraordinary amount of time, focus, and energy to learn the quantity of information tested on bar exams, memorize and get it all right every time, and to tirelessly develop the skills of using and applying those rules in thousands of different factual scenarios.

**GOOD LAWYERS ARE ATTENTIVE TO DETAIL.**

Betty was meeting with her lawyer, getting ready to prepare for settlement negotiations (and a costly trial if the parties cannot agree). Betty’s lawyer proposed meeting over lunch and offered to order in sandwiches. Betty requested turkey and, when asked what she liked on her sandwich, she replied, “everything except cheese.” Betty arrived at the appointed time. Her lawyer rushed in a half-hour late carrying a briefcase and a bag of sandwiches. The lawyer sat down, turned on her computer, and handed Betty a sandwich saying, “OK, here’s your turkey and cheese sandwich with nothing else on it.” Would you want to hire Betty’s lawyer?
Another student told me it was the Mount Everest analogy that finally got his family to understand and stop saying, "You always do well, son. You'll do fine on this, too! Don't worry." Climbing Everest is challenging, to say the least; finally, his parents got why he needed to disappear for two months. Bottom line, whatever the words or analogies you use to explain what you are facing, acknowledge your own needs and try to help those who support you so that they fully understand both the extent of the challenge and how they can help you.

SAYING NO TO SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE WHO STILL WANT YOUR TIME DURING BAR STUDY
You may have the most supportive friends and family in the world, but they may simply not get how intense bar exam preparation must be to succeed. Even if you tell them clearly or send them a letter like those above, they still may not leave you alone. So keep "In your pocket" some ready responses should you be faced with having to say no to some request. Consider the following sample dialogues.

Can't you come to just this one birthday party?
- Mom: "You studied all day! Now, you'll just take off tonight. It's your uncle's eightieth birthday, you know. You can't miss that!"
- Bar applicant, in your head: "But then next week is someone else's birthday, and before you know it, the exam is here. My uncle is not taking the bar for me. Neither are you, Mom. I have to go in there and do it myself. Can't you just give me a break?"
- Bar applicant's actual reply: "I would love to come, if I could. But this June and July are full-time bar review. I thank you in advance for supporting me in that. After I pass the bar, I'll go to family events. But I cannot take time away from my studies now."

HEAVY GUILT VARIATION OF "Can't you come to just this one birthday party?"
- Mom: "You have always been such a good student. Please just take off tonight. It's Uncle Joe's eightieth birthday. You know he's not doing well. It could be our last chance to see him. And, Aunt Bessie, she'll be there with all the cousins. They will all ask where you are. Besides, you study every day. I am sure you will pass that test. What are you worried about? You are so smart. You've always done well at everything. You'll be fine. This is family."
- Bar applicant, in your head: "If Uncle Joe were dying, I would go visit him in the hospital. But he's having a party! He can't be that sick. I know what all those people will say if I don't pass this bar exam. I just cannot break this commitment to myself. I've got that John Wooden quote on the fridge. I can't go into the bar knowing that I took off for family parties and didn't work as hard as I could have!"

"SUCCESS IS THAT PEACE OF MIND THAT COMES FROM KNOWING YOU’VE DONE EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO BECOME THE VERY BEST YOU’RE CAPABLE OF BECOMING."
— JOHN WOODEN —

- Bar applicant's actual reply: "I want to come, Mom. I love you, and I know it's important to you. Family is important to me, too, Mom. But this is different. Whether I've succeeded before or not, I'm playing in the big leagues now. People who don't step up now get left behind. You know how hard I worked to get into law school, how much you and everyone else have sacrificed to see me get here. I have to step up now. I have to study tonight, and basically every waking minute until the end of July. It just has to be that way. That's how I have to do it.
- [You might add, if you need to: "Imagine if you had to go see a lawyer, Mom. Let's say, God forbid, you were wrongly accused of a crime. Your lawyer came to court and didn't know what to say to defend you. She comes up to you as you are being taken off in handcuffs and says, "I'm so sorry, but I had a family birthday party last night, and I just couldn't get to researching your case. I'm really sorry."]"

Family expectations can be particularly demanding in certain cultures. Many parents expect their grown children to attend long weekly dinners and other family events, regardless of how much studying they have or whether they are still living at home. If this is your situation, work on it ahead of time. You must find a strategy.
I need you to take me to the doctor.

• Mom: "I have an appointment with the doctor on Friday. I'm counting on you to take me. You know I can't take the bus anymore."
• Bar applicant, in your head: "We talked about this. I asked you to make as many non-urgent appointments as possible before June or after July. I know you're not going to like it, but you will have to make other arrangements."
• Bar applicant's actual reply: "If this is something that can wait until August, please reschedule the appointment. If you have to go now, let's try to think of someone else in the family who could take you. [Even if this is your role in the family—you are the one who always takes your parent to the doctor—speak up and ask someone else to help out this time. You owe this to yourself. If no one else is available, perhaps you can pay for your parent to take a cab to the doctor for any appointments that must be in June or July. The price of cab fare may be far lower in the long run than the price of missing bar review lectures or valuable study time.]

Note: If you must go to doctor or other appointments (for yourself or others) in June or July, bring notes and work to do so that you do not get annoyed or frustrated with having to wait.

It is amazing that even lawyers sometimes forget how much time and energy the bar exam really takes. If you are clerking for an attorney, stop for the summer unless working just a couple of hours in a law office will help keep you motivated. Make sure your colleagues and boss understand your commitment, though. If the lawyer begs you to come in and research something when you know you must be studying for the bar, stick to your studying. (If there is a pro bono case you have your heart in and just don't feel like you can let go for the summer, let go anyway. Say no.) That extra work done now won't matter if you don't pass the bar exam. Pass first; then go the extra mile in helping out.

The Happy-Hour Dilemma

• Friend: "Happy Hour Friday. Be there!"
• Bar Applicant: "Dude, you know I can't. Studying for the bar."
• Friend: "Chill, dude. You study all the time. You're gonna lose your friends. Pretty soon we're not going to invite you any more. You say no all the time."
• Bar applicant, in your head: "Just because you're there drinking your weekend away doesn't mean I should. In ten years, when I'm a successful lawyer and a member of the real bar, you may still be sitting here drinking at this bar. Yeah, but who am I kidding? I so wish I could go! Maybe just this one night? I could take off just tonight? But I shouldn't. I really have to focus. Do I want to take this damn test again? No way!"
• Bar applicant's actual reply: "Keep inviting me! I'll try to stop by Friday if I can, but this thing is over in July, and Fridays in August I am all over it. (Pause) Thanks for supporting me through this! You might need a close friend who's a lawyer some day—ha ha! Kidding, dude! But seriously, I'll be back after July."

Remember that friends later become referrals. Don't be shy or embarrassed about your priorities. Whom will all these friends come to when they need legal advice?

The unhelpful study "buddy"

• Friend: "Want to come study with me at the library today?"
• Bar applicant: "No, I think I'm better off studying alone today."
• Friend: "Come on. A bunch of us are going. We'll all help each other. Then we'll go out for some beers after we work."
• Bar applicant, in your head: "Your idea of studying is 80 percent chitchat and 20 percent study. Working with you is not productive for me, and I know it. I end up helping you. I explain things to you, but all you really do is distract me."
• Bar applicant's actual reply: "Thanks for asking. Maybe another time. Today I need to study on my own. If I get enough done, I'll text you and see where you guys went and maybe meet up with you. Otherwise, I'll see you at bar review tomorrow."

Sometimes you slip. You know it would be best to say no and get back to work (or sleep, for that matter), but you think, "Well, just this once." Try not to succumb. Imagine if your lawyer came to court unable to represent you because he or she flaked on prep time. Understand that commitments you make to yourself are as important as those you make to others. As I said in an earlier chapter, think of it this way: would you flake if you were going to an appointment with a doctor or specialist you had waited months to see? No. Of course not. You wouldn't even think of canceling. Your studies must be as important to you as any appointment with anyone on the planet. Follow through. No excuses. Don't be a "no-show" on yourself!

And enlist your troops to help you stay on track. (Post your study schedule so they don't distract you during your "office hours.") If you do slip and end up doing something unproductive, get back on track ASAP. Don't waste any more time feeling guilty. Just get back to work.

Remember, some breaks are helpful. You may return to work able to be more productive. Allow yourself that possibility. Although the warnings about people and
activities eating your time should typically be heeded, you may find that sometimes distractions replenish the well and boost your energy. It can be good to take a couple of hours off here and there. Limit the number of these breaks, but don’t feel guilty for taking a little time off if the diversion will ultimately help you.

Father’s Day hits right in the middle of bar review, so does the Fourth of July. If you are a dad or have a dad, stop for a moment to acknowledge Father’s Day. And go to a barbeque or fireworks on the Fourth of July. Some people feel comfortable taking that whole day off. Others feel better putting in a good study day and then enjoying the evening out. Whatever time you do take off, enjoy it! You are doing a good thing in recharging your batteries and preventing burnout.

BEWARE OF SABOTEURS

We discussed people who mean well and don’t know how to be supportive. There will be others who are not supportive at all, some intentionally and others inadvertently. You must cut these people loose for the summer.

To better deal with people who may try to sabotage you, it can be helpful to divide them into competitive classmates and others who are generally negative (acquaintances or strangers).

Competitive Classmates

These are the people I call the “blowhards.” They are full of themselves. Some may just be so self-absorbed that they make comments they don’t even realize are insulting. Ignore them.

Other classmates may try to intimidate you. They may casually claim that they’re writing twelve practice essays or doing hundreds of MBE questions each day. Or they may claim to consistently be getting top scores on every practice test. Don’t listen to them, and don’t let them get to you. First, they’re probably not telling the truth. It’s tough to write twelve essays a day, in any meaningful way, and still get the rest of your work done—especially if you’re also spending any time at night sleeping. Next and most important, stay focused on your own work. Stick to your schedule. Trust your bar review and your mentor. Also, don’t let yourself get psyched out if, for example, classmates say they got a higher percentage correct on an MBE practice test than you did. What will move you forward is understanding why you missed the questions you did. Every mistake made now, every missed concept, is an opportunity to get it right on the actual exam. The only score that counts is at the end of the game. So don’t let a competitive classmate throw you by claiming he or she got thirty out of thirty-three questions correct when you missed more than twenty. The important thing is to learn by continuing to take practice tests.

Use positive peer pressure if it helps motivate you! But negative peer pressure is usually a complete and total waste of your time, a drain of your precious energy. Learn to rise above it. Success is not just about quantity; it’s also about quality. And it’s not about what or how someone else does; it’s all about you. It’s your bar exam.

STUDENTS REGULARLY ADMIT (AFTER THE BAR) THAT THEY EMBELLISHED THEIR STUDY RECORD.

If someone is bragging that he or she was up until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. studying every night and taking hundreds more MBEs and essays and PTs than you, ask yourself:

1. Is that person telling the truth, or just trying to psyche me out?
2. If this is true, is that person so tired or speeding through the material so fast that he or she isn’t really learning or improving on the skills necessary to pass?
3. Is that person spending critical time studying the answers after each practice essay and each set of MBE questions? Or has he or she opted to merely answer the questions mechanically without doing the hard work of diagnosing why an answer choice was right or wrong?

Negative People—Friends or Strangers

When faced with a negative person, the best advice is to get away. If they are phoning you or texting you and you have not yet answered, don’t. Post an automatic “Away until August” on outgoing e-mail messages. If they speak with you face-to-face or you inadvertently answer a call, use a polite excuse to cut off the conversation immediately. One that works every time is “Excuse me; I have to go to the bathroom.”

There will be people who are just dying to tell you about everyone they know—from their neighbor’s son to famous people—who failed a bar exam. They are similar to people who simply must walk up to pregnant women to share unfounded stories of horrifying birth experiences. (Stay away from them if you are expecting.) Other people may want to tell you about the dismal legal employment statistics. You do not want a lecture on how tough it may be to find a good job while you are studying for the bar. That may be appropriate before law school or after you pass the bar exam, but not now. It’s best to walk away and not listen.
Note: Sometimes it can be even more stressful when people make seemingly positive comments, such as, “Oh, I know you’ll pass.” To many bar applicants, that just piles on more stress by adding expectations you must live up to. How should you respond? One of my students shared that she would simply reply, “I’m doing my best,” and either walk away or change the subject.

Whatever the comments, have a response ready so you don’t feel cornered into talking about the exam with anyone who does not have a positive effect on you.

Keep doubters at a distance; build a protective wall around your self-confidence.

How should you deal with people you intuitively know are seeking to undermine your self-confidence or steal your study time? Take steps to keep your self-confidence strong. Remember, passing the bar exam is in some ways like climbing a mountain (an analogy I used earlier). Because it’s such a challenge, there may be days when you ask yourself, “Can I do it?” If you need convincing, remember that graduating from law school is credible evidence that you can pass. It doesn’t mean you will without a great deal of hard work, but it’s a good indicator that you have the capability. If you were not the kind of person who thrived when challenged, it’s doubtful that you would have started, let alone finished, law school. Some of your classmates flunked out after their first year. You did not. Now look at alumni from your law school who passed the bar exam. Are they all smarter than you? Not likely!

Relatives and others making destructive comments

If you need a boost, or a pep talk, ask your mentor, a trusted academic support advisor, or a professor you felt comfortable with. Notice I did not say to ask your mom or dad or Aunt Betty. Why? You must protect yourself, as mentioned earlier. If your parents and other relatives are supportive, they may be a great resource. But those who didn’t go to professional school themselves sometimes don’t get it and sometimes aren’t helpful. A mentor who recently passed the bar exam, someone you can rely on, may be more supportive and really understand what you are going through.

And far worse than simply “not getting it” is when people share destructive stereotypes or biases that undermine you. Warning: The following may appear to some as politically incorrect. Did you grow up in a family where your mom (or grandma or another relative you love and care about) believed that “girls like you” should “find a good man, get married, and raise a family,” and not “waste time” in school? Does Mom really think her son should be in business and making real money, not spending all his time in school racking up debt? Does Dad think that college and graduate schools are only for rich white folks? Do you have family members who think that all women who want to become lawyers are aggressive and overbearing? Does your family believe that all lawyers are corrupt liars?

Some families do not express (or embrace) these negative stereotypes and will give you their full support, as long as family commitments come first. This mentality might not explicitly undermine your focus on studying, but it may have a similar effect; therefore, it is a big problem. Bar applicants need to focus solely on bar preparation and cannot be there for others while studying for this exam. To compete effectively, you need to be able to give the same intensity to your studies as everyone else is.

Still other family members may make comments that are less direct, but equally destructive. For example, the student whose parent says, “Honey, I love you and you know I’ll be proud of you whatever you do. Becoming a lawyer is a great goal, but it’s just that you have never been the best student and I don’t want to see you get hurt.” Ouch! That hurts already. Steel yourself. And find your support elsewhere.

It may not be politically correct, but people do think this way. Such thinking can deeply hurt someone studying for the bar. If people in your family or community think along these or similarly negative lines, do not look to them for support now. And, do not “buy in” to their negativity. You have every right to be proud of earning a law degree and seeking to obtain a law license.

A note for women whose families do not support your becoming a lawyer: law school will not make you aggressive in any sort of negative way. The rigors of law school should help all law students (men and women alike) learn to write and speak persuasively, as well as think critically—both of which are essential to being an effective professional. And passing the bar exam provides credible evidence that you can perform effectively under extreme pressure. These skills will help you manage, lead, and be responsible for the lives and livelihoods of others, if you so choose. That is a good thing, and there is nothing unfeminine about it.24

If you do have negative folks in your life, don’t try to change their minds right now. First pass the bar exam, with the help of supportive people, and then try to bring them around.

Special problem in law school: professors who doubt you

If you believe a professor thinks that you aren’t smart or capable of passing the bar exam, this will likely hurt your confidence. If you have a negative encounter with such a professor, especially in class, first try to shrug it off. There is a good chance he or she doesn’t really think less of you, but is either busy or deliberately trying to scare you to prepare you for tough judges. If it’s still bothering you, though, you might want to try talking with the person during office hours. You might have an altogether different impression after meeting with him or her. At the very least, be sure to talk with other professors with whom you do feel comfortable, and let yourself feel respected by the way they treat you. Don’t let the judgment or perceived judgment of one person sink in or dictate how you view yourself.
The naysayers are out of line.

There are plenty of people who weren't "the best student" who passed the bar exam and are now thriving as lawyers. Just because someone did not Ambar all their classes or make law review does not make them stupid or incapable of passing the bar exam. The practicing bar is not made up entirely of those who made law review in law school. Many were C students.

The bar tests basic competencies; it is not a test of genius or scholarship. With 1) basic knowledge of the law (remember that you have two full months of bar review to learn or relearn the rules); 2) basic analytical and writing skills (which you will train intensively to develop every day); and 3) the will to succeed, you can pass the bar exam—even if you're not headed for the Supreme Court.

Passing the bar exam involves mastering a set of skills; it requires learning rules of law and how to apply them in a host of factual scenarios under significant time constraints. It does not require exceptional talent: There are tricky parts, sure. It's tough, yes. There is a lot to learn. But it is something most dedicated people who graduate from law school and then prepare and apply themselves can do. You can, too! (As I tell my students, passing the bar exam is more like repairing a car or fixing a sink than painting a Picasso. It may take time and effort to learn how to do it, you must master many skills, but you can learn to do it; it is not something that requires you to have been born with an extraordinary talent.)

Supporters and Saboteurs Worksheets

Complete this triage by filling in the worksheet below. You don't have to show anyone (and it may be best not to). You can even rip this up after you write it if you are concerned about someone seeing it who might be offended. But clarifying for yourself who will help you and who won't during these two months will increase your productivity and save you a lot of stress, as well as prevent wasted time and energy.

Part A: List your supportive troops (Write the names of and contact info for people you know "get it," whom you can call or reach out to when you need a boost):

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5.

Part B: List people who are supportive, but don't yet "get it":

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5.

Part C: List potential saboteurs (You can name individuals or classes of people; for example, friends on SBA who you know will distract you, or worse):

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5.

Part D: List people to avoid, or, at the very least, whose messages need to be diluted (name individuals who have intentionally or inadvertently made destructive comments or engaged in undermining actions):

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5.