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Mental Health and Wellness

Action Plan

2025 – 2030

 UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF LAW

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Introduction

The Faculty of Law continues to make the mental health and wellness of our students a significant priority. This updated action plan builds on the important principles and progress of the Faculty of Law's existing [J.D. Student Mental Health Strategic Action Plan](#) (2020 Action Plan), reinforcing our objective to adopt a systemic approach to foster a supportive and inclusive environment that enhances students' well-being and learning potential.¹

While the goals of the 2020 Action Plan remain relevant, this updated plan aims to reformulate the objectives to be adaptable to recent research and emerging trends, the needs identified by our law students and recent graduates, and our current social context, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This updated plan is grounded in the guiding principle that well-being is a prerequisite to learning and working and that cultivating well-being requires the support of our whole community.

Background

The University of Toronto's [2014 Report of the Provostial Advisory Committee on Student Mental Health](#) recognized that the experiences of post-secondary students could best be understood using a mental health continuum approach that considers the diverse student population and is responsive to the variety of student needs. In 2015, the Faculty of Law developed its inaugural J.D. Student Mental Health Strategic Action Plan based on this continuum and identified the following priorities: creating a healthy community; increasing mental health literacy and competencies; and provision of effective, accessible mental health services.

In 2019, the University convened a new task force to conduct an environmental scan of existing mental health initiatives and to consider or recommend new strategies. [The Presidential and Provostial Task Force on Student Mental Health Final Report](#), released in 2020, identified that the use of mental health services across all campuses had increased 22 percent. The report also discussed the culture at the University of Toronto and advocated for balancing the high standards of academic excellence that attracts many students to the University with an awareness of how it may impact mental health. As outlined in the accompanying [Administrative Response](#), the recommendations included creating an easier pathway to accessing supports, implementing a strategy to strengthen mental health literacy within the University of Toronto community, recruiting more diverse service providers, and establishing a culture of caring and excellence.

¹ University of Toronto Faculty of Law. "J.D. Student Mental Health Strategic Action Plan, 2020". Accessed March 14, 2024.

<https://www.law.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/documents/mhstrategicactionplan2020.pdf>.

The Faculty's inaugural action plan was reviewed in 2020, reinforcing the existing priorities and the importance of responsive and comprehensive mental health services and programming. Noteworthy initiatives from the [2020 Action Plan](#) that will continue include embedded counselling services through a partnership with the University's Health and Wellness Centre; the law school's Peer Mental Health Support Program where first year students are matched with trained and supportive upper year student mentors; an On-Location Accessibility Advisor through Accessibility Services; and robust programming focused on mindfulness, reducing stigma, and promoting resiliency led by the Faculty's Mental Health and Wellness Manager.

Where possible, and in keeping with this plan's guiding principle, the Faculty provides programming and support open to all students. However, it is important to note that J.D. and graduate students (i.e., G.P.LL.M., LL.M., M.S.L., and S.J.D.) at the Faculty of Law have access to different mental health and wellness supports due to their varied needs and the University's approach to service delivery. In addition to having access to certain supports and services at the Faculty, including access to the on-location counsellor, graduate students are serviced through [Graduate Wellness Services at the School of Graduate Studies](#) (SGS). J.D. students are primarily serviced through [Health and Wellness](#) and by the Faculty's Mental Health and Wellness Program Manager. The Faculty is committed to listening to graduate and J.D. students about their unique needs and to collaborating with the relevant departments within the University to identify how best to support all students.

Current Context

COVID-19 created unique challenges and disruptions as global lockdowns were implemented to curb the spread of the virus. The lifestyle changes that the virus necessitated, including social distancing and remote education, had a significant impact on student learning and the student experience.²

Several studies have determined that the pandemic has exacerbated the mental health of post-secondary students with many long-lasting impacts still evolving. A survey by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) conducted in 2020 found that 70 percent of students reported feeling stressed, anxious, or isolated.³ Additionally, 75 percent expressed concerns about financial uncertainty in the future, and many cited academic worries as significant issues. In a 2022 CASA study, 75 percent of students reported experiencing a decline in mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while 70 percent noted challenges in maintaining social connections. The study found that students from racialized groups, LGBTQ2S+ communities, Indigenous people, those with disabilities, and those with pre-

² Tayyab Rashid & Lina Di Genova. "Campus Mental Health in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic: Data-Informed Challenges and Opportunities". Campus Mental Health: Community of Practice (CoP) Canadian Association of Colleges and University Student Services, January 1, 2020.

³ Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. "Students are Still Worried: COVID-19 and Post Secondary Education". June 15, 2020. https://www.casa-acae.com/students_are_still_worried_covid19.

existing mental health conditions, were at greater risk and disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.⁴

In addition to understanding mental health trends in the post-secondary environment, the Faculty recognizes that law students are impacted by the culture of the legal profession. The 2022 National Study on the Health and Wellness Determinants of Legal Professionals in Canada, a two-year project by Université de Sherbrooke with the Federation of Law Societies of Canada and the Canadian Bar Association, reveals that legal professionals, experience higher rates of mental distress. This distress could be heightened among those with intersecting identities, such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), women, LGBTQ2S+ individuals, those living with disabilities, and lawyers with less than 10 years of experience.⁵

This action plan strives to be responsive to mental health and wellness trends in the post-secondary environment and the legal profession. It also acknowledges the Faculty's role in preparing students to become healthy lawyers and leaders, which can be supported through thoughtful and tailored programming that is culturally relevant and meets the needs of its diverse student community. This action plan does not supersede the Faculty's 2020 Action Plan. Rather, it reaffirms the Faculty's commitment to student wellness and mental health and builds on its progress with three refreshed priorities: fostering a community of kindness; increasing mental health literacy and competencies; and offering a customized range of services.

⁴ Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. "The New Abnormal: Student Mental Health Two Years Into COVID-19". September 25, 2022. https://www.casa-acae.com/the_new_abnormal_report.

⁵ Nathalie Cadieux et al. "Research report (final version): Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada. National Study on the Health and Wellness Determinants of Legal Professionals in Canada, Phase I (2020-2022)". 2022. https://flsc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Ontario_Final-Report_EN_Final.pdf

Priorities

Fostering a Community of Kindness

In the 2020 Action Plan, the goal of “creating a healthy community” focused on creating a supportive environment where pro-mental health behaviours were encouraged. The aim was to build a community that was mutually responsible for each other’s care, which could contribute to a positive learning environment. The plan acknowledged that an individual’s experience of mental health and their environment can significantly impact their ability to manage challenges, seek help, and achieve both academic and personal goals. The Faculty of Law has made significant progress toward the goal of creating a healthy community and continues to prioritize these efforts. Notable initiatives include the Academic Success Program, Welcome Wellness Sessions for first-year students, and stress-relief activities during exam periods, such as puzzles in the library, Doggie Day, and massages.

In response to a recommendation from the Dean’s Mental Health and Wellness Committee, the goal of creating a healthy community is being reframed to “fostering a community of kindness.” A kindness focused approach fosters self-reflection and promotes openness, curiosity, and inclusive teaching strategies that reduce barriers.⁶ Focusing on kindness is understood to be easier to grasp and more practical to implement.

Additionally, efforts to reduce stigma and promote help seeking behaviours, resiliency, and coping skills will continue as this has been found to provide significant benefits to law students.

Recommendations

- Launch and enhance educational campaigns to increase awareness about stigma, its impact, and the importance of empathy and understanding within the law school community.
- Recognize and celebrate students, faculty, and staff who prioritize mental health initiatives and support wellness programming.
- Engage faculty members to integrate universal design principles into teaching to reduce barriers for students with disabilities and to support well-being.
- Pilot a shared calendar of activities and key dates (e.g., recruitment cycles, exams, SLS deadlines) to raise awareness of students’ high-stress periods.
- Develop programming focused on resiliency, self-awareness, self-compassion, and the importance of self-reflection in forming one’s personal and professional identity.

⁶ Kathryn Waddington. "Developing Compassionate Academic Leadership: The Practice of Kindness." *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 6, no.3 (October 8, 2018): 87–89. <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v6i3.375>.

- Continue collaborating with the Student Mental Health Working Group (formerly the Student Mental Health and Wellness Committee) to elevate and respond to students' experiences and needs.

Increasing Mental Health Literacy & Competencies

To effectively support and respond to the needs of the law school community, the 2020 Action Plan recognised the importance of both raising awareness and developing the necessary skills to enhance mental health literacy. The Faculty has worked diligently to offer varied, accessible mental health training opportunities, with strong participation from staff and students. For example, the Mental Health and Wellness Program Manager offered the [University's Identify, Assist and Refer training](#), which covers early warning signs, appropriate responses, and available resources within the University, and [LivingWorks Start](#), an online module that trains participants to identify and respond effectively to suicide risk. In addition, mandatory mental health training is delivered each year to new Peer Mental Health Support Mentors, mentors in the Peer Mentorship Program, and Academic Advisors.

Over the past two years, the Dean's Mental Health and Wellness Committee has identified the need for a more comprehensive training strategy. In particular, the Committee emphasized the importance of faculty engagement in mental health awareness, as faculty members are often first points of contact and play a critical role in early intervention. Research supports this approach, confirming that faculty members significantly shape the law school experience and can help foster a culture of care and well-being.⁷ This also aligns with the shift towards a community of kindness, reinforcing the idea that student well-being is a shared responsibility.

Recommendations

- Develop an early intervention strategy in collaboration with faculty to help identify and respond to signs of distress, with an emphasis on first year and newly enrolled students.
- Design targeted mental health training for staff and faculty that emphasizes a whole-community approach to well-being and early intervention.
- Expand learning opportunities for students to strengthen resilience in professional settings, including training on trauma awareness, vicarious trauma, and self-care strategies.
- Continue collaboration with Accessibility Services and Health and Wellness to develop and respond to law student needs and best practices.
- Create an online resource hub focused on building knowledge and awareness of mental health and wellness supports and resources.

⁷ Institute for Well-Being in Law. "The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change". August 2017. <https://lawyerwellbeing.net/the-report/>.

- Develop a strategy to understand and raise awareness of the diverse ways mental health and other disabilities impact students.

Customized Range of Services

The 2020 Strategic Action Plan recognized that accessible and varied mental health services are essential for student well-being. It emphasized the importance of offering a broad range of supports, both University-wide and on-site at the Faculty. In addition to the existing On-Location Counsellor provided through Health and Wellness and the On-Location Accessibility Advisor provided through Accessibility Services, the Faculty's Mental Health and Wellness Program Manager implemented a range of services to support the well-being of students and the community. For example, the Mental Health Speaker Series is offered each year, featuring legal professionals with a variety of experiences sharing their perspectives on navigating mental health challenges in the legal profession. In addition, the Manager supports the student-led "Legal Minds Unwind" (formerly Law Chats), a student-led space for discussing mental health experiences in an academic setting. While the pathways to accessible and varied mental health services will continue to be enhanced for all students, tailored programming that considers and is responsive to intersectional identities and experiences has been identified as an emerging need in our community.

Recommendations

- Review the Faculty's existing strategies focused on supporting first-year students with their transition to law school.
- Develop mental health programming in consultation with student equity groups and community partners.
- Enhance and standardize communication about existing mental health pathways, resources, and supports including self-management coping tools.
- Explore opportunities to enhance pathways to crisis management support for students in acute distress.
- Develop a strategy to provide targeted support for students preparing for or returning from a leave of absence.
- Explore collaborations with other offices within the law school to expand wellness programming for students (e.g. Equity, Diversity and Inclusive Office, Financial Aid Office, Career Development Office, Indigenous Initiatives Office, etc.).
- Explore collaboration with the Graduate Wellness Services at SGS to support resource navigation and encourage a broader sense of belonging for graduate students.

Conclusion

It is recommended that this plan be reviewed in 2030 to ensure it continues to align with and address the evolving needs of law students at the University of Toronto. The aim is for this plan to adapt responsively to the Faculty's vision for inclusive excellence, as outlined in the 2023 Academic Plan and the Faculty's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategies. Over the next five years, the priorities set out in this action plan will be monitored and assessed through various methods, including feedback surveys, sharing circles, and both quantitative and qualitative reporting. Guided by the plan's core principles, we look forward to collaborating with the entire law school community to center and promote mental health and wellness to the benefit of the Faculty's remarkable students.

Questions or concerns regarding this action plan can be directed to:

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