



A Study on Psychological Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Dark Triad among Lawyers

Partishtha Sharma, *Post-Graduate in Psychology, Amity University, Mohali*
pratishtha2233@gmail.com

Abstract: The professional legal field workers carry on the stress of their own lives, their families, their clients, and their clients' families. The overflowing emotions lead to difficulties in their own life as well. Therefore, it is important to study and identify those factors that give rise to multiple other problems. The current study aimed to understand the psychological burnout, compassion fatigue, and dark triad traits among Indian Lawyers. A sample of 33 lawyers was taken to examine the relationship. Standardized tests were used for each variable. The findings show a significant positive correlation between Compassion Fatigue and depersonalization, revealing a higher level of compassion fatigue would lead to higher psychological burnout in Lawyers. Moreover, the components of Dark Triad traits also showed a significant positive relationship with the components of Burnout. The study does not show any significant relationship between Dark Triad traits and Compassion Fatigue, revealing that compassion fatigue is the result of outer circumstances, not the personality traits among Lawyers. The study suggests that more research be done in the field of legal studies by taking a much larger sample, and a need to conduct stress management workshops and training, which help them to share their own feelings than just their clients' problems.

Keywords: *Psychological Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, Dark Triad, Indian Advocates.*

1. Introduction

"Fatigue makes cowards of us all." - Vince Lombardi.

"There is no work-life balance in this profession. There is only work, and that's life."

These are the words of Justice Vibhu Bakhru during his farewell from the Delhi High Court, featured in Times of India (July 2025). The legal profession is often viewed as a roller coaster of emotions and the corridors of justice, where morality, logic, and intellect meet empathy. The Indian advocates stand as warriors and witnesses to human suffering. The profession of law is emotionally and intellectually demanding in society, often leading to a drain on their mental health and the struggle hidden behind its façade of strength (Ahuja, 2025)

Advocates face constant exposure to conflict, injustice, and secondary trauma through their clients' challenges to both professional integrity and personal well-being. Eventually, this overloading of emotions leads to emotional turmoil over time. Advocates often struggle with psychological burnout, compassion fatigue, and such conditions and circumstances decrease the level of motivation to work, empathy, and overall well-being (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Similarly, certain dark triad personality traits, Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and psychopathy, can shape and examine how advocates respond to stress and how effectively they are influenced by these dark triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Moreover, the professionals in this field themselves comply with the fact that this field is mentally and emotionally challenging. As Justice DY Chandrachud stated during an event organized at Harvard Law School in New Delhi, India, there is a lack of empirical studies in the field of mental health among lawyers. He also stated that despite clear evidence claiming various mental health-related issues, such as anxiety and depression, the advocates.

According to the American Psychological Association, Lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from Mental health disorders as compared to non-lawyers. The American Bar Association also supports it by saying that lawyers are the 11th highest profession to commit suicide, according to a survey conducted across eight High Courts of India (Gandotra, 2024). It was concluded that 79% of lawyers surveyed earn below 10,000 a month, which was another reason of stress and mental health issues. Comparatively, many international studies have been conducted as well, suggesting that legal professionals face among the highest rates of stress and depression (Krill, Johnson & Albert, 2016). Unlike therapists or other healthcare professionals, advocates rarely receive any training regarding emotional regulation or mental health support (Lee et al., 2019).

Psychological burnout is characterized by three primary dimensions: depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Within the legal system, this psychological burnout is seen as lost motivation, cynicism, lost interest, and irritability towards their clients. Compassion fatigue, a condition closely linked with emotional exhaustion and secondary stress received from the clients (Figley, 1995).

Advocates perceive the trauma of their clients as the secondary source of stress and feel emotionally stuck and exhausted over time. Handling cases of abuse, injustice, guilt, or helplessness makes them vulnerable to stress and mental health issues.

This is directed to Batson's Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis (1991), which states that when someone empathizes deeply with another person's feelings of stress and trauma, this elicits the same feelings in the person. This is seen in the advocates as well, who empathize strongly with their clients, often increasing their own emotional burden.

Adding to this one more dimension is the Dark Triad, including three distinct personality traits- Machiavellianism (tendency to manipulate others for one's selfish motive), Narcissism (need for admiration and self-focus), and Psychopathy (lack of empathy and emotional strength), given by Paulhus and Williams (2002). Studies have shown that people who have a moderate level of these traits may help in high professions like law to be resilient in pressure. People who have extreme levels of these traits may develop reduced empathy, a lack of decision-making, and become ethically insensitive (Jonason et al., 2012).

This can be better understood by the Cognitive Appraisal Theory, by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This explains that based on one's own perception and personality traits, individuals evaluate and respond to certain stressful situations. It further explains how advocates interpret emotionally charged situations, whether as a challenge or as a threat, which influences their own coping style and emotional response to certain stressful situations that they encounter socially over time.

The current research seeks to examine the interplay and relationship between psychological burnout, compassion fatigue, and Dark Triad personality traits among advocates, which is a need of the society as well as for their own well-being, and bridging the gap between the psychological well-being of these high-profession job roles. It also targets the limited empirical research on legal professionals and mental health within the Indian framework.

Psychological Burnout

According to Maslach and Leiter (2016), "Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job". Additionally, according to WHO (2019), the definition of burnout is entirely "an occupational phenomenon and is not considered a medical condition".

According to the American Psychological Association (1975), burnout is characterized by a loss of motivation, lowered performance, pessimistic attitudes, and mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion towards oneself and others. When an individual is overburdened,

physically and mentally exhausted, and performing at a high level of stress for an extended period, it results in burnout.

Professions such as law, which is driven by emotionally complex interactions with clients, continuous exposure to conflicts and high work pressure, burnout becoming a widespread concern among advocates. To support this, a study on burnout among young lawyers was conducted by Martin and Mathew (2025). This states a high level of burnout among young lawyers without showing any gender influence. To mitigate burnout, the authors suggest training in emotional resilience and the development of emotional intelligence to help lawyers in their high-pressure jobs.

However not a personal problem, but a result of certain work activities. Work-related burnout can adversely affect all highly stressful professions both in personal and work life (Bouza, Monte, Palomo, 2020). A study was conducted to assess the occupational stress and burnout among 180 lawyers from 26 law firms. The results showed that the Litigious Lawyers have higher work-related and client-related burnout, along with higher social support and higher decision authority, as compared to the non-litigious lawyers. It was concluded that high levels of personal and work-related burnout were associated with high levels of occupational stress (Tsai, Huang, and Chuan Chan, 2009).

Burnout is defined by Freudenberger (1974) as “burnout as a state of exhaustion, fatigue, and frustration due to professional activity that fails to produce the expected results.” A study was conducted to identify the level of perceived stress and burnout among lawyers to elucidate various other problems, along with the perception of the problem and area of specialization. There was a positive relationship between occupational stress and occupational burnout. Lawyers, highly experienced, reported lower levels of stress, whereas criminal court lawyers. Alongside financial problems, occupational stress is reported. Overall, more stress and burnout were reported by less experienced criminal court lawyers with high levels of family, finances, and security stress (Azeem et al., 2020).

Compassion Fatigue

According to Figley (1995), “Compassion Fatigue is a psychological condition or the distress resulting from the desire to help traumatized and suffering people.” Compassion fatigue results from the desire will help others and the empathic engagement with trauma survivors (Figley, 2017). Whereas Sorenson et al. (2016) states that “Compassion Fatigue, as a condition that gradually decreases compassion over time.”

Notably, according to the studies and reviews of Norton, Johnson, and Woods (2015) burnout and compassion fatigue are common to people working in social settings. Highlighting

lawyers, who are more prone to develop compassion fatigue and burnout, for several reasons. The extreme values placed on competition, self-sufficiency, and being available to cater emotional needs of their clients.

According to a study conducted to measure trauma, compassion fatigue, and emotional labor among 311 public defenders it was seen that one-fifth of lawyers experienced an increased level of compassion fatigue after being surveyed. There were several predictive variables as well, such as the age, frequency of reviewing the graphical evidence, self-identification, frequency of discussing traumatic events with their clients, and the connection between them. Secondly, the emotional labor mediates the relationship between workplace trauma and compassion fatigue (Bohannon, 2023).

According to studies, indirect trauma exposure plays a huge role in developing the risk of compassion fatigue among lawyers, a secondary trauma response that mitigates the emotional, cognitive, and physical symptoms as well. The study conducted on 83 lawyers resulted in dispositional optimism and locus of control being predictors of compassion fatigue among lawyers. Lawyers with higher dispositional optimism and internal locus of control as resilience factors are high on compassion fatigue. And lower dispositional optimism results in lower risk of compassion fatigue (Barichello, 2023).

A study was conducted where compassion fatigue was studied along with mindfulness among social workers. A sample of 111 professionals was taken. The data revealed that lower levels of mindfulness increased the risk of compassion fatigue, whereas higher levels of mindfulness increase compassion satisfaction among professionals (James et al., 2015).

Dark Triad

The concept of Dark Triad was given by Paulhus and Williams (2002): “Dark Triad is a constellation of three conceptually distinct but empirically overlapping personality variables considered to be socially undesirable.” Accordingly, these 3 variables include Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Narcissism.

According to Rauthmann and Kolar (2012), “Narcissism is complex and multifaceted - individuals high in narcissism can be classified along multiple facets. United by a heightened sense of entitlement, uniqueness, and self-importance while disparaging others.” Where the meaning for psychopathy has been defined as, “they are interpersonally cold, non-empathetic, and demonstrate little to no impulse control or remorse. This is observable in their predisposition towards socially aversive behaviors such as adult-bullying and mate poaching” (Baughman et al., 2012) Christie and Geis (1970) defined Machiavellianism as “a personality

trait which is defined as using manipulation against other people's interests to achieve one's own personal goals.”

A study was conducted by taking a sample of 10 practicing and aspiring lawyers and analyzing 20 interviews from various other social media sources about the legal profession. The study examines lawyers' personality traits and explores how and when these traits develop. The results showed that three key dimensions of personality were analyzed: relating to self vs. relating to others, Cognitive vs. emotion-focused traits, and Developmental source. The study concluded and found 13 major traits among lawyers. These traits are found to emerge naturally through the legal profession and social interactions. The study teaches and provides a clearer understanding of a lawyer's personality, explaining whether personality shapes the profession or the profession shapes the personality of the lawyers (Malkin & Scruggs, 2022).

A Cross-sectional study was conducted among lawyers in the age range of 22-65 to examine the relationship between attachment styles, the Dark Triad, and Depressive symptoms. The results showed that the dark triad traits were interrelated to each other; if one trait is present, the other are also likely to be present. Professional satisfaction also influences these traits. Whereas attachment styles and depression did not predict Dark Triad traits (Minaz et al., 2025).

Another study was conducted to explore the relationship between Dark Triad traits, empathy, and moral decision-making across high professions, including lawyers, doctors, and firefighters. The study included 278 participants, including 88 lawyers. The study revealed different levels of decision-making among professionals according to their jobs. However, lawyers predicted a comparatively lower level of psychopathy and Machiavellianism than other professions. It also showed that differences in personality traits and empathy often play an important role in how lawyers make moral decisions. The authors suggested that it is important to include training programs focused on developing empathy, which could help lawyers make more thoughtful and fair ethical decisions (Jamab et al., 2024).

1.1 Purpose

The purpose is to study psychological burnout, compassion fatigue, and dark triad among Indian Lawyers.

1.2 Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant relationship between Compassion Fatigue and Burnout among Lawyers.

H2: There will be a difference in Burnout and Dark Triad traits among Lawyers.

H3: There will be a difference in Compassion Fatigue and Dark Triad traits among Lawyers.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

A total sample of 30 Indian Lawyers, 15 male and 15 female, in the age range of 25-50 was collected.

2.2 Measures

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to measure psychological burnout among Indian lawyers in the study. The scale was developed by Maslach et al., (1996). The test consists of 22 items, and the rating scale includes (0) Never, (1) A few times per year, (2) Once a month, (3) A few times per month, (4) Once a week, (5) A few times per week, (6) Every day. The test has 3 subdimensions: Exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement.

Compassion fatigue was measured using the *Compassion Fatigue Inventory* developed by Eng, Nordström, & Schad (2021). The Inventory consisted of 16 items, the responses given on a Likert scale included: (1 = Does not fit at all, 2 = Fits poorly, 3 = Fits partially, 4 = Fits fairly well and 5 = Fits perfectly). The test has 3 components: Reduced compassion, social life, and Workplace.

The Dark Triad was measured using the *Short Dark Triad Test (SD3)*. It was developed by Jones and Paullhus (2014). The scale measures three dark personality traits, Psychopathy, neuroticism, and Machiavellianism, with a rating scale that includes (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly Agree

2.3 Procedures

The participants were informed about the research, the questionnaire and the consent was taken from them. The data was collected with the help of standardized psychological tests using Google Forms. Each participant was thanked later for their participation and cooperation during the study.

3. Analysis of Data

3.1 Results

Table 1. *N, Mean, and Standard Deviation.*

	Burnout	Depersonalization	Personal Achievement	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	Narcissism	Compassion Fatigue
N	33	33	33	33	33	33	33

Standard Deviation	9.02	5.59	11.5	4.74	4.07	4.01	8.53
Mean	12.7	7.33	36.6	28.0	16.3	29.6	33.1

Table 2: *Correlation of all variables.*

	Burnout	Depersonalisation	Personal Achievement	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	Narcissism	Compassion Fatigue
Burnout	—						
Depersonalization	0.702***	—					
Personal Achievement	-0.008	-0.137	—				
Machiavellianism	0.110	0.063	0.584***	—			
Psychopathy	0.022	0.159	0.102	0.253	—		
Narcissism	-0.229	-0.084	0.310	0.311	0.212	—	
Compassion Fatigue	0.476**	0.529**	-0.313	-0.090	0.111	-0.264	—

Note. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$

4. Discussion of Results

The study aimed to understand the relationships among Burnout (including its components), Compassion Fatigue, and Dark Triad traits among Advocates. The results were found to have several significant relationships between the variables and their components. Compassion Fatigue was significantly positively correlated with Depersonalization ($r=.52$, $p < .001$), Burnout ($r=.47$, $p<.01$). This supports the first hypothesis of the study, showing a significant positive correlation between burnout and compassion fatigue. Lawyers often have a secondary source of trauma by addressing their clients and serving as a supporting emotional figure, which eventually increases the psychological burnout among them. This study supports the research conducted by Norton, Johnson, and Woods (2015-16), claiming that lawyers become more vulnerable by ceding their emotional support to their clients. Machiavellianism

showed a significantly positive relationship with personal achievement ($r=.58$, $p<.001$). Supporting the second hypothesis, stating there will be a significant difference in Dark Triad traits and the components of burnout. Whereas the dark triad traits among themselves did not show any correlation. As in a study conducted by Minaz et al. (2025), it was found that the Dark Triad traits are correlated among each other; the presence of one lead to the others as well. As seen in this study, the presence of only one triad, Machiavellianism, is correlated positively with personal achievement, a component of burnout. This explains that lawyers high on personal achievement are high on Machiavellianism, manipulating other people's needs to achieve their own goals. Depersonalization showed a significant positive correlation with Burnout ($r=.70$, $p<.001$).

However, the study showed no such relationship among any of the Dark Triad traits and compassion Fatigue among lawyers. Which proves the third hypothesis wrong. The study's smaller sample size could also be the reason for not getting statistical results among Dark Triad traits and compassion fatigue.

5. Conclusion

The professional legal field workers carry on the stress of their own lives, their families, their clients, and their clients' families. The overflowing emotions lead to difficulties in their own life as well. Therefore, it is important to study and identify those factors that give rise to multiple other problems. This study aims to understand the psychological burnout, compassion fatigue, and dark triad traits among Indian Lawyers. A sample of 33 lawyers was taken to examine the relationship. Standardized tests were used for each variable. The findings showed a significant positive correlation between Compassion Fatigue and depersonalization, burnout. Revealing a higher level of compassion Fatigue would lead to higher psychological burnout in Lawyers. Moreover, the components of Dark Triad traits also showed a significant positive relationship with the components of Burnout. It shows that not all the Dark Triad traits are correlated with other variables used in the study. The study does not show any significant relationship between Dark Triad traits and Compassion Fatigue, revealing that compassion fatigue is the result of outer circumstances, not the personality traits among Lawyers. The study suggests that more research be done in the field of legal studies by taking a much larger sample, and a need to conduct stress management workshops and training, which help them to share their own feelings than just their clients' problems.

The study helps in analyzing the need for a balanced case load system. Courts and legal firms should develop a system for lawyers that helps in reducing the workload of lawyers,

especially in sexual abuse and domestic violence. A safe peer sharing platform can help in reducing their work pressure and receive support without judgment. The study provides meaningful insights; certain limitations acting as a barrier must be addressed. The studies' limited time exposure could not measure the long-term effects of the emotional disturbance and workload pressure that lawyers face. The smaller sample size could be a reason for lawyers' less willingness to be a part of a study related to mental health, which again gives rise to another loophole in the field of the legal profession, where mental health is often ignored. The suggestions mentioned could be possible solutions to work on in this field.

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