

# Are Lawyers Less Likely to be Happy?

“Are all lawyers so cynical?”

“No, there are a lot of really happy lawyers,” I explained to my wife.

“It just seems that so many of the practicing lawyers you interact with online aren’t especially happy.”

We joke about this all the time, but is there truth to it? This past week I had the chance to speak to a group of attorneys and legal professionals in Washington D.C. at [“The Case for Social Media”](#) and because I was the second to last speaker of the day I tried to lighten things up by playing this video:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMvARy0IBLE&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMvARy0IBLE&feature=player_embedded)

There were a lot of laughs at the conference when I showed the video, and I’ll admit that when Niki Black first showed me this video, I was also LOL (“laughing out loud” for those of you that have never been to the interweb before). This is funny stuff. But it also paints a pretty negative view of lawyers and the legal profession. Is it really funny because it is dead on?

I shared this video on Twitter during the conference as well, and Carolina Avellaneda, an employment lawyer in Boston has this to say:



I would hope that most of us love the law, so why does there seem to be a tendency towards unhappiness in the legal profession? Alcoholism is one problem with an estimated [one in five lawyers addicted to alcohol](#), but not the root of the problem. Mental health is also an issue with lawyers suffering depression at [3.6 times the rate of those employed across all industries](#).

The root of these issues? Pessimism. According to Dr. Martin Seligman, PhD and Professor of Psychology at University of Pennsylvania. He observes that in general optimists are far more successful than pessimists. Pro athletes with positive attitudes beat the spread more often, recover more quickly from set backs and tend to see problems as temporary rather than permanent. Undergrad students with positive attitudes out perform the pessimistic students with similar SAT’s.

In the legal profession however, this is switched according to Dr. Seligman:

“Pessimists do better at law. We tested the entire entering class of the Virginia Law School in 1990 with a variant of the optimism-pessimism test. These students were then followed throughout the three years of law school. In sharp contrast with the results of prior studies in other realms of life, the pessimistic law students on average fared better than their optimistic peers. Specifically, the pessimist outperformed more optimistic students on the traditional measures of achievement, such as grade point averages and law journal success.”

Or in other words, Law School weeds out the optimistic lawyers in favor of the pessimistic ones. This pessimistic perspective makes lawyers more prudent, better attuned to the risks and better at recognizing pitfalls of any potential deal. “Unfortunately,” says Dr. Selligman, “a trait that makes you good at your profession, does not always make you a happy human being.”

So the next time my wife ask me, “Are all lawyers so cynical?”

My response will be, “Only the really good ones.”

What do you see as the biggest reason lawyers have a tendency towards unhappiness?

How can lawyers (if they are indeed more pessimistic) still find joy in the practice of law?