

The Hidden Psychological Risks of Legal Practice: Alexithymia, Dark Triad Traits, and Mental Health

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Abstract

Lawyers face high-pressure work environments that can negatively affect their mental health (Maguire & Byrne, 2017). This study examined the relationship between alexithymia, Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy), and mental health among 300 practicing lawyers in Lahore, Pakistan. Participants completed the Perth Alexithymia Assessment, Short Dark Triad Scale, and DASS-10. Results indicated significant positive correlations between alexithymia, narcissism, psychopathy, and mental health problems. Regression analyses revealed that alexithymia, narcissism, and psychopathy significantly predicted depression, anxiety, and stress, whereas Machiavellianism was not a significant predictor. These findings suggest that emotional processing difficulties and maladaptive personality traits contribute to psychological distress among legal professionals. The study highlights the importance of mental health support, emotional awareness training, and workplace interventions to promote well-being in the legal profession.

Keywords: Alexithymia, Dark Triad, Lawyers, Mental Health, Depression, Anxiety

Introduction

A lawyer (also called attorney, counsel, or counselor) is a licensed professional who advises and represents others in legal matters (American Bar Association, 2019). The legal profession is naturally demanding, both emotionally and intellectually. Long workdays, intense cases, and adversarial conflicts create high-stress situations for lawyers. These challenges can negatively impact their mental health (Maguire & Byrne, 2017). The incapacity to identify, characterize, and communicate one's emotions is known as "alexithymia" in psychology (Bagby, & Parker, 1997). This frequently results in their appearing emotionally aloof, lacking empathy, and having trouble controlling their emotions (Ecker, Preece, & Schleicher, 2025). The "Dark Triad" combines three socially undesirable personality traits that include psychopathy and Machiavellianism and narcissism. The traits display dominance-oriented conduct and emotional detachment and ability to manipulate others and self-centered behavior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Furnham, Richards,

& Paulhus, 2013). The mental health of an individual includes three components which are emotional well-being and psychological health and social connections and their mental state determines how they think and feel and act and handle stress and build relationships and make choices (World Health Organization, 2013). When people maintain positive mental states, they can achieve their full potential and solve daily problems and perform their work duties and provide valuable service to their communities (Keyes et al., 2014; WHO, 2013). Alexithymia leads to increased anxiety and depression and individuals who struggle to identify their feelings and express their emotions become more likely to develop mood disorders (Quinto et al. 2022). A study was conducted to investigate the relationship among stress, anxiety, somatization and depressive disorders in lawyers. The data was collected from 206 district bar association lawyers. The result of the study indicates that there is significant association among the working hours, depression, anxiety, stress and alexithymia in lawyers (Chrobak & Joško-Ochojska, 2020). People with high levels of alexithymia find it difficult to identify emotional arousal and frequently mistake emotional states for physical sensations (Preece et al., 2017). The difficulty prevents them from achieving two goals which include understanding emotions at an advanced level and creating effective methods to handle stress (Taylor & Bagby, 2016). The condition of alexithymia shows complex emotional processing which affects both negative and positive emotional states of individuals (Preece et al., 2018). A study was conducted to investigate the relationship among the alexithymia and mental health among the professionals. The data was collected from 150 participants. The result of the study revealed that there is positive associations between alexithymia and both anxiety and depression. Moreover, anxiety and depression fully mediated the relationship between alexithymia and mental health (Quinto et al., 2022). According to Vaingankar et al. (2017) mental health includes various dimensions which include psychological abilities (cognitive clarity and problem-solving capabilities) social health and emotional health. The legal profession has high rates of mental health disorders which include burnout and substance use disorder and depression and anxiety (Levin et al., 2020). Furthermore, those who work in prestigious, cutthroat professions like law frequently exhibit higher degrees of Dark Triad characteristics. The mental health of lawyers experiences negative effects when vulnerable narcissism becomes a problem which leads to mood swings and anxiety and results in poor emotional regulation (Miller et al. 2018). Most of the time narcissism leads to negative outcomes. According to research studies narcissistic individuals exhibit two main issues which include their inability to understand emotions and their tendency to engage in negative social interactions while they react to criticism in an inappropriate manner (Miller et al. 2011 Zajenkowski et al. 2016). A research was conducted to examine the gender difference and relationships in terms of overt and covert narcissism, hyper competitiveness, personal development competitiveness, and mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms among college students. The data was collected from 195 college students from Hong Kong. The result of the study revealed that Narcissism was associated with competitiveness in both genders. Covert narcissism was independently and positively related with depression, anxiety, and stress in both males and females. Hyper competitiveness was independently and positively associated with mental health problems in females, but independent associations were not found in males (Chan & Cheung, 2022).

Machiavellianism highlights three main traits which include cunningness and duplicitous behavior and emotional detachment. People who display this behavior pattern use charisma or logical arguments to hide their actual intentions while they treat other people as tools to accomplish their personal goals (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Lawyers who show Machiavellian traits behave according to rational and objective standards but they prefer to avoid emotional relationships while they commit dishonest acts and show little respect for ethical principles (Dinić & Sokolovska, 2021). Research was conducted to investigate the relationship among the Machiavellian and depression among the university students. 675 university students participated in the survey and the result of

the study indicated that Machiavellianism was found to correlate positively with depressive symptoms, and negatively with general health status and student satisfaction (Bianchi & Mirkovic, 2020). Psychopathy includes three main behaviors which include the inability to feel empathy and the inability to show emotions together with specific instances of antisocial behavior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jones & Figueredo, 2013). The combination of emotional detachment and fearlessness enables people with psychopathic tendencies to perform successfully under pressure in high-risk occupations such as law enforcement (Bergman et al., 2020). A study was planned to examine the role dark triad personality traits has towards depression and its symptoms. 130 participants were recruited by using online survey. The findings show that Machiavellianism and psychopathy are positively correlated and influences the prevalence of depressive symptoms within the sample by 12.8% and 14.1%. Narcissism showed no significant correlation with depressive symptoms (Sie & Anggreany, 2022). In conclusion Alexithymia and Dark Triad traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are linked to increased stress, anxiety, and depression among lawyers. These findings highlight the hidden emotional and personality-related burdens in the legal profession and underscore the need for mental health support, emotional awareness, and workplace interventions to improve lawyers' well-being.

Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the relationship among the alexithymia, Dark triad and mental health among the legal professionals
- To investigate the predictors of the mental among the lawyers.

Hypotheses

- There would be significant relationship of alexithymia and dark traits among lawyers.
- Alexithymia and dark traits likely to predict mental health among lawyers.

Methods and Materials

Participants

A N=300 practicing lawyers were recruited with the age range of 23 to 31 years. The data consisting of (N=181) male and (N=112) female (M=27.80; SD=1.16) The data was collected from the high court, civil court and session court of the Lahore district by using purposive sampling technique.

Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

The participants who earned the Bachelor of Law degree were included in the study and rest of the individuals were excluded from the study. The participants who were practicing as a lawyer having at least one year experience were included in the study fresh passing out and the participants who have experience less than one year were excluded from the study.

Measures

Demographic information sheet: The demographic information sheet was used to collect the personal information of the participants including age, socioeconomic status, marital status, years of experience, family members and education as well.

Perth Alexithymia Assessment (Preece et al., 2018): A contemporary self-report 7-point Likert type scale (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree) used to evaluate alexithymia. The Perth alexithymia assessment has 24 items scale consisting of 5 subscales named difficulty identifying negative feelings, difficulty describing negative feelings, difficulty identifying positive feelings, difficulty describing positive feelings, and general externally orientated thinking. Higher alexithymia scores correspond to higher levels of the condition.

Short Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002): the short dark triad scale is 27 items 5-point Likert type scale (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree) consisting of three subscales Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. The Machiavellianism subscale measures strategic manipulation through emotional distance and self-interest, The narcissism subscale measures self-admiration and entitlement with a need for praise, the psychopathy subscale measures three behaviors through two statements which include "I like to get revenge on authorities. The reliability of three subscales Machiavellianism ($\alpha=0.78$), Narcissism ($\alpha= 0.77$) and Psychopathy ($\alpha= 0.80$).

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Taliaferro et al., 2020): the shorter version of DASS 21 items scale is DASS-10 was used. The scale consists of 10 items which require participants to respond according to a 4-point Likert scale. 0 = Did not apply to me at all, 1 = Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time, 2 = Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of time ,3 = Applied to me very much, or most of the time. The Depression subscale achieves a reliability score between .81 and .85 while the Anxiety subscale shows a reliability range from .79 to .83 and the Stress subscale maintains a reliability score between .82 and .86. The tool offers an efficient method to assess mental health distress which researchers and clinicians can utilize in their work.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, permission was obtained from the Department of Clinical Psychology and approval was sought from the original authors of the instruments used to measure alexithymia, dark triad traits, and mental health. Data were collected from lawyers by visiting law firms and legal offices and distributing printed questionnaires. Participants first completed an informed consent form explaining the study purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of responses. Only lawyers with a law degree, at least one year of professional experience, and the ability to understand English were included. A total of 300 lawyers aged 23 years and above participated, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. The data was analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 27). The result of the study are mentioned below.

Results

Table 1 Psychometric Properties of Study Variables

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
NDIF	4	14.25	7.03	.88
PDIF	4	14.10	6.65	.83
NDDF	4	13.90	7.58	.88
PDDF	4	13.92	7.08	.86
GEOT	8	28.68	14.88	.97
Machiavellianism	9	30.16	9.84	.92
Narcissism	9	28.02	5.52	.62
Psychopathy	9	26.40	6.06	.69
Anxiety/Stress	6	6.67	4.31	.81
Depression	4	4.39	3.04	.80

$N=350$;

Note: The Negative Difficulty Identifying Feelings (NDIF); Positive Difficulty Identifying Feelings (PDIF); The Negative Difficulty Describing Feelings (NDDF)

The result of Table 1 indicated the psychometric properties of the study variables. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the study variable is ranged from moderate to excellent range The Negative Difficulty Identifying Feelings (NDIF) and The Negative Difficulty Describing Feelings (NDDF) achieved excellent reliability ($\alpha = .88$ and $\alpha = .88$). Positive Difficulty Identifying Feelings (PDIF) and Positive Difficulty Describing Feelings (PDDF) also achieved reasonable reliability ($\alpha = .83$ and $\alpha = .86$). General Externally orientated thinking (GEOT) also achieved outstanding internal consistency ($\alpha = .97$). Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy exhibited reliability ($\alpha = .92$; $\alpha = .62$; $\alpha = .69$) respectively. Depression Anxiety and stress have good reliability ($\alpha = .80$; $\alpha = .81$, and $\alpha = .80$) respectively.

Table 2 Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables ($N = 300$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. NDIF	...									
2. PDIF	.33**	...								
3. NDDF	.63**	.37**	...							
4. PDDF	.46**	.61**	.45**	...						
5. GEOT	.47**	.37**	.49**	.43**	...					
6. Machiavellianism	.02	.15**	.14*	-.01	.11*	...				
7. Narcissism	.65**	.70**	.66**	.76**	.82**	.11	...			
8. Psychopathy	.12*	.09	.12*	.05	.04	.09	.07	...		
9. Anxiety/Stress	.24**	.07	.22**	.14*	.24**	-.07	.22**	.15*	...	
10. Depression	.29**	.12*	.20**	.20**	.25**	-.01	-.26**	.16**	.85**	...

$P < .001$ ***; $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$ *

Note. NDIF = Negative Difficulty Identifying Feelings; PDIF = Positive Difficulty Identifying Feelings; NDDF =

Negative Difficulty Describing Feelings; PDDF = Positive Difficulty Describing Feelings; GEOT = General externally oriented thinking. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

The result of the table two indicates the relationship among the study variables, the alexithymia and its subscale Positive identify feelings is positively correlated ($r = .15^{**}$) with Machiavellianism, negative difficulty describing feelings and general externally oriented thinking is positively correlated ($r = .14^*$; $r = .11^*$) with Machiavellianism respectively, Negative identifying feelings, positive identifying feelings, Negative difficulty describing feelings, positive difficulty describing feelings and externally oriented thinking are positively correlated ($r = .65^{**}$; $r = .70^{**}$; $r = .66^{**}$; $r = .82^{***}$) with Narcissism respectively. Narcissism is negatively correlated ($r = -.26^{**}$) with depression.

Table 3 The linear Regression Analysis indicating the Alexithymia as predictor of Depression ($N=300$)

Predictor	B	SEB	β	t	p<
$R^2 = .08$; $\Delta R^2 = .08$					
Constant	.51	.113		4.49	.001
Alexithymia	.001	.001	.29	5.19	.001

$P < .001$

The result of table 3 indicates that alexithymia is significant predictor of depression that depicts that with the increase of alexithymia the depression also likely to increase in lawyers.

Table 3 The linear Regression Analysis indicating the Alexithymia as predictor of Anxiety/stress (N=300)

Predictor	B	SEB	β	t	p<
R ² =.07; Δ R ² = .06					
Constant	.64	.11		5.76	.001
Alexithymia	.001	.001	.25	4.54	.001

P<.001

The result of table 4 indicates that alexithymia is predicting anxiety/stress which means that with the increase of alexithymia the anxiety/stress also likely to increase in lawyers.

Table 4 The Stepwise multiple Regression Analysis indicating the Dark triad as predictor of depression (N=300)

Predictor	B	SEB	β	t	p<
Step-I					
R ² =.07; Δ R ² = .07					
Constant	.62	.10		6.06	.001
Narcissism	.13	.03	.26	4.73	.001
Step-II					
R ² =.09; Δ R ² = .09					
Constant	.16	.20		.81	.001
Narcissism	.12	.02	.25	4.59	.001
Psychopathy	.16	.06	.15	2.64	.009

P<.001

stepwise multiple regression was conducted to examine the predictors of mental health among lawyers., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism were entered as potential predictors. The final model included Narcissism ($\beta = .25$, $p = .001$), explaining 7% of the variance in mental health ($R^2 = .07$, $F(300) = 22.39$, $p < .001$). Machiavellianism was excluded from the final model as they did not significantly contribute to the prediction. The psychopathy contributes ($\beta = .15$, $p = .001$), explaining 9% of the variance in mental health ($R^2 = .09$, $F(300) = 14.897$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The legal profession faces social challenges which adversely impact attorneys' mental health because of their demanding work environment and their need to compete with others and their lack of access to emotional assistance (Pyle & Rosky, 2025). Stress causes physiological change internal psychological traits like narcissism and projection, affect a person's overall well-being (Engel, 2012). Therefore, the current study was planned to investigate the relationship among the alexithymia, dark triad and mental health among the legal professionals of Lahore city. The study revealed the important result that are being discussed below. Since the first objective of the study was to investigate the relationship among the alexithymia, dark triad and mental health among the lawyers so, it was hypothesized that there would be significant positive relationship among the alexithymia, dark triad and mental health among the lawyer. The result of the study indicates the wonderful results and support the study's first hypothesis and indicated that the alexithymia, dark triad and mental health have positive relationship among them. The previous published literature also supports the result. Alexithymia makes people more vulnerable to various mental disorders

because it serves as a transdiagnostic risk factor (Aleisa et al. 2022). alexithymia leads to more suicidal thoughts and behaviors when people experience emotional distress and depression (Hemming et al. 2019). A study was conducted to investigate the gender difference in psychological discomfort among the lawyers. 110 lawyers were investigated with the equal ratio of male and female from Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The result of the Study indicated the significant difference in male and female lawyer and also indicated that the lower lawyer face more psychological discomfort (Arzeen et al, 2018). The second objective of the study was to investigate the predictor of the mental health so, it was hypothesized that alexithymia and dark triad are the predictor o the mental health. The result of the study supported the hypothesis and indicated that the alexithymia, narcissism and psychopathy are the significant predictors of the mental health. The previous theories and researches also support the results revealed by study. A cross-sectional study was conducted in Germany in which 425 participants were recruited with the age range of 18 to 73. The result of the study indicated that Machiavellianism was positively correlated with depression anxiety and stress and predictor of anxiety and stress, even when controlling for alexithymia and emotion regulation. Psychopathy showed positive bivariate associations with depression and expressive suppression but did not predict distress in the multivariate models. Narcissism was modestly correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress (all $p < 0.05$), and emerged as a predictor of perceived stress only ($\beta = 0.10, p = 0.042$). (Hornstein et al., 2025). In conclusion the alexithymia and dark triad leads to mental health problems in legal professionals. With the increase of alexithymia, narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism increase the mental health problems in lawyers

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between alexithymia, dark triad traits, and mental health among lawyers in Lahore. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship among these variables and showed that alexithymia, narcissism, and psychopathy significantly predicted mental health problems. These results suggest that emotional processing difficulties and dark personality traits play an important role in the psychological well-being of legal professionals, highlighting the need for greater attention to mental health support within the legal profession.

Implication of Study

The findings of this study have important theoretical and practical implications. The study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the role of alexithymia and dark triad personality traits in influencing mental health among lawyers. Practically, the results emphasize the need for mental health awareness and psychological support within the legal profession. Law firms and professional organizations should consider developing mental health programs, counseling services, and emotional regulation training to help lawyers manage stress and improve psychological well-being. Additionally, the findings may assist psychologists and mental health professionals in designing interventions aimed at improving emotional awareness and reducing the negative impact of maladaptive personality traits on mental health.

Limitation and Recommendation

The present study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to determine causal relationships among alexithymia, dark triad traits, and mental health; therefore, future studies should use longitudinal or experimental designs. Second, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may involve response bias, so future research should consider using multiple methods such as interviews or behavioral measures. Third, the sample was limited to lawyers from Lahore, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings; thus, future studies should include larger and more diverse samples from different regions of Pakistan. Finally, future

research may also examine additional factors such as occupational stress, emotional intelligence, and coping strategies to gain a deeper understanding of mental health among legal professionals.

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