I Didn’t Pass This Time: Retaking the Bar

This chapter is dedicated to those of you who unfortunately did not pass the bar on the first try, and therefore have to take the bar exam again. Retaking the bar is not easy, especially if you have already taken it more than once. But it is absolutely doable. Many people have taken the bar exam multiple times. It will end up being merely a small footnote in the story of your incredible legal career. The bar exam does not define you, or your legal career.

Failing the bar exam brings up a lot of emotions, and you should let yourself feel all of those feelings. It is almost like the stages of grief. You will feel sad and you will feel mad. You will keep rechecking to make sure the bar examiners didn’t just make a mistake in the letter they sent you. You will think the bar exam is a stupid way to determine whether someone should be a lawyer (and you will be right). But, try not to focus on these emotions for more than a few days.

Register for the bar, get copies of your essays (if your jurisdiction permits), and make a plan. Figure out whether you have good study materials, and whether you want to sign up for a commercial bar review course or supplemental program. Determine how much time you can devote to studying this time around. Once you have a realistic sense of your time, make a study schedule. Reach out to your school’s bar support professors to help you with this process.

Lean on your loved ones. People can surprise you with their kindness and willingness to help. Taking the bar often takes a village, so does retaking it.

Most importantly, be kind to yourself. Needing to retake the bar does not mean anything about how awesome you will be as an attorney. You need to figure out what went wrong and what you can change going forward, but it is absolutely not a reflection of whether you are in the right profession.

Trust yourself. Only you know how you study best and what you need to do. Now is the time to listen to yourself and to be selfish about your needs. Lots of people will give you advice. Most of them will give you bad advice. Do what works for you, but make sure you do an honest self-assessment of what worked and what did not work for you during bar study. Your bar support professors can help with this as well. Simply repeating exactly what you did before won’t work.

Take care of yourself during this journey, and let other folks help take care of you too.

In sum, here are five tips for retaking the bar:

1. **Be kind to yourself.** Having to retake the bar exam brings up a lot of emotions. Give yourself some time to feel the sadness, anger, frustration and grief. Then push through it, develop a plan, and execute it. The only thing you can do now is to once again give the exam everything you've got. It may feel like you are alone, but you are not. Countless people have had to retake the bar and do so successfully. Many people are feeling the same things you are right now. Reach out to them. Seek support from loved ones and from your law school. You are smart and capable. You will pass the bar this time. Keep telling yourself that.

2. **Start with a subject you like.** Many people feel like they should start with their weakest subject so that they will have more time to work with it. Getting back into studying is difficult enough. Start with a subject you feel ok about. You can get to that tough subject next.

3. **Remember that you have done a lot and you know a lot.** You are not starting from zero. Spend some time taking stock of the materials you have, and deciding what study materials you can use, and what you want to make anew. You don't need to do everything all over again. You don't need to watch all of the lectures again. Use the materials you have. You have laid a very solid foundation for yourself. You have already earned a lot of points on the bar exam. That gives you a leg up from where you started the first time.

4. **Prioritize practice.** You're not seeing anything new for the first time now. You have already been through this process. Use all of that extra time to practice actual bar questions. Do MBEs and essays every day. Do MPTs at least once each week. Practice, practice, practice! Reflect on your practice every time you do it. Add every rule that you learn or clarify through a practice question to your outline or flashcards. Keep a journal of tips for yourself based on your common mistakes.

5. **Take care of yourself.** Self-care is an essential part of any bar study plan. It is especially critical when you are retaking the bar. Make sure that you build in practices that are good for your physical, mental, and emotional health every single day. Give yourself a daily opportunity to wind down. Pay attention to your stress level and your physical exhaustion. You need to be well to be productive. It is important to build in wellness practices early on, and maintain them as the exam gets closer and more stressful. (This will be important to maintain after you earn your law license as well.)