



## Episode 112: Managing Distractions

Alison Monahan: Well, welcome to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today, we're talking about one of the keys to success in Law School, which is 'Managing Distractions'. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are, Alison Monahan, and that's me and Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the Law School and early legal career experience so, that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. Together, we're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the Catapult Career Conference. I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#).

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With that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back. Today, we're talking about one of the keys to success in law school, "Managing Distractions". So first off, let's talk about some of the most common distractions students struggle with in law school. So, Alison, what do you think is one of the top distractions for law students, and probably you and I as well?

Alison Monahan: I know, and probably everyone existing on the planet. Well, I think we've got to face it, we've created this monster of the internet in our phones and social media and all these things, and these are the really huge distractions, I think for pretty much anyone, who is using any of them, because they actually rewire our brains.

I'm sure you've read these, they make it harder to focus and a lot of these Apps and things, particularly with these push notifications, they're actually designed to activate the reward center in your brain. So, it's not really an exaggeration to say they're addictive. They're literally addictive.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, not to mention the fact that now they're having the studies that say, "The more you check Facebook, the more depressed you get." Which, I always think is really interesting.

Alison Monahan: Right, right and that's something we want to touch on later is that you've got to really be cognizant of what is it doing to you. Are you getting something valuable out of the time that you're spending reading these push notifications from Facebook, or even? ... This one obviously, it's from news sources. I mean, I've actually turned off, basically all of the push notifications on my phone.

Lee Burgess: Me, too.

Alison Monahan: Because, I mean, I'm not sure I want to hear the latest breaking news from the New York Times or Wall Street Journal multiple times a day, So ... You know, you can't not look at it.

Lee Burgess: Right. Yeah, there's a lot of fatigue, information fatigue that comes with that, and I think that our phones and the connectivity from our phones can be really distracting, but also just being connected to the internet when you're trying to work. I think anytime I've tried to put up any blocker to stop myself from checking Facebook, checking in the New York Times, checking People Magazine. Whatever it is that I am deciding to waste my time doing, checking Twitter. It's amazing, you don't even realize how fast you go to check those things without even making a conscious decision to do so.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, at various points, I think I'm sure we've all done this. I've removed certain Apps from my phone, so that I did have to make a more conscious choice that, if I wanted to go on Facebook, I was going to at least have to go through the second step of opening up a browser on my phone. I think at one point, I even logged myself out all the time so I'd have to log in. But they try to make it frictionless so, that there isn't this friction of you really making conscious decision. "Okay, I'm going to spend 20 minutes checking up on my friends and family and whatever on Facebook or Instagram or Snapchat," whatever you want to be using.

I mean, that's one thing, but using them all day long constantly at all times, and having that constantly divided attention makes it really, really difficult to get some sort of thinking done, and the reality is in law school, you have to do that hard work, and it's really difficult if, you're constantly being distracted.

Lee Burgess: I think that's totally true, and I know for me personally, I think I've talked about this in another podcasts episode. I have an app that runs in the back of my phone that tells me how many hours that I've used my phone, and I think it's called [The Moment App](#), we'll link to it in the show notes. It's very interesting because it not only tracks how many times you pick up your phone, but how many hours that you're on your phone. I think you can upgrade to a pro feature, where it even tells you where you're spending your time on your phone, although I think I pretty much know the answer to that.

But, it has been fascinating to notice the days that I don't spend a lot of time on it plus the days that I do, and I actually have notifications that when I hit a certain time limit, I get notifications every 15 minutes after that to note how long I've been on my phone.

Alison Monahan: It's like "Lee, get off the phone."

Lee Burgess: Basically, it's totally like ... It's like "Put down the phone. Stop." It's kind of like having somebody nag me on my phone, which is kind of ironic, I guess, but it has made me a little bit more aware and mindful about it, and sometimes, especially at the end of the day when you're tired, which is I think, when you can really go down the rabbit hole of the distraction on the phone. It does remind to just say, "Hey, instead of even multitasking ... Am I reading on my phone or watching TV? Just like lay it down, move it out of the room. Come on, you're in your house with most of your important people. You don't need to ...

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: You don't need to constantly continue reading about stuff outside of what's happening in your own small world."

Alison Monahan: Yeah for sure though, right before bedtime is really ... Can be brutal for me. I'll find that like two hours have passed and it was just like, "What just happened?" Yeah, or even ... Sometimes if my battery ... That's always my clear side if, my battery ... Suddenly now it's only one in the afternoon, and I have 30% battery life, and I'm, "Wow, where did all that battery life go?" And if, you look at it, it tells you really clearly what you've been doing for the last 24 hours on your phone, and it is usually not pretty.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, anything that you can do to ... I think, just become more aware of how you're spending your time on your devices, I think can be helpful, because so often, we get into these habits, and we're not even making judgment calls about it. So, I think internet, phones, and social media, huge time wasters, and distractors. I think huge ...

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and you know ... I mean, people have to be gentle with yourselves about this because, it's not entirely your fault. You didn't create these programs, and other people do sort of expect you to be constantly available these days and I think a lot of this avoiding distractions is going to come down to really resetting your boundaries for yourself and for other people, about what is going to allow you to be successful in law school, and what's not.

Lee Burgess: And, I think law school's an interesting time to try and figure out what those boundary needs are, because you're going to need to figure out a whole new set of boundaries when you start working, and-

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: And it's all good practice. Yeah, it's all good practice, and it only gets harder when it's a client or it's your boss pinging you as well, not just the New York Times. So, you have to decide what-

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Lee Burgess: What are the boundaries you need to not be completely burned out and strung out all the time? I still remember to date ourselves in the age of the Blackberry, and-

Alison Monahan: Oh God.

Lee Burgess: The first weekend I went away when I was working at the firm, and I drove up to Yosemite, and my Blackberry stopped working, and I was like "Oh, well" I was just completely offline, there was nothing I could do about it, but I guess I was just like, "Guess I just won't see those certifications this weekend."

Alison Monahan: No, I remember after I left the firm, I had Phantom Blackberry Syndrome for several days afterwards. I remember being in a car going up to my ski cabin in Tahoe, like right after I left, and literally reaching for this Blackberry that was no longer there every couple of minutes.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's amazing how ingrained it gets.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I mean, the upside is, that you can work anywhere, but the downside is you can work anywhere.

Lee Burgess: Right, at any time, I think is even the bigger deal with work anywhere, and I think it's important for our listeners to understand that this is something even internally, The Law School Toolbox we talk about a lot. We work in a virtually environment. We have to use these devices to talk to each other, and we encourage our team to set their own off periods, where they don't get notifications and things like that because it's so easy, we all work on different time zones.

I don't want somebody in my team, who's working off the East Coast to be pinging me at five in the morning. If my phone be going off. Just because they're working at a reasonable time 5 A.M. is not a reasonable time for me. So, it's just important that you have to be conscious about this. It's something we actually talk about internally a lot.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I guess something that everyone in today's world really struggles with. So, developing good habits and skills around this will really help you in the end.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. All right. So, outside of the digital realm, what about just not being sure what to work on, and spending a lot to time worrying about work versus actually doing work?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think that's a key distractor for a lot of people. I mean ... And that one is dangerous, because you can sort of feel, "Oh, I'm being so diligent, I'm sitting here thinking about what I should be doing", but if you're not actually doing that work, you're just wasting time.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: That's the harsh reality.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's a very thin line, I feel like between getting yourself organized, so you can execute a plan versus just spinning your wheels on a plan.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Yesterday, I had a ... "Oh my gosh, I needed to create a to do list because I have way too many things floating around in the air that I don't know when I'm supposed to be doing," but I created the to do list and then I'm, "Now, it's time to do things on the list." Like, "Stop making the list ..."

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: "The list is now long, start crossing things out of it."

Alison Monahan: Yeah. We'll have some tips and strategies later for how to deal with this stuff, but I think that's right. I mean, you obviously need to be organized and that's a really key factor in avoiding a lot of distraction, but at the same time you can't be a total perfectionist about how perfect your organization is, if that prevents you from actually doing anything.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. No, it's so true.

Alison Monahan: "Oh, my gosh, I don't have the right color paper to write my to do list, I don't have the right color pen. I can't possibly do my to do list." It's like - get a freaking note card.

Lee Burgess: I know.

Alison Monahan: And use the back of a receipt. Just do it!

Lee Burgess: But, you were the worst about taking notes on any piece of paper, and then I come over to your place for a meeting and you're like, "I have this index card, and this envelope."

Alison Monahan: Hey, whatever works, whatever works.

Lee Burgess: I know, I know.

Alison Monahan: I mean, although in fairness, what I've done now, is I've tried to move all of that into a virtual environment so that I don't lose it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, which is better, yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, potentially. All right. So, I think there's really two really key areas. I mean, I think realistically you've got to also consider outside life stuff ...

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: As being potentially a huge distraction, and these could be very ... Talk about relationships. Relationships are wonderful until they're not.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And, let's face it, law school can be pretty hard on certain relationships.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, actually most relationships outside of law school. I think because often times, you might be negotiating with family about how much time you have to do family things. Romantic relationships can be tough, even friendships can feel the strain, because you may not be as available to focus as you once were, or you might be struggling and not be able to be as supportive to other folks, because you're dealing with your own internal stuff.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. And I think any sort of strains that pre-existed law school are just going to get worse, and then probably a lot of other stuff is going to develop. So, it's not to say that you shouldn't have relationships. I think that you should.

Lee Burgess: They're very important.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, we're not trying to say like, "Oh you can't date anyone or you have to stop talking to your family." That's not the situation at all, but you do have to recognize that this is potentially an area that can distract you from things that need to get done, and thinking about how to balance that, and what strategies you're going to employ, can be very useful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly, and then I think there can be issues in the law school environments about boredom, because we'll be honest, some of the work is not exactly riveting.

Alison Monahan: Right, and I think a lot of times your attempts to avoid being bored can lead to a lot of problems, there's like, "Oh, my reading is so tedious" Or ... Not even that it's boring but maybe you're thinking about it a lot and your brain is just spinning.

I had a friend, who later told me that he, every night of his first year, would leave the library and go to a bar for a couple of hours, so he'd calm down and go

to sleep. And in retrospect, he's like, "That probably was not ... Being at the bar between midnight and 2:00 AM every night, might not have been the best life choice, maybe I should've meditated and tried to go the bed."

So, actually, you have to pay attention to how you're coping with these things, and is that becoming more of a distraction than the actual underlying issue itself?

Lee Burgess:

Yeah, that's a really good point. I also think for some students, what can come out in law school are struggles with ADD or ADHD, or other of their instabilities. I think we know a lot of students, who get diagnosed with these disabilities that maybe they were lurking in the background, but law school's kind of like this pressure cooker that almost amplifies everything and so if this is something that you struggle with or you have wondered if you were struggling with, this can make it become a much bigger deal. And so, it's important that if you need to be diagnosed or you need help that you take the steps to do that, but that it doesn't derail you, and that you just figure out how to make it work for you.

It can be a bit of a journey. You have to use a lot of the resources available for you, but you don't want it to become a distraction. You want it to become a learning experience so, you can move past it.

Alison Monahan:

No, I think that's right. I mean, I've talked to a lot of people, who have struggled through a year or two of law school, and in the process of what they're saying. Often times, you start to see patterns, and say, "Well, has this ever been an issue for you?", and they say, "Well, yeah, I was diagnosed in High School, but I never really did anything about it, and I've always been able to handle it, but now maybe I can't", and I think that's a pretty common reaction just because the stakes are higher, things are more difficult, you're being asked to focus more.

Something that was manageable in a little more easygoing environment, is not necessarily going to be manageable now, and that's something you to recognize and take seriously.

Lee Burgess:

Right, and to take seriously, hopefully in a productive way. By reaching out to your school's disability services. Learning about how to get tested. We have a great [podcast episode on accommodations](#) that we'll link to the show notes, that if this is something you have been chewing on. That maybe something you're struggling with, I think this episode gives a lot of great insight into why you want to explore testing and accommodations to kind of level the playing field for you. But it isn't something that you want to just be lurking out there throughout the semester.

It's something that, if you're worried about it, you want to be proactive and handle it. So, if, you do need things like accommodations, or different study techniques, that you can implement those as soon as possible.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, there's a lot of stuff you can do. So, I think, just kind of sticking your head in the ground and being like, "Well, yeah, I'm struggling, but that's just the way it is." That's not how it has to be.

Lee Burgess: No, for sure. But, didn't you just read an interesting book that talked a lot about this stuff?

Alison Monahan: I did. So, in fact that's one of the ideas for this particular podcast. I've been reading this book called "The Essentialist," or "[Essentialism](#)." We can link to it in the show notes. It's called "The Discipline Pursuit of Less." It's an interesting book. I mean, I'm not sure it's totally amazing, but it does have some interesting thoughts in it, and the point he makes, which is the basic idea. It's got three parts and I really thought that these applied well to law school, and to life.

So, I'll just go ahead and give them to you. So, his first point is about individual choice, which is that we choose how to spend our energy and time, and sometimes in law school, I think it can feel like, "Oh, I have to do this, or I have to do that", and the point of the book is that ... You don't actually get to choose what your options are, but you get to choose how you handle them.

Say for example, you have a legal writing assignment due, and you have a mid-term exam at the same week. Those are going to be in conflict to a certain extent. So, some people would say, "Oh, I have to spend all of my time doing all of my legal writing, or I have to spend all of my time studying for the mid-term." And really take that choice away. But this way, you still get to choose. So, I thought that was interesting. It was empowering. But even if you're in this scenario where a lot is being dictated to you, in terms of what classes you take, what professors you have. You still have a choice.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that is really interesting.

Alison Monahan: Second point, was about the prevalence of noise in the world in general, or any sort of discipline. The next point is, almost everything is noise, but then a few things are exceptionally valuable. And this is a point that's really similar to what Cal Newport makes in his "[Deep Work](#)" book, which is ... There's lots and lots and lots of stuff people would have you do, or that you would might want to do, but only a few of those things are really, really valuable to your outcome."

So, if, you can identify ... "Okay, these are the things that are really going to move the needle when I take a law school exam, you can focus on those things instead of focusing on all the minutia of everything, and then at the end, you haven't really focused on what is going to make the most difference.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. What do you think is the-

Alison Monahan: And-

Lee Burgess: Before you go on though, what do you think is probably the worst of the noise in law school?

Alison Monahan: I think it's all around class stuff honestly.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: The case reading, re-reading cases, doing super long briefs, trying to memorize those briefs. Taking copious notes, and spinning tons, and tons of time, going back over them. Oh, my favorite when people ... They record the class, and then they want to listen to it again. I mean if, you had an unlimited amount of time, sure, all these things could potentially be useful, but is that really the best use of time? Probably not.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's a really good point.

Alison Monahan: What do you think?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think I have to agree. I think ... I like your point about class prep, because so often people do the most work there, because it's busy work that you can check off your to do list.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: And not the deep work, that's the more challenging, which is trying to make sense of everything, and so anytime, I think that you can just create that to do list, and say, "Well, I did my six hours in the library today, I'm good to go." I definitely agree that that's kind of the worst of the noise, because you feel like you might be doing all this work, but you're not getting much value output, or an ROI, or a turn on investment for the work that you're putting in.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and it's not to say that you shouldn't read your cases. I mean, if we think you should read them, you should brief them if, it seems helpful, but there's a certain point beyond which, it really is just busy work.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And, it's not helpful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Oh, and finally ... So, number three on the list is, this is basically what we're talking about. The reality of tradeoffs. We can't have it all, and we can't do it all.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And, that's just the reality.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I tell yeah, the busier your life gets ... I mean, my whole existence is about tradeoffs and I think especially when you think about a legal career, and you're trying to balance any sort of life work with life. This idea of work life balance, which is something you should start playing with in law school, what is your study time? What is not your study time? What are those tradeoffs of the tasks? This is what most people, I think as we all get older, and our lives get a little bit more complicated spend most of our time thinking about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, the reality is, you just have a limited amount of time in the day, and there's only so much you can get done, and it's really important to focus on what's going to be most helpful to you. What's going to be most enjoyable to you so that you don't end up down this rabbit hole of distractions, and not getting things done, then that leads to stress, which then means you can't sleep, and then you're even more stressed out, and then you're even less effective. This can get pretty ugly really quickly.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. All right. Well, now that we've convinced everyone that they ... That we all have some challenges in this round, shall we talk about some strategies that they can implement to hopefully fix some of these?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, so let's start to get practical here, because I think everybody knows that this is going to be an issue. So, let's start with our biggest one, internet, phone, social media ... I mean, how can we even do this at this point?

Lee Burgess: It is so hard, and it takes so much self-discipline, but I think you really have to shut it off. I mean you can have apps that block certain things. I even know that ... I have found apps that will create quiet hours for your phone, so the only thing that would happen is, your phone could ring, but it won't allow notifications. It actually won't unlock if, you want to go easily ... If you want to go in and try to open it, you have to bypass things, but there are definitely things that you can do to really shut down the phone use.

If, turning it off seems too extreme, then I would at least put some restrictions on how it can be used, especially during your daytime, because those distractions are just going to make it harder to do everything else.

Alison Monahan: All right, and I think you'd have to almost think of yourself like a monk. If you think of the tradition of legal studies, it's really a person sitting at a desk, quietly reading with a bunch of books around them. That's the model, that's basically what you're signing up to do. I think with the phone, physically put it away.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: If you can see it, that's a lot more distracting than if it's actually in a bag.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I think ... Obviously, if you can turn it off ... I mean, heaven forbid if you leave it at home.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like, what's going to happen the two hours that you're studying? Is it really going to be a life emergency? I mean, people used to function in the world without being available every single second, and it worked out okay.

Lee Burgess: And I've even had rules within my family, and this was before text messages, and things like that to really date myself, but if somebody called and I didn't pick up they wouldn't call back, but if, it was an emergency, they would call twice.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: And so, two calls one right after the other meant I needed to pick it up. And so, you can even come up with these kinds of codes for family members. If you have a kid, and you are worried that you won't get a call from your caretaker if your phone's in your bag, or you can always tell them they need to call back twice immediately, and then you will pick up. Something like that, so you can contain the interruptions.

I also know other folks that will just create a schedule for themselves of when they're allowed to check email on their phone. So, it's almost like you know that you have that fix coming, because we're all addicted to it. Like your fix is going to come in two hours, then you can do that as well, and then typically there are very few things in the world that can't wait two hours.

Alison Monahan: Right, absolutely. I mean clearly if it's an emergency, you can give people special ring tones and things like that, but that should be a pretty rare occurrence. If you're having an emergency situation every single day with some sort of relationship, well that's something to address in that relationship, because that's not something that is really going to be good for anyone. I mean, we talked earlier about notifications.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Personally, I think you should basically turn them off ...

Lee Burgess: Yep.

Alison Monahan: On almost everything. I mean, maybe not if, you're using WhatsApp or something to communicate with important people, but even then, you can just open the app, do they really have to get you that second?

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: That's the whole problem. The problem we're addressing is, you have to somehow break that idea in your brain that you have to be reachable every second, because that's just not ... Your brain can't work and think in the way that it needs to think in law school, if that's the case.

Lee Burgess: Well even I can't ... Myself with this, because you and I use a couple of different ways that we chat with each other throughout the day, and one of them is Slack, which is a common business communication chatroom. I don't know how you describe it, but anyway ... But one of the things about that, is that's mostly work-related stuff. We use that instead of email, so I loved ...

The other day, I see that you'd emailed me something, and I was out in a meeting doing something else, and I had this moment where I'm like "Oh, my gosh, I'm not going to get back to Alison." And then I was like, "She doesn't care." I glanced at it. It's non-urgent, you asked me a question that can absolutely wait till I got back to my computer. It did not need an immediate response, but if, you need an immediate response from me you and I both ... We typically text each other, because we know-

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: That will pop up on our phones, and that's how you and I have a more immediate dialogue throughout the day, but it's so hard. I feel like you're doing something naughty by not responding to a message immediately, even though, it's completely legitimate.

Alison Monahan: Well, and also you have to think about ... I mean, this is in Deep Work a lot where his point is ... If you're a highly paid knowledge worker, and your only job that you're actually doing, is to field emails, because that's what seems urgent. You'll look back at the end of the year and you're going to be in your performance review saying, "Oh well, I answered email really quickly." That's not the point of your job.

Lee Burgess: Right. And every time I have had a situation where I've become forced to become very efficient about those communications, I find how much faster I can go through it. A lot of people come up with email checking schemes, they check email first thing in the morning, and then they come back and they check it a couple of hours later, and respond to things in bulk, and things like that.

It is amazing actually, that the world doesn't end if you don't check email immediately all day.

Alison Monahan: I know ... I mean, when I was on vacation a couple of weeks ago, if it was something super urgent that needed my attention I'd come out of my snorkeling and take a glance at my email, and I might respond to the one message in a day or the two messages in a day, and I probably had thousands of messages when I came back. I'll be perfectly honest, I just didn't look at them.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, so sorry if you didn't hear back from Alison.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but you know what, I haven't actually heard from a single person, who was like, "I wrote you an important email, and you didn't respond to it."

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: Not one.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: It really makes you think, "I didn't actually, probably need to look at any of that."

Lee Burgess: You another thing that I have been trying to do to help me manage the amount and volume of the noise in my email, is to unsubscribe to lists. Don't under subscribe to our lists, our list is high value, but every ...

Alison Monahan: And we only send one a week.

Lee Burgess: And we only send one a week, but I swear, every single thing I've ever purchased on the internet has me on some sort of a newsletter even if I think that I have not signed up for it, and if you go through consistently and unsubscribe for a couple of weeks, it's amazing, it can really reduce your junk email load, and that in itself can reduce the distractions in your email.

Alison Monahan: Right, and I think something for law students to keep in mind, is you're going to be on a bunch of lists at school. So, I'm sure career services will be sending you emails, your professors might be sending you emails, the school in general will be sending you emails, different clubs will be sending you emails. Make those filters.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Filter those into different inboxes and then once a day or once every couple of days, you can just go and see, "Oh, I need to go and pay attention to this." They're very rarely urgent.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But they will clutter up your life to no end.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Linked to what we're discussing here though, is this idea that you're not very productive when you're trying to do many things at once, and I think it's ... The Deep Workbook talks about this, that you really should be trying to do one thing at a time. Single tasking is far more effective than multitasking.

Alison Monahan: Right, and the reality is it takes your mind a certain amount of time to really focus and go deep. So, it's not the sort of thing where you can constantly be coming out of it every five minutes or every ten minutes, you need a couple of hours. And this is why we always say, you should block off several hours a week starting from the beginning of the semester to do this deep work in chunks, because you have to have enough time for your brain to really go into something for you to understand it and make sense of it. And if you're multitasking and trying to do seventeen things at once, your brain just literally doesn't work that way.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. The other options you have are really just go on a social media diet, or limit your social media use. You can even turn off social media networks, if you want, but ...

Alison Monahan: You're not really obligated to be on Instagram. It's actually totally possible to live your life without it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but you have to ask yourself if they are making you joyful, or if they are really being distracting and holding you back?

Alison Monahan: Right, and it's almost like the ... What's that woman's name? The sparking joy woman about every possession.

Lee Burgess: Oh, yeah.

Alison Monahan: It's kind of the same thing with your apps, and your social network. If you drop into ten minutes on Twitter, and you find out that "Oh my God, the world is ending, I'm so stressed out. This is like ... Everything thing is horrible, oh my God, oh my God." Maybe not helpful.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: For me, I really like to look at pretty pictures. So, Instagram is nice and relaxing so, maybe I should spend more time there and less time on twitter where everyone's arguing about stuff all the time.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's so true. What about your physical space? What doubts do you have about setting up a physical space where you can be effective?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think that's huge. I mean, I went to architectural school so, I do know something about this, but I do think there's good research again that if you ... To train yourself to really be a deeper thinker, it helps to have a place that you always go. So that your stuff is always available, and you're not looking for post it notes or highlighters to get started, and that you know, "Okay, this is my reading space. This is where I go to read." It's more of a habit.

Anytime you can make these sorts of things into a habit, I think the easier it is to get started with them basically, because that's really ... One of the hardest parts, is sitting down, opening up your text book, putting your phone away, and just committing to reading for two hours.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it is. It's not easy.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but once you do it, you find that the second hour is usually easier than the first, and then you start to get tired.

Lee Burgess: Damn.

Alison Monahan: So, yeah. I mean, I think being deliberate about this, maybe having a place that's not in the law school library ... Someone told me a very funny story recently, who would literally hide out.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: In a library. A different library on campus, and no one ... I think he said there were two people who knew where he was in case of emergency and knew how to reach him.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's really interesting.

Alison Monahan: I think that's ... You got to do what you got to do.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and after like ... I guess you have to really think through what your weaknesses are, and what your distractions are, or your triggers for distraction.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: To make sure that you're managing them. So, for me if I was at home doing a lot of my studying, I was always distracted by something else to do. Laundry, kitchen, getting a snack, cleaning up something, day dream about something else. My home is just not a place where I could be incredibly productive, and so I just couldn't study there, and once I made that decision, it was a lot easier to study, because I just went other places to study.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, whereas I was almost always most comfortable studying at home where I had all my stuff, and I wasn't going to have people walking past and chatting. So, it's totally whatever works for you.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. And you have to try a different step-out especially if, you're a new law student. Just be conscious and evaluate how you feel after studying in different environments, or even keep a little bit of a journal, so you can go back and evaluate how you felt so you can make better decisions moving forward.

Alison Monahan: Well, and you can also mix it up. It may be that certain tasks you're better off doing one place, certain tasks you're better off doing in other places. There's nothing that says you have to do the same thing day in and day out.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's very, very true. All right. So, what about the mental clutter? And this is really all the other stuff in our lives that we try and keep in our brain. What we've have talked about in another [podcast](#), is the importance of having some sort of system and plan to organize everything.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think the system and a plan that you can stick to are really the key here, and being cognizant about offloading information and recording it for later. We swear by Trello. We use Trello for everything and I find so many times, even when we're talking about like, "Oh, we need to record this podcast." I literally, often times can't remember what we decided to do as a topic, but I don't have to, and that's the beauty of it. That information is not clutter.

I don't have to try and remember, like "Oh, this week, we're going to talk about this. I just go to Trello, and my picture is right on a card that tells me what I'm talking about and I'm like, "Oh great. Okay, we're talking about managing distractions, that's right, we did have a conversation about that." So, I think there's so many things to keep track of in law school that getting them down in organized ways so, you can forget about them, but still have them when you need them is really key.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I believe that that is true and of course we are obsessed with Trello, and it does solve most of our challenges, and I think one of the things I learned was ... After I had my son and I was exhausted all the time, if I didn't write something down, it was literally gone because I had no capacity to retain information in my brain.

It made me really diligent about tracking stuff either in a notebook or in a system where we could share information, and all of a sudden, I realized how much better that was than trying to hold it all in your head.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, everyone has a limited amount of capacity, and one thing that I do that seems almost silly, but I wake up every morning and when I look at my calendar, if I have something set that's scheduled, a meeting, a call or whatever it is, I literally make an alarm that goes off ten minutes before that. And I can't tell you how many times these alarms have gone off, and I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to be doing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: But I know to check my calendar.

Lee Burgess: Right, yeah.

Alison Monahan: And, I've given myself enough time to get ready for whatever it is. If, I have to go some place, I might set it 30 minutes early so I can be like, "What in the world is that about?" Because otherwise I would be worrying the whole day.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: About what time is it? Is it time for my meeting? Am I running late? I just set the alarm, and then I forget about it until it goes off.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think linking to the outside relationship stuff that we've talked about, it's also important to try and schedule away those other life tasks that you can. I think you can use ... I mean, I could come up with all sorts of different ways to use Trello, and due dates and notifications to remind me to do certain things in my life, but I've had some mom friends who've really turned me onto subscribe and save like on Amazon.

So, you just decide what things you use on a regular basis, and then they just show up at your house. I'm now really sad when things like the cat food that I buy my cats, is not a subscribe and save option. So, I have to remind myself to order it on a regular basis, because my toothbrush heads just come magically every few months. It's amazing. Now I never run out of toothbrush heads.

Alison Monahan: High capitalism. Really, really amazing.

Lee Burgess: It is, but it produces that mental load.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: I don't have to track those things in my house. And I think that in law school or anytime that you're functioning on a very high level, these are little things that you can do to streamline your life, auto pay your bills and things like that can really save you.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, these are just not things that you need to be worrying about. You don't need to be worrying about, "Are we running out of paper towels? Do I have the color highlighter I like? Did I have to pay a fee because I didn't pay my credit card bill?" Just at a minimum, set up the minimum payment. If you're not sure if you have enough money to pay all of it, just make sure the minimum amount gets paid.

Lee Burgess: Right exactly.

Alison Monahan: And for everything. It's the same thing with your electricity bills, and your internet, you shouldn't be spending time paying any of that stuff.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, technology is beautiful in that way. It will just make that all go away.

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Lee Burgess: Autopay is an amazing thing, your rent, everything. And, what about scheduling in breaks, I think one of the things we're talking about, removing all the noise and getting all this deep work done, but don't you think scheduling breaks is almost just as important?

Alison Monahan: Oh absolutely. I mean, no one can work 18 hours a day. I mean, honestly, I don't think most people can even work at a high level for 8 hours a day and part of this is being realistic. If you expect that you're going to be performing at your top level 12 hours a day, for seven days a week, that's not going to happen.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I was reading an interesting study the other day where they studied top violinists, and of course the ones who are the best, they practiced a little bit more, but one of the things that they did more of was actually sleep and take naps.

Lee Burgess: Interesting.

Alison Monahan: And the idea ... Yeah, super interesting. So, they were taking naps daily in the afternoon. They'd have a morning practice session, take a nap, and then have another practice session, and the idea was not only were they doing more time spending more time practicing, but they were actually more effective because they took the time to rest.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that that is really interesting, and we've also read some of the studies where they talk about, especially for computer or desk work, the importance of taking breaks to clear your mind, to give your eyes a rest, to move your body and to not sit all of the time and how that also increases the amount of quality work that you can do.

So, we have ... I know that I have some students who I really recommend work on a - 45 minutes on, 15 minutes off - schedule because that's how they really need to balance their brain load versus their brain rest, but they will find that-

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: They can do many more productive hours in a day if, they do that, than trying to sit down for three hours at a time. It doesn't work.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. Pretty good if, you use that rest time to get up, and walk around outside, take a little walk, that sort of thing. I think it could be a really good way to start to calibrate the amount of work that you're doing and push yourself a little bit harder without it actually seeming like you're pushing yourself.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. We talked a little bit about outside relationships earlier in the podcast, but what about setting boundaries with people that you care about or rely on you? What are your tips for that?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think managing expectations is really the key. I mean, it should probably be obvious if you have a significant other that you may not be able to spend as much time as you have in the past with them and that's going to be difficult. So, I think just addressing that directly and figuring out options again, like almost habits that can work for you is probably going to lead to a lot less conflict. So, someone might be okay with you studying late on Thursday night, if they know that you've got dinner plans together on Friday.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: That's like, "Oh, okay I can make plans with my friends, and then on Friday we'll meet up and we'll have our dinner date." But you got to be clear about what you need for this experience, and then obviously listen to the other person what they need, and try to figure out a way to make those things align.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that that's really true. Communication and setting expectations is just the solution to so many issues around taking on the undertaking that is law school.

Alison Monahan: Right. I mean, honestly, I think if you're in a relationship that's struggling, I think it might be helpful to get counseling. Have a few sessions with an outside counselor who can help you get out of the same arguments that you keep having.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: "You're never there for me." Okay, you can only have that argument so many times before it's going nowhere fast.

Lee Burgess: Right. No, that's a good point, and we can all be better at how we communicate with each other. I mean, I don't know anyone who's a perfect communicator.

Alison Monahan: Right, and a lot of this is skills. A third party might be able to say, "Okay look, I hear you say that you want to spend more time together, and I hear you say that you're stressed out about the time that you're not studying, let's talk about some solutions that might be a middle ground."

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You might need that outside perspective.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that, that's a really great recommendation. We also talked about boredom. You were talking about your friend, who found himself drinking too

much, but I think there can be other counterproductive habits like watching tons of TV, staying up too late. Other types of partying. So, how would you recommend ... Combat this idea that you're maybe on this boredom hamster wheel of law school?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think a lot of it's just being honest with yourself. If you are bored out of your mind, maybe you need to find some other way to stay engaged with law, or with just life in general. Whether it's volunteering for something that you find inherently interesting, or maybe going to an exercise class that's kind of social.

Looking for ways to stay engaged that don't necessarily involve blackout drinking, which let's face it, a lot of people have substance abuse problems and a lot of those start or are exacerbated in law school. And I think that that's just something to pay attention to. The culture tends to be pretty heavy partying, pretty heavy big drinking, and I think it's just something to really not spend too much of your time doing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's true and there have been some really disturbing stories, I think in the New York Times had an article about it, about a big firm lawyer who ended up OD-ing and having a cocaine habit, and I believe he ended up dying. I guess this was a really disturbing article, and I've blocked it out. It was very sad.

Alison Monahan: It was very sad. It was a really sad article but yeah, the basic gist is, he was a very highly functioning, very messed up person, who then did end up dying related to drug use and left behind kids, wife, the whole thing. It was horrible.

Lee Burgess: It was horrible. We'll link too in the comments, if you'd like to read it, but probably it is noise that you should not read when you don't want to be distracted, because it's an important lead to take a breath.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and also in fairness a lot of the article was about the sort of things that law school can do to people, and there's some studies that are referenced, and I think those studies are worth knowing about, because I think people should understand that you might come into law school being a pretty high functioning person, but you encounter this environment and it triggers certain things in you and before you know it, you're kind of going down a pretty bad path, and that's not that unusual.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's really true. And then, we talked a bit about ADD, ADHD and the importance of taking steps to look out for this, but also to get help and if, you are worried about that, there are so many creative ideas.

I really want to make sure that you don't think that this is something that's going to stand in your way of becoming a lawyer. There are lots of amazing law students and lawyers, who have found ways to continue to be highly successful even with these diagnoses, but it's about getting coping mechanisms and learning how your brain works, and learning how to work the way you need to.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. I mean, there are plenty of options you can explore. It's not something that you have to feel embarrassed about, or ashamed about, that you can't tell anyone, that you can't get help. These are just things ... It just happens to be the way that your brain works. There's nothing bad about. It's just something that you're going to have to struggle with. I mean, other people struggle with other things. Some people have to sleep ten hours a night.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Just kidding. I don't know ... But yeah people learn differently and it's just one of those things on the spectrum, of ways that you can function in the world you may have to do a little bit of extra stuff around, but there are lots of opportunity for creative ideas, and law school's a better time to deal with that, than when you're studying for the bar exam, or when you're trying to work in an office.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I think the bottom line is you actually have a lot of control over your time, even if it doesn't feel that way, and you get to decide how to spend that time, even if sometimes it doesn't feel like you get to make that choice either.

But, it's not easy to avoid distractions and focus, but it's valuable and will serve you well in law school and your legal career. If, you are getting ready to start your law school journey or if you are in law school, it is time to kind of set some intentions to minimize distractions and really be your most productive self.

Alison Monahan: I think that's right, absolutely. There are tools you can use. There are books you can read. We'll link you to some of those. There are things you can think about. This is all very doable, but it is going to require some self-discipline, which is not necessarily fun and really some time and effort to think about what's going to work for you and explore options, but it's totally worth it in the end. Having a more organized life is probably not going to be a bad thing for you.

Lee Burgess: I think that we can all agree on that.

Alison Monahan: It's something we can all work on.

Lee Burgess: Yes, on a daily basis. Well with that, unfortunately we are out of time. If, you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox Podcast, please take a second to leave [a review and rating on iTunes](#). We'd really appreciate it, and be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. Our episodes are typically released on Mondays.

If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to myself or Alison at [lee@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:lee@lawschooltoolbox.com), or [alison@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:alison@lawschooltoolbox.com), or you can always contact us via our [website contact form at lawschooltoolbox.com](#). We love hearing from listeners. So, feel free to drop us a note. Thanks for listening and we'll talk soon.

**Resources:**

- [Moment App](#)
- [Podcast Episode 72: Seeking Accommodations in Law School and on the Bar Exam \(with Dr. Jared Maloff\)](#)
- [Podcast Episode 7: Time and Life Management Basics](#)
- [Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less, by Greg McKeown](#)
- [Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World, by Cal Newport](#)