Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have workplace mental health and well-being strategist and program development specialist Carolyn Thayer-Azoff here with us to talk about setting yourself up for sustainable workplace success. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically, I'm with 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 career-related website CareerDicta. I also run The Girl's Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolBox.com, and we would love to hear from you. And you can check out our Bar Exam Toolbox podcast if the bar exam's on your radar. And with that, let's get started.

Hi, it's Alison from the Law School Toolbox. Today, I'm excited to have workplace mental health and well-being strategist and program development specialist Carolyn Thayer-Azoff here with us to talk about setting yourself up for sustainable workplace success. Welcome, Carolyn.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Hi! Thank you so much for having me.

Alison Monahan: Oh, it's my pleasure. Well, to start us off, can you give listeners some information just about your background and your work, just so they have some context here?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yes, definitely. So, I have a background in counseling psychology and over 15 years of experience building strategies, programs, and teams in the mental health and wellness space. So, this includes leadership in startup companies all the way through to Fortune 50. And I specialize in evidence-based strategy and program development, as well as implementation for workplace mental health, well-being, and all-around culture. Right now I'm offering some workplace trainings on topics like emotional intelligence and psychological safety, preventing burnout, mental health first aid, and we'll talk about some of those topics today.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, if people want to learn more about you or reach out, how can they do that?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: I think LinkedIn is probably the best place, so Carolyn Thayer-Azoff, and there's a little "Contact me" button that has all my contact info. If you want to connect with me on LinkedIn, just mention that you kind of connected first with me through this podcast, and I'd love to do so there.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. We will link to that in the show notes. Well, you have obviously been involved in workplace mental health and wellness for a while now. What are some of the common themes or issues that you've seen arise in the course of your work?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah, definitely. I think I'll start with themes. There're a few themes that I'm noticing when it comes to workplace mental health. And the first is one that I'm particularly passionate about, which is the integration of mental health. So, mental health isn't just kind of over here in a silo, but really mental health and well-being is a throughline throughout the employee experience. And importantly, the business and the metrics of success kind of rolling up through that as well. And let me just say, when I say "mental health", I'm talking about the full continuum of mental health, not just mental illness. So just like mental health, right? We all have mental health, from healthy and thriving, all the way through struggling in mental health conditions. And so, when you think about new hires, what are the unique experiences of new hires? It's stressful, right? How can you have that mental fitness to learn a new job? What are the unique experiences of emerging managers or people who are being promoted, both during those phases of change, and also maybe as a new emerging leader? What are some soft skills that I can have to promote the mental health of my team? I'm also seeing integration in diversity, equity, and inclusion. So, the inclusion of people with mental health conditions, also culturally-centered care, things like that. That's one theme. A big kind of underscore of that is middle management. There's a big focus on both the mental health and well-being of middle managers. They oftentimes have a lot of deliverables, as well as supporting their team and kind of the expanded responsibilities of management. And also for middle management in terms of how to foster an environment that is one that promotes psychological safety and which means where people feel safe to express what's going on, or think out loud, or learn out loud. So, kind of two sides of the coin for middle management. And then I'm seeing I guess one more trend, and then I can talk about a need, which might not be surprising to those on the podcast, but it's really around proactive support. We know about the importance of mental health benefits, but also, companies are providing more upstream support around tools to manage stress before it becomes kind of a bigger ordeal.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah. And then in terms of opportunities, I think we're seeing a lot of focus on burnout. Burnout is on the rise, especially in careers or workplaces like law firms and other industries. And then, it's great to see an emphasis on other specific things, like women's health, even topics like menopause, which has a physical

and mental impact. How can we support employees through that? And just, again, de-stigmatize this human experience that we all have, that we surely don't leave at the door when we enter work. And how can the workplace be supportive of that, so that people can be their best in their workplace?

Alison Monahan: Wow, that's all super interesting, and I want to dive into some of that definitely more as we go through. Well, a lot of our listeners are pretty new to the professional workplace, so I want to talk a little bit about how people can raise their odds of finding a place they can be successful. We all hear these horror stories that law firms and other legal organizations are super stressful, terrible places to work. What type of questions do you think people should be either thinking about in interviews or maybe research they can do, just to get a sense of the workplace culture?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Really good question. So, I think I'll first speak to maybe what you can ask if you're in that process, and then also some research that you can do on the side. So, of course you can ask questions during your interview process. I would first say this is going to be different for all of us. Ultimately it's going to depend on you. Think about a time or a workplace or even a group project scenario where you really felt like you were thriving. And what were the key elements to that? Maybe on the flip side, were there any situations where you really felt you were struggling and weren't set up for success or weren't thriving? And then what was impacting that? And ask questions around those things, around how that workplace may or may not support those different variables that are important to you. I would also say, think about where you are in life. What's important to you, and what is actually essential to you? Maybe you have a school pickup that you have to be at, so ask questions around that. And you can ask questions in your interview process. I would also leverage your network. Do you know people who work there that would be more than happy to hop on a phone call and talk about the reality of things? Some companies may offer, or you can even ask to talk to somebody, like if they have employee resource groups or affinity groups. I know I talked to somebody in the parents affinity group. And it was off cycle, it wasn't a part of my interview, and it was really a safe place to just ask real questions about what it's actually like to work there, so that I could make the decision for myself about if it felt like a supportive place for me so that I could be great at my job and also have it be sustainable in a way, so that I could also show up in other parts of my life.

Alison Monahan: I think that's great advice. And we often tell people who are doing interviews, you can always go back. I think a lot of students don't realize this. Once you have the offer, if there are things that you were not comfortable asking, you can ask to go back and talk to specific types of people. So maybe you get on the phone with a parent or someone who has other characteristics that you're

interested in. And yeah, that's when you're like, "Alright, give me the real deal here. I'm hearing this, but is that really the reality?" And honestly, I think most people will tell you things if they think that you're really just trying to do it to figure out if it's the right fit.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Definitely. Yeah, that's a really great point. When you have the offer, that's not going to be a reason why they're going to rescind an offer. So, you have leverage in that position. And also, especially if you're meeting with a hiring manager, there're questions that you can ask that can also be signals. So, think about things like teamwork, or collaboration, or growth and development – asking questions around that. How does the team typically communicate or collaborate? How have you supported somebody in their professional growth? Or how has somebody supported you in your professional growth at the firm? Yeah, but that's a really great point.

Alison Monahan: I think another one that's also good to dive into a little bit with people is, how is work assigned? Because I think oftentimes people don't understand that there are different ways that work might be assigned in an organization, and that can have a lot of bearing actually on the experience. So, to a certain extent, I feel like if you're not familiar with these workplaces, you've got to do the research to understand kind of the basic parameters, and then within that you can say, "Okay, I would prefer maybe to be more at this type of place or more at that type of place." Legal employers are not all the same, so you want to know, basically, "What am I getting into here?"

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: And legal employers are not the same, and each person is not the same, right? So, what might be important to me in terms of my top values for a workplace might be different from yours.

Alison Monahan: Oh, totally.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Flexibility can be micro, or even ways of working, autonomy, feedback structures, communities.

Alison Monahan: Right. I mean, is there any way that we can sort of define that? Or is it really what the person themselves finds to be supportive?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: I think there are best practices for inclusive workplaces that support the mental health and well-being of employees. But I think that when it comes to choosing the workplace for you, it is going to be individual. You might be entering a workplace knowing the risks that might come from it, right?

Alison Monahan: Right.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: But knowing that it might be a great growth step in your career, right? And understanding those tradeoffs. There're definitely ways of understanding in the process, but there's also, as you mentioned, research that you can do to kind of also get the real deal. So, things like Glassdoor, Salary.com, Indeed. There's also a website called Blind that has anonymous and verified reviews about workplaces. And then, like I mentioned, tap your network. People want you to succeed. I find that most people in your network, when asked, will be truthful about the reality of things.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Sometimes I've definitely had people completely lie to me, but I also knew they were lying. I've also had other people be very, very straightforward. So, as we've kind of alluded to, unfortunately, a lot of legal workplaces don't have the best reputation for being mentally healthy places for people. Do you have any thoughts around how people might be able to be more prepared maybe for certain challenges, or even like boundaries or steps to think about before they start these jobs that might help them adjust better and cope with this?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah, that's a big question, but I think, yes. First and foremost, just awareness and that mental preparation of what to expect. And this can help not take things as personally, right? So just know that the environment might entail long hours, or tight deadlines and high expectations, and can be a competitive environment, fast paced. Perhaps that's stating the obvious, but acknowledging and that awareness can really help with that mental preparation and importantly, hopefully a reminder of what's in and out of your control. And that can help not take things so personally, right? That's something that has to do with the environment, not you. And I think, from there, then it comes down to, "Okay, what internal tools or what parts of my mindset can I prepare to better navigate difficult situations or difficult environments?" I mean, one, which it's become a bit cliche, but it really is important, is self-care, right? There's no better time than now, even if you're not even in that workplace yet, or if you're there. What does self-care mean to you, and how can you build that into your day? This can be physical. Maybe you make a point to walk around the block before the workday. Or you sign yourself up for a package of workout classes that you're going to lose if you don't use it. That's accountability. Have a workout buddy. There're also things like mental fitness or mental well-being. So, try to practice just sitting for five minutes and breathing. There're great apps for that, of course, as well. Small nuggets that just, again, prepare yourself now. Do a gratitude journal. It sounds maybe a little bit fluffy, but there's science behind starting the day with gratitude. Jot down five things, do morning affirmations. There's something called "neuroplasticity", where your brain can be wired to shift towards the positive, and build your resilience to better navigate those difficult situations when you encounter them. And then a big thing is your

support system. So, it's always great to have a mentor. So, is there somebody in the field who's a few steps ahead of you that you look at them and you say, "Hey, their personal life and their professional life – this is something that seems like I desire." And see if you can find a mentor, or even just ask them in one conversation what their experience has been and what have been the keys to success. And then of course, your personal network, your friends and your family. Especially if you're entering a new job or a new phase of your career, or even if you're in it, let them know your hopes and desires, so that they can remind you of those and hold you accountable.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think that's all great advice. I was laughing when you said "Have a gym package", because I remember when I was at the law firm, I got a personal trainer at the gym across the street, because the rule of the firm was if you had an appointment and they made you cancel it to work for something, like the gym, they would actually pay you back, which meant that because they were all cheap, nobody ever canceled it. So, it was basically the way to ensure that you could work out. It wasn't just like you had it on your calendar and you were planning to do it. It had to be an actual personal trainer session. So, it was pretty funny.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah, I like that. I mean, there's something to be said about the incentives around that. Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it was definitely one of the things that kept me sane. When I was working a lot of hours, it was knowing that at 5:00 PM I had this appointment with my trainer. I was going to get out, I was going to get some fresh air, I was going to go to the gym. I mean, I was probably going to come back to work after, but at least I got that hour away.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah. I think that's also just an example of setting boundaries. Small things that can be tactical, but to have hobbies, whether it be working out, or playing chess, or standup comedy – whatever your hobby is, to cultivate them now. Even on your first day, put it on your calendar, treat that as a commitment and a boundary. And of course, it's not going to happen every day or every time. You might have to be flexible, but it's putting it out there in terms of setting that boundary. And same goes for things like vacations, right? Or school pickup, or even a five-minute break. Putting it out there that this is something that I'm committed to. It's like a meeting, right? You wouldn't schedule over a meeting that was on your calendar.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think sometimes people don't realize early on you actually have a decent amount of flexibility in controlling your own schedule. You may not control how many hours you're working in a day. You may have a lot of hours

that you're billing and you have things that you need to get done, but really, frankly, in most cases, no one cares when exactly you do them. I'm not a morning person, so I'd often work pretty late, but I would much rather do that than get up super early, but somebody else might want to get up at 5:00 AM and knock out their work, or take an hour lunch break because you want to get out of the office and take a walk around the block. I think even these micro adjustments, if nobody's really paying attention to exactly what you're doing, and they just want you to get the stuff done. You have more power sometimes, I feel like, than you think.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah, to create those boundaries. I know something that I've done is create a block on my calendar just for flow time. That's also part of mental health. It's just that ability to get in that flow without having your attention pulled in and out of meetings, for example, or whatnot. So yeah, I think it comes back to what's in and out of your control. And there are things, even micro things in your day-to-day that you can first commit to yourself that, "This is important for my well-being and my mental health", and also, set that expectation and that boundary with others of that as well.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I do the same. Ever since I started working for myself, I block off my Wednesday, so that it's my deep work day. We tell students to do this on their calendar, to do deep work three or four-hour blocks minimum. But I do the same thing, because otherwise, yeah, your day just gets chopped up and at the end of it you're like, "Oh, what did I get done today? I don't know." That doesn't feel great.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: And I would also say, if there are leaders listening, this is, I would say, a form of leadership too. This is not just for new lawyers, but if people see other people doing this, especially people who are maybe like levels up, it gives that type of cultural permission to do that. And if that's the type of workplace, and if this is something that you feel like is valuable to well-being and performance, then that's something that can be done to kind of, again, give that permission, for lack of a better word.

Alison Monahan: For sure. One of the first attorneys I worked for, the partner said to me, "Never book a meeting before 10:00 AM. I'm not a morning person." I'm like, "We're going to get along fine. This is great." That one actually happened to be a good match, because if she'd been someone who was like, "I'm up at 5:00 AM sending you email and you're still sleeping for another multiple hours", that was probably not going to work. So, I got lucky on that one. Well, before we wrap up, I want to talk about a few scenarios. So, I'm a newly graduated lawyer. I think I want to have kids fairly soon. How can I find a supportive workplace

without causing problems for myself right now, them thinking I'm not committed or whatever?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah, that's a great question and a real reality. And I think that even if it is not fairly soon, but if you know that having a family is something that you desire, that's an important, really important thing to keep in mind. I can speak to that from personal experience. So, I think a first thing to do is just look at the company's policies on things like remote work, flexible hours, parental leave. And then, like we were talking about, whether it be before or after an offer, ask the recruiter to talk to somebody in the company who is a parent, whether they have an employee resource group, or just somebody that can give you insight. I also would say that if somebody in your interview loop is a parent, or is, insert blank, in terms of what value or lifestyle is important to you, this can also be an opportunity to connect with them, right? Remember that they are a human as well, navigating life as a parent in a firm, right? They're in the same boat. And so, you can use it as an opportunity to connect and inquire as well.

Alison Monahan: Definitely. Alright, awesome. Well, next question: I've struggled with some mental health issues most of my life. I'm ready and eager to work, but I feel like there's a stigma following me around and I'm not sure how much to reveal to potential employers. Do you have any thoughts here?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yes. So I would first say that maybe it's an opportunity to reflect on the stigma, and really there's something called a self-stigma, or an internalized stigma, which is, we all know about external stigma of mental health, but what stories are you telling maybe yourself about your mental health struggles, and challenge them. Think about your strengths and everything that you bring to the table, and that mental health is a part of being human, right? You are not the exception. I would also say in terms of feeling not sure how to reveal it to your employers, I guess two things come up. One is, ask yourself if your mental health condition or your mental health struggle, is it impacting your ability to perform your job duties? And if it's not, you might not need to disclose it during the application or the interview process. If you do require some type of accommodations to do the job, you may need to disclose that, but you can do this after the offer is made, rather than during the interview process. And so, I would just understand your rights for things like reasonable accommodations, assess the relevance of that information of when you choose to disclose that. You might wait until you're in the role, working with your manager, and then that becomes a conversation of how they can best support you to be successful in your role. And it doesn't take away from everything that has brought you to be fully qualified for that role.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think something you alluded to earlier is, people want you to be successful, particularly if they've already hired you, they brought you on board, they're enthusiastic about you being there, you're the shiny new hire. And so, yeah, I understand people's fear around this, but in most cases, there are processes in place, there are laws around this, you have certain rights. And the reality is, you're not the only person in any workplace who maybe has some challenges. It's one of those things that I think sometimes people can catastrophize around, like, "Well, if I tell anybody, everything's going to fall apart." It's like, that's probably not going to happen. And if it did – well, you probably have some legal recourse.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yes.

Alison Monahan: That is not legal advice, but just based on certain things. But I totally understand people feeling antsy around that one.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: No. Definitely, that's real. And I think that there are things that you can look for, even before you decide to disclose or if you need to disclose, like, what are the mental health benefits that they offer? Are there things like employee resource groups, things like that? Even questions around how do managers and leaders promote the growth and development of employees, not just through promotion, but just to be performing at your best in your role.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and that's something that since I was in a law firm ages ago, they've actually really started doing a lot more around, is employee development. Everyone knows that the partnership model does not necessarily mean everybody who starts at a law firm is going to be there in 10 years, but they actually do seem to be legitimately investing more into the employee experience and helping people figure out what they want and get them there, even if that means eventually they leave, because that's the expectation. It's just the business model.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yeah. Yep, absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, we're running a little short on time. I've got one more question or one more scenario: I got what I thought was my dream job, and it's a total nightmare. What can I do?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Oh, yes. So, I think a few things. One is, differentiate – is this nightmare temporary, is this time bound? Maybe it's busy season. Or is it a more permanent, kind of systemic issue? And I think that a good thing to do around this is to set a timeframe. You will know what that timeframe is, but let's say, I'm going to give myself three months or six months to see what shifts can I

make? Maybe I'm going to try setting better boundaries. I'm going to try to engage more in my hobby self-care. I'm going to work with my manager to manage expectations or prioritize better. So, give yourself a timeframe, and importantly, voices to others – maybe your partner or your support system for some of that accountability. And then check back. Have things changed, in terms of either my ability to operate in a sustainable way in this environment, or the environment itself? I would give a nudge that, as a plug, just to beware of signs of burnout, and act quickly on those. So you might not be able to wait six months if you're feeling like increased levels of cynicism or anxiety or low mood or low energy. So, of course you want to act if you're really feeling like even that three-month or six-month period is not having a real impact. But I would say what's temporary, what's permanent? Again, this will look different for all of us. And I think that this is where it's important to really know and have front and center, what are your non-negotiables? And really that comes down to what are your values, right? What are your top values that are things that you are willing to make big changes around? I'll actually provide an exercise for this, maybe in the podcast notes, around how to articulate and have your values top of mind for you. And this can influence just micro decisions and behaviors that you make throughout your day. It can also set your North Star for bigger decisions, like this one, in terms of this kind of nightmare scenario and when you might need to make changes that are more in alignment with your values and your personal mission statement.

Alison Monahan: That sounds awesome. We would definitely love to share that, because I think that is so important – really figuring out what's going to work for me, what am I willing to tolerate? I mean, of course, any job has annoyances and probably things you don't love about it, but fundamentally, is this doing harm to me? Am I going to put up with this forever? And if the answer is "No", then you know you're going to have to make some shifts.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yep, yes.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, we're about out of time. Any final thoughts you'd like to share here?

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: No. I mean, I just think it's really great and important people like you are bringing mental health in the full continuum, whether it be thriving to struggling, into the conversation of being a professional. The reminder that we are all humans in the workplace, and it's not about just navigating challenging times, although it certainly is, but it's also about protecting and promoting your mental health, your mental well-being, your mental fitness, so that you can thrive at work and have a fulfilling career in the long run, and a fulfilling personal life as well.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I feel like that's also better for organizations that can figure that out. I mean, I would have to imagine that people in workplaces who have happier, healthier employees probably also tend to do a little better. I don't know, just throwing that out there.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: There's data around that, that's becoming an expectation and a choice factor, decision factor for many employees. So, it's becoming not just a performance, but an attraction and retention strategy as well.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. This is a totally different podcast topic, but I've started seeing data coming out of law firms, and they're kind of phrasing it as like "generational differences", but really a lot of it is around ideas of what is appropriate in the workplace. What should people be putting up with? So, I think that's going to be super interesting as it develops over the next few years.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yes. Yeah, maybe a podcast topic for another time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely want to dive into that one. Well, Carolyn, thank you so much for joining us.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Thank you, Alison. This was great. Thank you for your leadership and opening up these types of conversations.

Alison Monahan: Oh, my pleasure. And just remind people really quick how can they find out about you, if they want to do that.

Carolyn Thayer-Azoff: Yes. So, go to my LinkedIn – again, Carolyn Thayer-Azoff. You can connect with me there. There's also a "Contact me" button that has all of my contact information and a website as well.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. We'll put that in the show notes. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app. We would really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website contact form at LawSchoolToolBox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

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