Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have therapist Angela Corbett here with us to talk about protecting your mental health in law school. 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 the Bar Exam Toolbox podcast if the bar exam is on your radar. And with that, let's get started.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have therapist Angela Corbett here with us to talk about protecting your mental health in law school. Welcome, Angela.

Angela Corbett: Hi Alison. Thanks for having me.

Alison Monahan: Oh, good to see you again. To start us off, can you give our listeners just some basic information about your background and your work, just so they have some context here?

Angela Corbett: Yeah, of course. So again, my name is Angela. I am a licensed clinical social worker and a certified addictions professional. I work out of the state of Florida. I've been a therapist now for 16 years. And I also own a therapy group practice called TrueCandor, here in the state of Florida.

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

Angela Corbett: Yeah, they can do that by going to our website, which is TrueCandor.com.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, it's no secret that law school is stressful. And the unfortunate reality is that this experience can really negatively impact people – I mean, I ended up clinically depressed my second semester in law school – even when you might not have struggled with your mental health in the past. So, what do we know about how prolonged stress and this kind of experience really impacts people?

Angela Corbett: Yeah, no, that's a great question. And what we have learned through the research is that our nervous systems are not set up to be in a chronic state of

stress. So, the way that our nervous systems operate is that we encounter a dangerous either predator, event, our body releases cortisol, adrenaline gets us moving, gets us to safety, and then we go back to our baseline state. However, when we are in stressful situations for prolonged periods of time, we are getting hits of adrenaline, cortisol over and over and over again. And that's just not the way that our bodies are set up to manage stress. So, ultimately, some of the consequences of that are going to be fatigue, because we're running on 10 and we're not made to do that. Depression, anxiety – all of those things start coming up when we are constantly being exposed to stress. So, it's really not good for our brains, our bodies, our mental health, and our physical health.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I definitely found that to be true. I did a different master's program before I went to law school, and it was very intense, very stressful, no one was sleeping. And I looked back once at a photo from maybe the first couple of weeks of school, and at the end of the year looked back at that photo and everyone in that picture looked like they had aged 10 years.

Angela Corbett: That's horrible.

Alison Monahan: It was actually really shocking. Everyone was like, "Oh my gosh, this does not seem good."

Angela Corbett: It reminds me of, I don't know if you've seen those memes of kids on the first day of school. The parents send them off and they're all fresh and put together, and they come home, their hair's rearranged, their outfits are all torn. Yeah, so kind of illustrates what it's like living under chronically stressful conditions.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And I feel sometimes like law school is really set up just to maximize stress, because it mostly involves one exam at the end of the semester. I mean, some places have midterms now a little bit more, but the bulk of your grade is set up for this one often three to four-hour experience. And that's kind of a crazy way to test people if you want them to stay not totally losing their minds.

Angela Corbett: Yeah, I think that's probably the way that it's been done for centuries at this point. But that's high pressure, right? To have to retain all of this information, make sure that you are able to recall all of it. And how long do these tests typically take, Alison?

Alison Monahan: I mean, often if they're in-class, they're three to four hours. Sometimes you might get like an eight-hour take-home or 24-hour take-home. But the most standard law school test is still the three to four-hour time pressure in-class exam.

Angela Corbett: So that's three to four hours of sitting there with an elevated heart rate, sustained concentration, not meeting your biological needs, I'm assuming.

Alison Monahan: No.

Angela Corbett: Perfect storm for a nice little anxiety attack. So, yeah, in an ideal world, you would absolutely test at different intervals throughout the semester, so that people can manage their stress in a more effective way, because ultimately what I'm hearing – and I know that this happens in other graduate programs as well – is that this is kind of a "make it or break it" moment. So you don't get do-overs throughout the semester, right? So you go in already with the mindset that, "Oh my gosh, if I don't pass this, I have to re-do all these classes, all this semester." And it's just not conducive, again, to the way that our nervous systems are set up. And a lot of empathy for law school students that have to operate again and again in these types of environments that are really just not set up for you to succeed, right? So, we look at performance, right? Just like overall performance as human beings.

Alison Monahan: No, I totally agree with you on the testing aspect. I also don't think it's a great way to let people learn. The other thing that is very difficult for a lot of people in law school, which you may have heard about, is the way that they do classes. So, they have the Socratic method. Not every professor still does this, but the classic way that it's done is, you never know if you're going to be called on on a certain day. And so, you might walk into the class and the professor says, "Oh, Ms. Corbett, tell me about this case." And now you're on the spot in front of the entire class. It can get a little hairy for people.

Angela Corbett: Yeah, especially, I can imagine those that maybe have social anxiety, perhaps didn't get a lot of sleep the night before, maybe had a fight with your significant other leading up to that. Yeah, that doesn't sound like a good time at all. And again, it's all about that nervous system activation, so it sounds like what I'm hearing is that law school keeps you all in an activated state pretty much the entire time. And when we look at the neuroscience of how things are supposed to work... And I get that this is not the only circumstance where people have to live in kind of a heightened state, but nervous system activation. We encounter a threat, we respond to the threat, then we go back to baseline. So we activate our parasympathetic nervous system – the rest and digest. And so, that's where we're supposed to be hanging out the majority of the time. And then we go into nervous system activation when we need to protect ourselves. And my concern – and this is for law students and just I think the state of the world now – is that we were not meant to live in an activated state consistently over long periods of time. And there is a lot of research that connects stress to our physical health, cardiovascular disease, autoimmunity, diabetes, and then obviously as a

therapist, I look at the mental health component and just the incidents, the prevalence of anxiety, depression. Unfortunately, some people go even further and they feel like they can't take it anymore, and so then you have to worry about people's safety. So yeah, it's definitely an issue.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I thought it was interesting, earlier you mentioned being an addiction specialist. I think that also comes into play for a lot of people, partly because there's just such a normalized culture of drinking, often to excess, in law school. Like once a week we had what they call "bar review", and everybody met at a bar at a certain time. It was just very normal. Also, I was in law school in New York, so people already were drinking a lot. But I think a lot of that starts for people, or at least gets exacerbated and then becomes a problem for them in the profession. Lawyers do not have the best rates of things. They have a lot of alcoholism, a lot of mental health thing. Lawyers are not a healthy profession in general, and I think a lot of that really starts in law school. And what you said about being in that heightened state really did resonate with me, because I think back and I think how often in a day was I actually relaxed and breathing? Well, I think like 10% maybe, if that in an average day, maybe if I was at a gym class or something. I mean, it had to be this very explicit thing that, "Now I'm taking time off to try to relax."

Angela Corbett: Right. As opposed to that just being the norm for you, like, "I'm normally in a relaxed state, and then occasionally I have to amp things up to get through this difficult period."

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Listening to you, it's not really shocking, probably, that I ended up completely fried after the first semester. For me, also, I had really chronic insomnia when I was trying to study for exams, because I was studying really intensely all day, and then I'd carefully blocked out eight hours in my day to sleep. But there's no way you could just fall asleep at that point.

Angela Corbett: Right.

Alison Monahan: That's not going to happen.

Angela Corbett: It doesn't happen at all. Again, at that point if you look at even your vital signs, your heart rate's accelerated, your blood pressure is higher. It's hard to downregulate quickly so that you could just fall asleep. The research shows that we need quite a few hours to transition to be able to get restful, restorative sleep. And so the idea that like, "I'm going to study until 10:00 o'clock and then I'm going to go to bed at 10:30" – we don't unfortunately have the ability, most of us anyway, don't have the ability to just like turn off the switch and go to sleep immediately. And then you have that vicious cycle of not getting enough

sleep, and you're tired and your cognitive functioning is impaired, and your ability to respond to and manage stress is impaired. And now you have this whole vicious cycle of not getting enough sleep, having the impacts of it the next day, and then not getting enough sleep. It's like a "wash, rinse, repeat" type of thing.

Alison Monahan: Right, yeah, then you start being like, "Well, maybe I should just have a few glasses of wine. Maybe that would help."

Angela Corbett: Well, it's interesting when you mentioned... I think back into my early career, I interned at a substance abuse rehabilitation facility for impaired professionals. And so, it was lawyers, therapists, doctors, pilots, really high performers, and it was always full.

Alison Monahan: That does not surprise me.

Angela Corbett: There was always a waiting list and it was always full. And also, as you were talking about it, I started going in a different direction and I was thinking about even core beliefs, right? So you have the people that pursue these types of professions already have this sense of, "I have something to prove. I cannot fail, I must succeed." So they already have these pretty rigid negative core beliefs, which some could argue are not so negative, because they end up producing positive results in these high-performing professions, but they usually stem...

Alison Monahan: Kind of.

Angela Corbett: Yeah. Well, in these highly regarded professions, right? Like, "Oh, you're a lawyer, you're a doctor." I think there is probably a large group or subgroup of law students who feel like they have something to prove, or feel like they don't want to let their family down and this is the only way that they can live up to the expectation, is to successfully finish law school, pass the bar, go on, make lots of money, make their parents proud, those types of things. But when you look at the incidents of substance abuse, paired with trauma, paired with low self-esteem, paired with perfectionism – there's a correlation there, right? And so, what I'm hearing is that while in law school, probably many of the students are self-medicating, because they can't downregulate, because they're so stressed out that they can't just be like, "Okay, I'm going to go to sleep now." So it's like, "Alright, what helps with that? Well, a couple of glasses of wine." And then I'm sleeping, but I'm not getting restorative sleep.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Angela Corbett: The data that I've been receiving all day long, I'm not processing things the way that I need to during the REM cycle, which is where a lot of that information is stored and sorted, in implicit, explicit memory. We won't get into all of that, but it's a really important piece of our health – both our mental and physical health – is getting restorative sleep. And so, that's not happening when you've taken a couple of downers or had a couple of glasses of wine or whatever the case may be. But yeah, there's definitely correlation there. I can see what you're saying where some of those habits maybe start while in school and then just continue to progress. They typically don't get better without intervention, so that is a slippery slope.

Alison Monahan: Definitely. Well, I feel like so far we have been kind of on a downer train here, so let's shift gears a little bit. I think everyone can agree that there are certain factors, both in the personality of someone who goes to law school and also in the educational system that are probably going to be challenging. Like you said, a lot of perfectionism, a lot of competition, everything's graded on a curve. But what advice do you have for people who are either thinking about law school or they're in law school and saying, "I want to go through this in a different way. I want to manage this"? What are some kind of techniques or strategies or just ideas that people might think about to stay mentally healthy in law school?

Angela Corbett: Yeah. Well, first I would say kudos to them for being aware enough that there is another option. There're some alternative ways to be able to go through law school without losing yourself in the process. I think that right there is a strength and asset to anybody who's able and willing to do that. Beyond that, I would say that it can be really helpful to have a support system. And I know when I hear people say that personally, I'm always like, "In this day and age, making new friends, meeting new people is so hard." And I can imagine it's especially hard for law students who are studying for eight hours a day, and that's life right now. However, it doesn't mean that's still not important. Even if we kind of cringe at the word "support system", cliches are cliches for a reason, because there's truth behind them. And so, having a strong support system is really important. It doesn't necessarily have to be family or significant others. It can be an online community, it can be your study mates. And just knowing that you have people that you can commiserate with and say, "Hey, I'm having a hard time", and hearing other people say back to you, "Me too", so that we don't feel so othered, we don't feel like we're the only ones struggling, we're the only ones failing. So, being able to have your experiences mirrored back to you is really important. And in this day and age, I feel like there're more and more tools to be able to connect with people, even if it's digitally as opposed to in-person. Though I will say in-person is preferred. We have these things called "mirror neurons", and so when we're in the same space as another person, we can help regulate each other. So, in-person is definitely preferred, but I also

recognize that there're limitations. So, having a strong online community, either a forum, some type of support group, if you do find that you're maybe drinking, smoking too much, maybe some type of online 12-step or recovery program. Recovery Dharma's a really good one, because it's very meditation-based, not so dogmatic. But just some type of support system. I would also highly recommend if you have the ability to find a therapist. I had a lot of medical students and law students in my career when I was still seeing patients more. I still see them, but it's much smaller caseload now that I'm running my business. But at that time, oh man, they were like cycling through. But it was really good, I was proud of them because they were recognizing that "I'm having a difficult time and I'm going to ask for help." And so, being able to have a professional that's able to kind of give you feedback, reframe things like, "Is this really the end of the world? How else can we look at this?" Asking "What's your sleep like, schedule? Are you eating? Are you drinking?" These are things that we know, but sometimes we need to be reminded of them. And so, having somebody that's kind of checking in about those things: Are you exercising? Are you getting vitamin D? Are you going outside? That can be really impactful. I think the biggest thing though is that the way in which we take care of ourselves is often very small tweaks, we just have to be willing to do them. Maybe you don't have access to a therapist, you don't have time, maybe you don't have time to go do some online support group, but can you go outside and walk for 10 minutes, and get vitamin D, fresh air? Can you leave your phone, so that you're just being mindful, present in the moment? Can you get enough water throughout the day? Can you have a timer on your phone to remind you to drink? Because when we're dehydrated, that also increases our anxiety and our heart rate and all of those types of things. It also decreases our ability to comprehend information. So, can we stay hydrated? Can we eat three meals a day? Simple things like eating, drinking, sleeping, getting outside, moving our bodies, can have a profound impact if only we're willing to prioritize them. We all know this information. These are future lawyers, they're smart, there's no doubt about it. But it's putting it into practice I think that can be a struggle, but can have some really big payoffs at the end.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. There is this thing where you'll go to some sort of lunchtime presentation and they have pizza, so people just end up eating pizza day after day. Not that I don't love pizza, but it probably was not the best thing to eat on a five day a week basis, every single day. And most schools do have access to therapists. I mean, that's how I started therapy, and I think it's one of the best choices I ever made. Basically it was like, "Huh, this does not seem to be going in a good path. I can't get out of bed, I don't really care if I go to class or not. I think I might be depressed." And so, I showed up in the student health and they're like, "Oh yes, of course, you're in law school. Here you go." And no one was surprised to see me there, they were all very kind. But it really did set me on a path that I think

was actually life changing. And Lee and I both always say you have these resources available to you through your school one way or another. And this is a great time to actually prioritize that, because like you're saying, these are skills and mindset that you're going to carry through into the career. So, it's not like it gets easier when suddenly you have clients who you need to keep out of jail or whatever it is. It's not like, "Oh, you graduated, now your life is not stressful." Probably just gets more stressful as you start working as a lawyer.

Angela Corbett: Yeah. No, that's actually a really good point, being able to recognize. I think sometimes that we fall victim to the idea, "If I can just get through this semester, if I can just get through this week, it'll get better." And then life keeps lifeing and then you're like, "It's not getting better." And it's because it's life, right? There're always going to be challenges. So, learning how to ask for help, set your life up so that you're meeting your basic biological needs, meeting your social needs, those types of things in the midst of the sh*t storm – excuse my language. But I think that is the key to success long term, long-term sustainable success.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think of someone who works with us now, actually – who I just totally adore – but he quit his job as a lawyer and walked across the country with his dog, and then wrote a book about the experience. And one of the things that I really remember from that book is he said his mindset in the beginning was like, "If I just get to point X, everything will be okay." I can't remember if it was the Mississippi River or whatever, but he's like, "Once I get there, everything's going to be okay." That's what drove him on the first half of his trip. And then he got there and he realized, "Okay, I'm here. It's not any different." And now he's really shifted his mindset to, "Every day I just decide if I want to be out here. I get up in the morning, and is this what I'm going to do or not?" And he's like, "It was a really fundamental shift. I just have to get to this point and everything's going to be great." He's like, "I realize it's never going to be great. It's just going to be what it is."

Angela Corbett: Yeah. I think that's a really healthy mindset and a really positive reframe, is recognizing that, "Every day is going to have some challenges, and this is what I'm going to do to meet the challenges." And there still can be joy. And I think there's been some more talk around this concept of glimmers. So we talk a lot about triggers, like "This is triggering to me, that's triggering to me." And that's valid, people get triggered for all different kinds of reasons. But also being able to recognize the glimmers throughout our day, like what's going right. You know what I mean? Like yesterday, personally for me, everything that could go wrong was going wrong. And I ended up with a nail in my tire and I was like, "Oh my God!"

Alison Monahan: Oh no!

Angela Corbett: Now I have to go stop at the tire shop and get this fixed. And it was like an hour out of my day that I really did not have. And when it was all said and done, the guy was like, "Don't worry." I was like, "What do I owe you?" and he's like, "Don't worry about it." That was a glimmer, right? That was an act of kindness, a moment that I kind of paused and took that in. I was like, "Thank you so much!" I had some gratitude for that and then I moved on to the rest of my day, which there're a lot of difficult points in it, but being able to stop and pause and take in the good moments, like the acts of kindness, like when things go right or "That was easier than I thought it was going to be." Those are the glimmers. When you have a good laugh with somebody, that deep belly laugh and you're like, "Ah" afterwards – those are the glimmers. And so, we do have to be willing and able to recognize and acknowledge them throughout this process, because ultimately that's what life is, right?

Alison Monahan: Exactly.

Angela Corbett: How you build a good life is by moments, not by stretches of time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Someone I know has a book and she describes those as "micro joys".

Angela Corbett: Oh, I like that.

Alison Monahan: Even in the midst of terrible things happening, and a lot of terrible things did happen in this particular year for her, just outside of her control, but she could still in a day look at and say, "Oh, the light here is really amazing" or, "I'm going to have this cup of tea and really appreciate it." And I think you're right. I mean, the more I go through life, the more I was like, it kind of is what it is and you've got to look for the good points in it.

Angela Corbett: Yeah, notice the good.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Alright, before we wrap up, if students are really finding themselves struggling, what should they do, and how do people know if it's bad enough that they need to actually get some professional help?

Angela Corbett: That is a fantastic question. And so, I'm going to give the very standard clinical answer. So, clinical significant impairment for two weeks or more – that is how we as clinicians determine whether or not this is just like a bad day, a bad week, or if it requires some type of treatment. So, if your domains of functioning – so that's occupational, your social, your medical, your health – any degree of functioning is being impaired significantly for two weeks or more, then it is time

to get help. So if you are not sleeping for two weeks, if your appetite is reduced for two weeks, if you're crying every day for two weeks, if you are isolating more and more for two weeks or more – go get help.

Alison Monahan: Alright. I think that's a great marker for people because it's very clear. Everybody has a bad day, but for me it was like I wasn't sleeping, and then I wasn't eating, and I wasn't leaving my house at some point. It's like, "Okay, this is probably not going in a very good direction."

Angela Corbett: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: So, I'm very glad that I did reach out at that point, find help. And frankly, I think it was really life changing. I did not end up depressed again, and in retrospect, I had been previous times before.

Angela Corbett: That's awesome. And can I just do a little plug for, I think in terms of going to seek help, that can look different for different people. I highly recommend going and getting evaluated by a therapist, but some people want to go the medication management route instead. That is also okay. Some people go see a yoga teacher, and that's okay. I think the idea that you're getting some type of support and you're at least getting the ball rolling and you're open and willing to receive help is a big indicator of a good prognosis down the road.

Alison Monahan: Interesting. Yeah, I have my massage guy now, my acupuncture guy. And I do feel like they really are actually very supportive of my mental health, because we're friends now.

Angela Corbett: Yeah, and there's not one-size-fits-all. I know that some people culturally don't feel comfortable maybe talking about their problems or their feelings to a stranger. And so, yeah, going to acupuncture is a great way to still take care of yourself and slow down and still receive some support as opposed to none.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I feel like that's where I go and I just need to do the Control + Alt + Delete or turn the computer off and I turn myself back on. I just feel like the whole system just got reset here. I don't really know what happened, but, oh, everything is just better.

Angela Corbett: Like my energy shifted, yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, totally. It's like my Chi is moving or whatever.

Angela Corbett: Yes, yes. Exactly, exactly. And again, I'm a huge proponent for therapy. I would love it if everybody would be willing to go to therapy, but I'm also recognizing

the limitations that people have, either personally, culturally, financially, whatever the case may be. And so, any help is still good enough.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's totally fair. And I think as a student, you have paid for a lot of things, so you may as well take advantage of some of them. I mean, we got very discounted classes at the gym and things like that. Even something like that can be a social outlet. I started taking up squash, so I was learning something, I was getting exercise, and it was a social thing. So, even something like that I feel like can be really meaningful if you're just kind of in this funk of like, "Ugh, this sucks and I don't know what to do."

Angela Corbett: Yeah. I think the bottom line is, do something,

Alison Monahan: Right. Take some step.

Angela Corbett: Take an action, exactly, and do something. Don't just sit on it, because typically it's going to get worse, not better.

Alison Monahan: No, I think that's totally fair. Alright, well, any final thoughts, Angela, you'd like to share before we wrap up here?

Angela Corbett: I think that was my final thought, so I think I'm good.

Alison Monahan: Alright, awesome. I think that's a great place to end. Remind us again how people can find out more about you.

Angela Corbett: Yeah, so if they're interested, they can either find me on LinkedIn – Angela Corbett, or you can go to my website, which is www.TrueCandor.com.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, we will link to all that in the show notes. Thank you so much for joining us. I really appreciate it.

Angela Corbett: You are so welcome. It's my pleasure.

Alison Monahan: Oh, thanks. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app. We'd 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!

**RESOURCES:**

TrueCandor
LinkedIn: Angela Corbett
Recovery Dharma
Podcast Episode 123: Mental Health in Law School and the Legal Profession (with Sarah Weinstein)
How to Take Care of Your Mental Health in Law School