Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

Alison Monahan: Hi, and welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're going to be talking about why lawyers are so miserable and how you can avoid being unhappy as a lawyer. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan, that's me, and Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. Together, we're the co creators of the Law School Toolbox, Bar Exam Toolbox, the Catapult Conference, and the Trebuchet Legal Career site. I also run the Girl's Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on iTunes. And if you have any questions, do not hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com. We'd love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're talking about a very interesting and incredibly important topic. Why are so many lawyers miserable? And how can you avoid being a miserable lawyer and law student? All right, so first off, are lawyers actually more unhappy than the average professional, or do we just like to complain a lot?
Alison?

Alison Monahan: Well, I'd say it's probably a little from column A and a little from column B, but I think there's actually a lot of research suggesting that lawyers are more unhappy than the average profession. And one of the people who's written about this is a guy named Martin, I guess, Seligman. I don't know how to pronounce his last name, but.
He's one of the leaders of the positive psychology movement, which you might have heard about, and he's done a lot of work with lawyers. And here's what he had to say in one of his recent books, and we're going to link to this in the show notes. In a recent poll, 52 percent of practicing lawyers described themselves as dissatisfied.
In addition to being disenchanted, lawyers are in remarkably poor mental health. They're at much greater risk than the average population for depression. And researchers at Johns Hopkins University found statistically significant elevations of major depressive disorder in only three of the 104 occupations surveyed.
One of those, you might suspect, is lawyers. When adjusted for sociodemographics, lawyers top the list. Suffering from depression at a rate 3. 6 times higher than employed persons generally. Lawyers also suffer from alcoholism and illegal drug use at rates far higher than non lawyers. And the divorce rate among lawyers, especially women, also appears to be higher than

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

the divorce rate among other professionals.
Thus, by any measure, lawyers embody the paradox of money losing its hold. They're one of the best paid professionals, and yet they are disproportionately unhappy and unhealthy. And lawyers know it. Many are retiring early or leaving the profession altogether. Does that resonate with sort of your vision or your experience of being a lawyer?

Lee Burgess: Well, that's super depressing. Let's just take a moment. Oh my gosh, I'm getting depressed by reading the statistics about depression.

Alison Monahan: I know it is sort of really depressing. I mean, three and a half times higher. That's I mean, that's enormous. We're not talking like 10 percent more likely that you're going to be depressed as a lawyer.
Three and a half times more likely to be depressed.

Lee Burgess: Ah, so depressing. But, you know, I think I know a lot of really unhappy lawyers, which is really sad. I know a lot of happy ones, too. But the people who are unhappy, the unhappiness runs really deep. I mean, it seems like I consistently get emails from friends, telling me that they're leaving the law with you know, a voice that is gleeful and passion filled about kind of escaping their legal job, which I think is, is sad, right? Because I mean, it's not like we hate the law. I think that becoming a lawyer can be a really great thing if you find the right fit for you. But I do think that when you are in this profession and doing a job that is not a good fit for you, that you are signing yourself up for a really difficult road.
And I think, I know Alison, you and I have both seen people whose personal lives are in shambles, people who are alcoholics, people who need mental health counseling because they're really upset and depressed.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, a friend of mine in law school actually had what was sort of a joke, but not entirely a joke.
He thought it would be interesting to create a big law misery index, by firm. And one of the, one of the factors he was in all seriousness going to use was basically the divorce rate among partners. He's like, you know, because, you know, Lots of them are on their second or third divorce at this point, and that can't be a good sign for working conditions.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's very true.
You know, and it's not just, like, the law. I mean, I think, I used to be a consultant and worked for a big consulting firm before law school, and the divorce rate in the consulting firm was also astronomical. That was mostly because everybody

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

traveled for work all the time and, you know, it was gone, but, so, I mean, that was also problematic.

Alison Monahan: No, and I think there are a lot of similarities with, say, a large law firm and a large accounting firm or a large consulting firm. I think one key difference, though, is lawyers are managing their own organizations, and lawyers tend to be really horrifically terrible managers, and it's not something they care about. So, you know, in a firm, you might have people talk about, oh, you know, they're the lawyers and they're the non lawyers. I mean, can you imagine another business where it's like oh, we're the business people, but like my HR people are the non business people, you know, it's like, no, the, you know, and like, so the consultant sure, like they work crazy hours and it puts tons of stress on people and it's, you know, horrible for the relationship, but at some point they also have someone who's trained in business evaluating things and saying, you know what, actually, we might be more efficient if we forced our people to take, you know, one day a weekend off, and I mean, you would never hear that from a law firm.

Lee Burgess: No. And I think one of the things that this, you know, study doesn't even touch on specifically is, you know, it mentions the divorce rate amongst women, but I know you and I have done a lot of reading about the, the difficulty women have becoming moms. Yeah. And keeping up, you know, especially like a big law career or even a, just a competitive legal career and some of this stuff that gets written by you know, big law partners about how women as new moms are supposed to handle it is shocking.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, just pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Get out there. Like, hire someone. If you need two nannies, get two nannies. Just make it happen.

Lee Burgess: Yes. So it's hard because I think that even if you read this stuff and you're like, this is whole, these statistics are just shocking and I can't believe that they're true, but then you start to think about, you know, what happens in some of these organizations that creates this environment. It is believable.

Alison Monahan: No, I believe it. I mean, but I want to push back a little bit on something you said earlier, too, which is that This idea that if you just find the right fit in the law, like, you know, you're not going to have any problems. I think there's a lot of truth to that. Like having a better fit can definitely decrease your problems, but I think there are these things that are sort of intrinsic to the profession that can lead to a lot of mental health problems. Even if it's a job that, you know, you're

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

totally dedicated to and you care about and you get sort of extrinsic motivation from.

Lee Burgess: Fair point.

Alison Monahan: And intrinsic motivation.

Lee Burgess: Yes.

Alison Monahan: You know, I'm thinking, for example, of. Like my law school roommate who was very dedicated to public interest work. And after graduation, she became a public defender in New Orleans. And you can kind of imagine like how intense that experience was. And even though, you know, she really cared about the work and she, after a couple of years, was just like, I can't do this anymore. Like, it's literally killing me.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Well, so it's a good thing that she left and found a spot somewhere else. And I think that's maybe one of the other things that is the new reality as a legal profession is, you may not have people who have one legal career, just, you know, like the longevity in other , kind of in other career spaces is that now we move around and how many times on average do folks change careers now? I can't remember that statistic.

Alison Monahan: Oh, it's something like every three years or something? I mean, yeah, like the average person will have like 15 or, you know, something careers in their career.

Lee Burgess: But you know, our parents generation, you know, worked as prosecutors for 25, 30 years.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, like my father was a manager at the same company his entire career.

Lee Burgess: Right, and I think that maybe also one of the realities is. You have to be very cognizant of, you know, if this job is wearing on you and be able to say, Okay, my time here is up. I need to switch to do something else. It may not be leaving the law, but it may be finding a space that isn't so hard on you.

Alison Monahan: Right, and that's the sort of one of the pieces of advice the judge that worked for gave us. When we left, you know, I was going to a large law firm. My co clerk was going to a large law firm. We both were pretty realistic about the idea that like we probably would not spend our entire career in this law firm. You know, just look at the statistics. 80 percent of associates leave in the first

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

five years. So, you know, even if you think you're a special snowflake, like, probably you're going to leave. So we were realistic about this. And he said, you know, my only advice to you is make sure when you want to leave, you're able to leave.
Like, specifically financially, you know, like, don't take on a lot of expenses. Don't take a mortgage. Don't take on, like, really, you know, fancy car loans and these sort of things. Because there's no, he's like, if you can't leave and do something else when it's time for that to happen, that's when people become really miserable.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that is amazing advice that we often give to many of our students and mentees.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. But you know, so I think it's interesting to sort of think about these intrinsic pieces of the profession and why they tend to make lawyers unhappy. Because I mean, let's think about it, you know, people who are doctors, like they operate under stressful conditions, they're dealing with important stuff, but they're not seeing depression rates anywhere close to what the legal profession sees.
So some of the issues that Martin or Professor Seligman has identified, I think are pretty interesting to think about. And he identifies three primary ones, and the first is that in law school and also in a legal career, typically. Pessimism is rewarded. So typically for mental health reasons, you're better off being an optimistic person.
You know, optimistic people like try harder. They were more resilient, you know, they get better results typically. But the really interesting thing is he did a study of students who are coming into Virginia to UVA, and he found that the most pessimistic students were the ones who did the best. So, you know, basically, and then in law school, obviously you're trained to always look on the dark side to like, what's the possible problem we have to, what are the risks here?
So you're trained to be really risk averse. So, you know, if you're naturally pessimistic and then you're trained to be even more risk averse, and then that's rewarded because you do better on your exams and you actually do better typically. In your legal career, because you're the person who, you know, when the deal is being done, it's like, well, what about this crazy thing that could happen?
You know, this one in a million chance. And the client's like, Oh, good point. We hadn't thought about that. Of course, the problem is you can't turn that off.

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

Lee Burgess: No, just ask my husband. That's, he's always like, it's not always going to be the worst case scenario.
That's one of his favorite things to say to me.

Alison Monahan: I mean, and he grew up in basically a family of entrepreneurs.

Lee Burgess: Right. Totally different.

Alison Monahan: So, you know, your background, like growing up as a child, two lawyers who were always looking on the dark side. Right. You know, his parents were like, no, let's just make it happen. Maybe it'll be wildly successful.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. Yeah. So, I mean, But it's amazing because I have to catch myself that I, I am hardwired both for my legal education and the way that I grew up to see the world that way.
Now, does it make me really good at certain things? Of course.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, well, that's the problem is that there are benefits to that point of view.

Lee Burgess: For sure.

Alison Monahan: I mean, I think for me, I was never risk averse. And so that was one of the reasons I couldn't stand being a lawyer. I was like, oh, I worry about this.
Like, who knows? Like, we'll figure it out if it happens, which is not really the mindset that, you know, you're necessarily looking for.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. But what about the nature of the work? Is that something else that the professor talks about?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And what he, I mean, Sort of technical way that he describes it is that attorneys, particularly junior level attorneys, have what he calls low decision latitude in high stress situations.
And in a nutshell, what this basically means is you don't really have control over your work. And so there are lots of studies that you know of people in the workplace and one of the key factors. In terms of how happy they are It was whether they have a sense of being in control of their own schedule and being in control of the work that they're doing.
And you know, I think you can pretty easily see that for most lawyers, For various reasons, that's just not the reality. I mean, if you're a litigator, you're, you have deadlines that are out of your control. You know, the court is telling you, like, you have to produce this document by, you know, this date. You have to be at

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

this hearing.
Um, and then obviously, you know, if you're working as a low, a low level attorney, you've got partners telling you what to do, or your boss is telling you what to do. What do you I mean, did you find, do you have any thoughts about this from your experiences in the firm?

Lee Burgess: This was one of the most frustrating things about firm life for me.
Was that, you know, I am not generally a procrastinator. And so I like to, like, plug along at work. So I'm not frantic at the last minute. and the Friday afternoon email blast from the partners-

Alison Monahan: Yes, like 4:45 like, oh, who's around this weekend, right. To help on this emergency project that I dropped the ball on because I was not paying attention four days ago.

Lee Burgess: Well, that was the thing. It was like these weren't real emergencies. These were actually things that they knew about. They just didn't plan ahead. So, you know, one of the things that really got me was, at the time I was at the firm was during part of the slow down, so there were times when work was not a plenty.
And so I would be at the office during the week, you know, doing FaceTime and kind of hunting for work and doing pro bono work and things like that. And then Friday afternoon these emails would come up and you'd end up working all weekend. And I felt like I was working insane hours, but my billables weren't that high because the work was getting front loaded to the weekends.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Which does not make for a really fun work existence.

Alison Monahan: Right, and back to, again, back to management practices. That's just horrible management.
I remember the first summer job I ever had, similar thing, you know, we started on like a Wednesday or something, you go for a few days of orient Actually, both of the summer jobs now that I think about it, you go for a few days of orientation.
And then, Friday afternoon, a partner walks in, drops a box of documents, and is like, oh, okay, so we're gonna need you to like, take care of this over the weekend. And you're like, seriously? I'm a summer associate. I mean, the first, like, after my second summer, I literally worked every day for the first two weeks, including like, three or four in the morning on Saturday and Sunday.

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

And I had to cancel my own birthday party.
And I was a summer.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: A summer! Like, it was only gonna get worse.

Lee Burgess: Right. I mean, I remember taking a trip with my family to Yosemite. Um, well, I was an associate and we got to the cabin and my Blackberry didn't work.

Alison Monahan: Oh God.

Lee Burgess: But it was, it was actually kind of awesome because I just looked, I looked at my husband and I was like, well, guess I'm not answering emails this weekend.
And I just turned it off.

Alison Monahan: No, I had partners who, I went to Burning Man while I was at the firm and I, you know, I told them very specifically, like, you, you are not going to be able to get in touch with me. Like, I'm not kidding. You know? And I got out a week later and I had all these messages being like, I don't know why you're not responding. I'm like, are you kidding me? Like I wasn't making this up. So yeah, I think this like always on sort of thing is crazy.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think it just really messes with your head and it creates no boundaries between. Your personal life.

Alison Monahan: Oh, do you you remember when you quit? Did you have like phantom blackberry syndrome?

Lee Burgess: I don't know that-

Alison Monahan: Because I rem I remember like the last day of work and I remember giving back my Blackberry and then I went up to my Tahoe ski cabin and I remember like being in the backseat of this car and having these like moments of panic 'cause I couldn't find my Blackberry. And it had been like 20 minutes and I hadn't checked my email.
And this went on for like three days.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's pretty extreme.

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

Alison Monahan: Well, yeah, no, I mean, you know, the firm I worked for was that, you know, the managing partners sending out emails at three in the morning that ended up on above the law, like check use emails often. You know, so there's literally the expectation that if you wake up in the middle of the night and need a glass of water, that you're going to check your work email and not just look at it.

You're actually going to respond to things at three in the morning. I mean, that's crazy.

Lee Burgess: It is crazy. And you know, these stories should make you nervous if you're, you know, moving towards a big law profession. But I think the reality is you need to hear these stories because not all firms are that extreme.

And so you need to learn about the firms and the culture to see if you know, there are some that sound like a better fit for you. I'm sure there are people who don't mind checking their email and responding to work emails at 3 in the morning. But I am not one of them.

Alison Monahan: No, but I think that also feeds a little bit into, like, why individual people end up having so many problems with the laws, because on some level, you know, it is gratifying, like, you feel important if you get a client email at 3 in the morning, and that becomes the cycle of, like, oh, I'm so important, like, I need to respond to this. I mean, frankly, most of the things you're responding to are totally pointless and could wait until morning. But people, you know, they get caught up in this sort of external validation of like, you know, makes me feel important to be working for an important client or to like be getting these emails.

And so, you know, that, I think, is not necessarily the most healthy outlook. You know, there's a lot of, a lot of studies suggesting that, like, being validated externally is actually, in the long run, doesn't really lead to happiness, is more sort of intrinsic motivations, and this is actually, there's an interesting article, people probably saw, in the New York Times at some point about the relationship between pay, as a lawyer, and job satisfaction. And basically, you know, this is not the only study on this topic. I've seen others. I think Michigan does a study of their graduates and they find the same thing, but but basically, the more sort of successful you are and the more money you make in the legal profession, the less happy you tend to be, which is very interesting.

Lee Burgess: Which is very interesting. I mean, it's, but I think it's, you have to ask yourself, they're paying you a lot of money for a reason, you know?

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, they have to pay you that much money for people to do this.

Lee Burgess: Right. It's so true.

Alison Monahan: And I guess we should circle back to the third thing that is identified as one of the typical reasons that people are miserable in the law.

And that's just the underlying nature of the profession. You know, think about business, think about being an entrepreneur, creating a business, or even an established business. Ideally, when people come into a meeting, what's their goal? They want to have a win win, right? You know, like, if it's a negotiation, I want to get something, you want to get something, but ideally, we end up with something where the sum is greater than any of the pieces.
But that's not really the way the legal profession works, right? Like, somebody wins and someone loses. It's not typically a win win environment.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I mean, I think there are those lawyers who are out there trying to create win win environments. Sure, which is nice. Which is great. But generally speaking, yeah, I mean, litigation is all about conflict.
And I think it's not just about the fact that somebody has to lose. I also think it has to do with the fact that you're typically representing clients when people are at their worst. I mean, and this is in all parts of the legal profession, but since most legal work is due to conflict, the people are not usually at their best in conflict.

Alison Monahan: You don't typically call your lawyer when things are going well.

Lee Burgess: No, you really don't. No, I mean, they're, you know, maybe there are positive things like you're adopting a child, you know, or something like that. But sure, there could be. There are outlying situations, but generally speaking, it's because this stuff is not going well, and I think, people in extreme situations can, are really hard to deal with, and you, most of these attorneys have to kind of take on some of that stress either of the corporate client or an individual client or the family members of a client, um, and I think that that part of the profession also becomes, very draining on lawyers.

Alison Monahan: I think that's a great point, I mean, if I think about my day to day life now versus my day to day life as an attorney. I was just on a daily basis dealing with so many more stressed out people when I was an attorney. You know, now, like, occasionally, like, we'll get an email from, you know, a student who's having an

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

issue or something, but typically, like, Most of what we get is kind of positive feedback.

Lee Burgess: It's true, and even the stressed students, it's our job to help them become less stressed.

Alison Monahan: Right, it's sort of like, you know, so we're like more in the role of the doctor. We're like sure you're seeing people at a bad time, but ideally you sort of patch them up and put them back together and then you have the satisfaction of seeing them go off and like live their life and be happy.

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: Well, I mean, with lawyers, it's like, best case scenario is like, your client wins, and they're like, okay, great, but, I mean, lawyers are also terrible at giving praise, so, you know, like, I mean, I definitely had a situation where I'd, like, write a winning summary judgment motion. And the partner would like forget to tell me we'd won.
Much less be like, wow, that was so great. Like you did a fantastic job. We're so happy. We're so proud. You know, like weeks later you'd be like, oh, I just saw on the docket that like, we won that. Great. Do I get like any recognition for this? No.

Lee Burgess: You know, I think the other thing is this kind of disassociation with the work that you do, too, is kind of a coping mechanism, and that's part of the profession as well, is you oftentimes have to step into the role of an advocate that is not what you believe.

Right. And then you're spending a lot of time basically doing like a role play, which is fine to a point, but, you know, if you do that all the time, it can be really easy to lose your kind of authentic self of what you actually believe in and are passionate about.

Alison Monahan: No, and I think that definitely starts in law school.
I mean, you know, I think a lot of people when they go into law school, they experience a lot of cognitive dissonance because, The values that you came to school with that you've had your entire life are suddenly being challenged in this very direct way. I mean, I remember a story from, uh, the class below me where I think it was constitutional law.
And so the professor, you know, assigned everyone these roles and they had to role play. And he gave this, you know, very left wing, like, advocate sort of girl

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

some horrible, like, you know, to defend something that she just thought was, like, literally indefensible, and she, she did it, but she showed up dressed like Hitler.

Lee Burgess: Wow.

Alison Monahan: As a statement.
So, I mean, but, you know, that shows actually a lot of, like, fortitude on her part, um, to just say, like, this is not something that I will willingly participate in. Like, I will do it because you're making me do it, but I'm also going to protest against it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Which is not something, you know, that I think almost any law student would even consider doing.

Lee Burgess: You know, one of the other things that I think is interesting about this new technology age, and how it's maybe creating almost a pressure cooker for some of these issues, is the fact that we don't have time to contemplate our responses to anything, or slow down and even process anything. And be more strategic about how we deal with things.
I was in, a couple of years ago, I did some mindfulness training that Judy Cohen offers from her Warrior One programming, which is great if you have any interest in mindfulness training for lawyers, it's like warriorone.com. But anyway, Judy talked about how when she began practicing law, how different it was when people would like, send an inflammatory letter.
Because like, the letter would land on your secretary's desk, and the secretary would open it, and then, you know, record it for filing, and then leave it on your desk. And then it would be in your inbox, and then you would choose a moment when you would go review. The possible inflammatory documents, and then you would read-

Alison Monahan: Right, so, and your secretary might, in some cases, warn you that like, hey, you're not gonna be happy when you read this.

Lee Burgess: Right? You know? And then you'd read it and you'd go like, wow, that was really inflammatory. And then you would like either lay it to the side or you'd like work on a response. But then you'd print it, or you'd type it, and then you'd proofread it, or maybe you'd dictate it, and your secretary would type it, and then you'd read it.

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

And so there are all these steps before you ended up communicating your response. So there was cool off time, there was time for you to reflect, there was time for you to kind of recover from the fight.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: And so not everything was done in this kind of like fight or flight state. And I think now with technology, I mean, we are, we are almost in this constant, you know, fight or flight nervous state because the emails just come in constantly. You don't know when the bomb is going to be dropped in your email, and you're expected to respond to it immediately.

Alison Monahan: Right, and on like a mobile device typically, which I think just encourages people to like spout off about, you know, without really thinking twice about things.

Lee Burgess: So true. So I think the other thing that can be hard for, Lawyers practicing that have only practiced in this time of technology is to figure out how to manage the technology so it doesn't exacerbate these problems with the profession and make it even harder to practice law as kind of a whole person.

Alison Monahan: Right. And the other problem I think too, is as the hours demands just increase, you know, it used to be like 20 years ago, 30 years ago, people were expected to bill like 1300 hours a year. That was considered kind of the maximum of what you could possibly do. And now like twice that is normal. And you know, there are all these articles about like overwork and whatnot, but you know, basically, if you work too much, you're not sleeping, it's short circuits, the sort of emotional stability that you need to deal with these highly stressful situations.
So, You know, it's like a vicious cycle. The more you work, the worse decisions you're making about more trivial things and the less capacity you have to sort of respond as a mature person in the universe. Yeah. So I don't know. I mean, it's definitely, it's a, it's all a problem.

Lee Burgess: You know, it is all a problem.
And I think, you know, most people aren't surprised to hear that. Law firms are, and honestly, any type of law practice is a stressful work environment, that there are a lot of demands placed on you by your peers and your supervisors and oftentimes your clients, but then I think, I think, you know, really looking at who self selects themselves to become a lawyer can also feed into this.
I mean, I think we often talk about the problem with lawyers being perfectionists and how that can really be problematic when you practice law and

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

then that feeds into, again, it bleeding over into your personal life. Do you consider yourself a perfectionist, Alison?

Alison Monahan: I think I'm a recovering perfectionist.
No, I mean, I definitely had that tendency, you know. I mean, I think. Most people who end up in law school are very type A. They've worked hard all their lives, you know, they're overachievers. And they, you know, most people have received validation for getting good grades and being smart. And so I think that, you know, the fact that you basically have received that validation in a lot of cases, you know, because you were like, oh, you're the smart kid.
Like that's what you do. You've never really thought that carefully about what it is that you want. It's all people, you know, teachers or parents or whoever coaches like telling you what to do. And then you're like, Oh, if I achieve this. You know, I'll be happy. And then you kind of realize at some point, like, that's sort of a hollow goal, um, and that, you know, getting straight A's because your parents wanted you to is ultimately probably not actually that satisfying.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: But then, you know, then you get to law school and it's like, oh, the competition is even greater. I mean, for me, for example, like, you know, I did well my first semester in law school and then basically had a nervous breakdown because the pressure to continue doing well was even more intense. And you know, I've talked about this before, like, I ended up clinically depressed, um, I went to therapy, and you know, so that was a lot of what we talked about, was like, well, what are you getting out of this?
Like, are you really satisfied by, like, the idea that you have to get, you know, does getting an A make you happy? It's like, no, it makes me more stressed out.

Lee Burgess: And I think we've, we've read studies that have talked about the fact that, A lot of these issues that we find with the legal profession as a whole, they start in law school.
I mean, law school is turning, turning us into these people who cannot You know, cope with our professional and personal existence very well.

Alison Monahan: No, and I think a lot of that has to do with the stress. I mean, they, you know, they've got a study we can link to about 96% of law students experience what they call extreme stress versus 70% of medical students and 43% of overall graduate students.

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

So, you know, like, I mean, I would say arguably doctors should be a lot more stressed out. Like what they're doing is a lot more important.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: But, you know, but almost all law students are experiencing this really extreme stress, which is horrible for your health.

Lee Burgess: Mhm.

Alison Monahan: Um, and so you see it, you know, they've done studies of students coming into law school, and they found, you know, they're basically completely normal psychologically, like they have pretty good coping skills, and within a few months, something like 30 to 40 percent of them are clinically depressed. Yeah, that's really sad. And these are not people who, you know, some people are sort of like, oh, well, you know, they just couldn't hack it. It's like, that's not true. These are people who are doing fine, and three months into law school, like, they suddenly can't get out of bed.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: Like, that's a problem.

Lee Burgess: It is a problem.

Alison Monahan: Anyway, I didn't know about that when that happened to me. I thought, like, oh, like, I'm just, you know, I can't cut it, or I'm not, like, strong enough, or whatever, but when you look at it in the context of, like, this is something that happened to me, like, this is something that was basically imposed upon me externally, it's very different from thinking, like, oh, I'm, you know, just a person who gets depressed.

Lee Burgess: Right. So, I mean, what do you do? So a lot of new law students are listening to this podcast, and if they weren't feeling depressed when they started listening to it, they might have not-

Alison Monahan: They're probably really depressed.

Lee Burgess: I know. Now they're feeling very depressed, you know, like a half hour into this experience.
So we are big advocates of figuring out what you can do to make your life better. And so I think there are things that law students and lawyers can do. To make

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

sure that they are not the percentage that is struggling to the extent that these surveys talk about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And I think a lot of this, I mean, you know, it's the stuff your mom would, like, tell you to do if you asked her.
But the reality is this stuff works. It's like, you know, you've got to pay attention to, are you sleeping enough? Because, you know, Not sleeping is one of the fastest ways to make yourself crazy. It takes about four days

Lee Burgess: Or a year if you have a newborn.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, no, exactly. Yeah, but you know, I mean, literally if you don't sleep for a couple of days, you will start hallucinating, you will eventually die.
So it's true. So, you know, these are things that you think like, oh, I've got to stay up and like, you know, read one more supplement. It's like, no, you have to go to bed and kind of developing like good. I mean, again, like, time and life management practices of, like, really taking care of yourself, like, self care.
Your brain is the only thing that's going to get you through law school, and you have to take care of that.

Lee Burgess: Right, and your body, because I think a lot of people think, well, I'm taking care of my brain, but you're also only as good as the healthy body that's, you know, You deliver into your exams.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, totally.
So things like, I mean, for me, I think for you too, like going to a yoga class, for example, is restorative in all aspects. And you know these, like you've got to manage, you have to have sort of proactively have a plan for managing the stress that you almost certainly are going to encounter.

Lee Burgess: And heavy drinking is not a great way to long term manage that stress, contrary to what most people do.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think, you know, the drinking rates and like drug use and whatnot in law school are off the charts. And I think if you find yourself, you know, if you find yourself in a position where you're saying, you know, I'm drinking either every night, I mean, a friend of mine who is also in law school in New York, eventually sort of acknowledged after his first year, he's like, my brain was so wound up that I would go to a bar alone at midnight when I left the library every night.

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

And you know, that's not going to kill you necessarily, but it's also not very healthy over the long term.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And so, you know, a better use of his half hour or hour he spent in the bar might have been listening to a guided meditation to help him sleep or whatever.

Lee Burgess: Mm hmm. Yeah, going to a 24 hour gym and actually, you know, walking or moving.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. Like doing something, so I think, you know, you know, understanding like you're making the choices about how to deal with the stress, um, and you can make better or worse ones. Also, obviously, like, you know, we're advocates of getting the help that you need. If you're, if you see yourself spiraling down a pathway that doesn't seem like it's going to end up in a good place, it's better to break that cycle early.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely, and we've mentioned this on this podcast a few different times, many schools have resources that are free for you to reach out to if you are struggling, you should reach out for help.

Alison Monahan: Right, there are also, you know, there are books on this topic. There's some called, like, The Happy Lawyer, or like, you know, I saw one the other day, Yoga for Lawyers.
Um, you know, there are all kinds of things that you can pick up. One of our friends is working on a book called The Resilient Lawyer or like the Warrior One Training. You know, these are things, it's not like you, there are options out there. And more and more people are sort of tuning into this idea that like, to be a good lawyer, you need to be a healthy lawyer and a happy lawyer.
I mean, then there's a bigger question of like, are your career choices actually aligning with your values? Because if you're chasing the money in a big law firm, like, you have to understand what you're getting into.

Lee Burgess: Yep, it's very true. And, you know, make sure that you're okay with that. I think you, you have to always remember that life is kind of happening while you're doing whatever you're doing.
And I think sometimes people just get on this hamster wheel of saying, Yeah, I've gotta see a big law. I've got to pay off my debt, I've got to, you know, take this job because it was given to me, and then you're on this hamster wheel, and then

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

four years of your life goes by, and you realize, you know, you've missed a lot of life.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think also, I read an interesting article yesterday about sort of reframing, it was interesting, you just said, I've got to do this. And this article is really about reframing into, I get to do this, which can have a very different, you know, I've got to keep this big law job. It's very different than, I get to have this challenging job in order to support my family.

Lee Burgess: Right. And I think the people I know who enjoy big law, or at least are are happy in that career choice, have that mindset

Alison Monahan: Right, it's just a different way of looking at it. I mean, the job is what it is, and some people like it and some people hate it. So, whatever job you have, is there a way you can reframe? Or if it is in law school, some people are like, oh I have to do this for school, its like, law school is a privilege, you've chosen to be there. You know, like how many people would kill themselves to have this opportunity? And, you know, yeah, it's stressful, but it's also a huge opportunity that you can choose how you're going to take, like, what you're going to do.

Lee Burgess: And if you're a new law student, I think that's one of the reasons why we also advocate spending time with people who aren't in law school. Because I think sometimes it's just a really good reminder that What you're doing is a privilege. It is a luxury of being able to go back to school.

Alison Monahan: Right. Or, you know, do some pro bono work and find out like what real problems.

Lee Burgess: It is very, very true. Yeah, It's to keep yourself connected to reality. Cause I think it is very easy to get caught up in the stresses of your day to day existence.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, which is stressful and it's also fine to acknowledge that. You don't have to pretend that you're not stressed out, like, you will be.

Lee Burgess: No.

Alison Monahan: All right, well, with that, unfortunately, we are out of time. Hopefully you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast. We'd really appreciate it if you had a second to leave a rating or review on iTunes, and you can subscribe to make sure you don't miss anything. And if you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to us.

Episode 10: Why are Lawyers so Unhappy?

You can reach Lee, L E E, @LawSchoolToolbox.com, or Alison, A L I S O N, @LawSchoolToolbox.com, or you can always contact us via our contact form on the website at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening. We'll talk soon.