Episode 23: Law School Exam Day Tips

Lee Burgess: Hello and welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're going to be sharing tips for getting ready for exam day. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess. That's me. 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.

We're the co creators of the Law School Toolbox, the Bar Exam Toolbox, the Catapult Conference and the Trebuchet Legal Career site. Alison also runs the Girl's Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on iTunes. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com, and we'd love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.

Alison Monahan: Well, it's the day that you've all been waiting for. Final exam season is upon Sure, you've been preparing over the last weeks or months for this moment, but it's incredibly important to think about how you're going to get ready for exam game day. And the same way that an athlete must have a pre game day approach to be prepared and get to the right mindset for success, so do you.

But enough of the sports analogies, let's talk about some practical tips for the exam period and specifically for the exam day, so you can be prepared to walk in and do your absolute best and be ready to go. So Lee, let's talk about getting ready for the exam period. So, you know, say I'm a couple of weeks out, maybe it's the reading week, the start of reading week, or it's about to be reading week.

What do I need to do?

Lee Burgess: Well, I think you really do need to look at this. exam period, mine was always a couple weeks long, as, you know, kind of an exam bubble. You need to get your life in order. That means, you know, make sure your house is stocked, grocery shop, make sure you're not going to run out of toilet paper, things like that.

Alison Monahan: Oh my god, can I tell you what we used to do in preparation in my house? I had two roommates in law school. I had sort of forgotten about this until right now. Our our preparation for the exam day period, the exam period, was we would place an order from sees candy, which if you know, if you're in California, I went to law school in New York, but if you're a California and you know exactly what I'm talking about, you can go to the scenes website and you can order yourself exactly like each piece of candy that you want.

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So we would each order ourselves a custom box of exactly what we wanted. And then we would get one for the house for like our guests who would come over and study and like him. And so that was like our, that was our ritual. That was our preparation. We had to have the See's candy or we weren't going to be able to study.

Lee Burgess: Excellent. I like it. I like the See's candy studying approach. I like it.

Alison Monahan: And people loved it when they came over, they were like, Oh, this is such a good idea.

Lee Burgess: I think especially for winter term, because It's, you know, it's, it's the holiday time and I always found kind of finals and exams were such a bummer because everyone around you is so joyful because it's the holidays.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, like New York and the holidays is great. It's like snowing, there's Christmas trees, there's Santa Claus, everybody's going like Rockefeller Center, ice skating, you're like studying for exams.

Lee Burgess: Did you have a Christmas tree in your law library?

Alison Monahan: I'm pretty sure they would not do that at Columbia.

Lee Burgess: Fair point. I went to a Jesuit law school.

Alison Monahan: Only if it was like next to a menorah.

Lee Burgess: Right. We also had, I believe, a menorah in our law library because our dean was Jewish, even though I went to a Jesuit law school. But they had this Christmas tree every year, and the law students could make the ornaments. They had like crafts out and it was kind of like law school therapy was to make Christmas tree ornaments that you could hang on the tree, it was very fun.

Alison Monahan: Right. So, you know, if you're gonna need Christmas decorations, now is the time to be thinking about where you're gonna get them.

You don't want to be stringing up your lights the day before your exam. Exactly.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. Other things you can do, most of us, you know, pay our bills electronically, like set up things for auto pay. So you don't, you know, miss a bill pay and get in trouble. angry note from your landlord or something like that.

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Alison Monahan: Right, or like miss a credit card payment. And like not, you know, have to call them and like negotiate for the fees and all that stuff.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, so do everything like that you can. Schedule everything out early. And try and just look at your calendar and make sure, you know, don't schedule a dentist appointment during final exam period unless you absolutely have to go to the dentist, you know.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's tempting when you're looking at like all, you've got like seven whole days with nothing in it. Like, let's schedule a haircut and a dentist appointment and a massage and all this. It's like, no, this is not, you need to be studying.

Lee Burgess: Yes, although the massage can be a good R& R. So sometimes the massage you might have time for.

But especially anything that could cause you stress. Like, I hate the dentist.

Alison Monahan: Or like a doctor. You don't want to go get like test results.

Lee Burgess: No, no. So, try and just move all those appointments or commitments that are not absolutely necessary to outside of the exam period. I think it's okay to hang out with friends and to have some social time because it helps with your sanity, but don't do so to the detriment of your studying.

You might have to have a sit down with your friends and significant others and family, especially if you're a first semester law student, about what this really means because you're not going to be taking whole days off to go, you know, do family shopping outings and things like that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and that can be really tough because people don't necessarily understand the pressure that you're under, but the more you can kind of set those expectations and, you know, if you do have family, for example, you know, it's probably not realistic for you to think like, I'm just going to totally skip Christmas with the kids, you know, it's like, yeah, it's better to say, look, okay, let's sit down like with, you know, as the adults with our calendars and say, okay, you know, I can take four hours off this particular afternoon and we can take the kids ice skating, or we can go to shopping, you know, to buy them presents.

You wanna try to balance these things, but at the same time it's, you know, it's not realistic for you to necessarily say like, oh yeah, I just won't work for the two days before my first test.

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Lee Burgess: Right. And I think too, I mean, depending on if you practice various religions, you can have, you know, religious holidays popping up at different times in December, depending on where your exams are.

You know, you want to make sure that you are planning for those family commitments. But still respecting the fact that law school is pretty important and you want to do well.

Alison Monahan: And again, you know, if you're listening to this before Thanksgiving, same thing with Thanksgiving, like we've talked about 100 times.

You just have to be realistic. But at the same time, you want to watch out for signs of burnout, and you do want to make sure that you're taking time to mentally recover from all the studying that you're going to be doing, because you're going to be doing a lot of studying. Your brain is going to get tired.

Lee Burgess: And what are some of those signs of burnouts that are some of your favorite, Alison?

Alison Monahan: I think for me, it's I start to go into the sort of self sabotaging type of behaviors where either I'll stay up super late, you know, I'll be like, oh, I'm tired at midnight, but then it's two 30 in the morning. And I find myself like I've been on the iPad browsing the web for two and a half hours.

Why was I doing that? Or just not getting up in the morning. Like, oh, I'm so tired. I need another four hours of sleep and getting up at like noon. Those are signs for me that like, okay, there's something going on. I don't know, what about you?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that too. I have this horrible habit of not wanting to go to bed because I don't want to do what I have to do to get up in the morning, which is so, but that doesn't help.

That's, you know, I, even now that I have a young kid, I mean, If I, if he's, he's had a cold and he'll wake up more often and I'll be like, God, I just don't want to go to sleep because he's going to wake me up crying in the middle of the night because he's-

Alison Monahan: Yeah, better than, better than you just be awake when he starts crying.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. I know, right? But I do have my own self sabotaging behaviors. I definitely take on other projects.

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Alison Monahan: Oh yeah, right.

Lee Burgess: Around the house especially. So I'm not a big fan of studying in my house because I can start finding a project anywhere, anywhere.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's like, my house was never as clean as during the exam period.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, you know, burnout is something that I think almost all of us can struggle with, but you just have to be very conscious of it, and one of the best things you can do is by creating a study schedule to give yourself breaks. So, you know, if you want to do some of these, Neurotic behaviors. You do them during your break time and not during your study time.

Alison Monahan: Right. You know, it's fine to have like a one hour, two hour, like during your break time sex and the city marathon is probably not okay to have an eight hour, like Netflix, marathon.

Lee Burgess: I do remember a student who once came to me in office hours when it was teaching and I said, how are how's the studying going?

And she goes, well, I did watch a marathon of Dexter all weekend.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Like that's a sign that you're probably avoiding something like actually getting work done.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: Or, you know, I mean, again, like, as we know, there are a lot of issues in law school and in the legal profession with things like substance abuse.

So, you know, if you find yourself drinking really heavily, you're going at, or for example, if you say, oh, you know, I'm going to have a beer with my friend is like a study break. And you find that you're drinking all night, you know, that's another sign that this is probably not the healthiest behavior.

Yeah, I'm not the most productive.

Lee Burgess: Exactly, and sometimes this unhealthy behavior actually leads to you getting sick Which I think in the winter months for winter exams are a really big concern for people Because getting sick can really derail you so your first priority if you get sick is to get better.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean you may have to take a day off and spend it in bed.

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Lee Burgess: Right, but that's better than having like a week of feeling sick

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and it's the sort of thing where like you, you just have to know yourself. You know, if it's a minor cold and you can kind of keep going and get an extra hour or two of sleep at night, great. But you know, if you're really not like with it at all and you're not studying, if you're not studying effectively because you don't feel well, you need to prioritize feeling better.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. And stress is going to make everything worse. So, you know, a cold can turn into something much worse if you don't take care of yourself.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and also, I mean, like, for my first semester exams, I had really horrible insomnia. So even though I had made my responsible schedule, and I'd blocked out, you know, time to sleep between 12 and 8 or 9 every morning, I wasn't able to fall asleep every night until 3 or 4 in the morning.

So I was getting maybe 4 hours of sleep. And after doing that for a couple of weeks, you're certifiably crazy. So, you know, after that, basically, I made sure that I had gone to the doctor and had them prescribe me sleeping pills because during the exam period, I would find that I had to take them.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

The one thing to also keep in mind is if something extreme happens, I mean, we've heard all the stories. You have to get your appendix out, you know, you are so sick that you are hospitalized, a family member is hospitalized, somebody passes away. I even had a friend who had a friend. friend commit suicide during final exams, not a law student.

Alison Monahan: Horrible.

Lee Burgess: I know, but horrible. So, horrible things can happen. The thing is, you need, if you feel like these horrible things are going to prevent you from taking your exams, you need to talk to your school as soon as possible. So if If the, if, because the world does not stop for final exams, if you find something horrible has happened, don't wait for two or three days to see what the school will do, you need to reach out to your registrar or your dean's office, but do not, under any circumstances, call your professor, because usually, you're not allowed to speak to your professors during the exam period, and if you do end up making up the exam, it's got to all be blind grading.

It's, it's very touchy. Go to the dean's office or the registrar first.

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Alison Monahan: Yeah, or like the student affairs people, or whatever. Like, there should be someone who's like responsible for dealing with these sort of situations. Which, of course, hopefully you don't encounter, but things do happen. And, yeah, I think, you know, something horrible is going on, you know, like a family member's in the hospital or something, a lot of people are like, oh, you know, I'm just gonna, I'll compartmentalize, I'll be okay. And then they realize, like, really, I'm not okay. It's much better to deal with this, you know, a week before your exam than the day before.

Lee Burgess: Right, or do really poorly and then have to go back to the school and say, well, the reason I failed was because I had this stuff going on.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's like, they're gonna be like, well, sorry, you didn't tell us.

Lee Burgess: No, and schools sometimes will let you delay exams, or make it up, I mean, they, given the, there are a multitude of options if they have the information.

Alison Monahan: Well, and if nothing else, at least you have on the record that like, I don't feel, for this reason, like I'm qualified to sit for this exam, I don't think it's going to be an accurate reflection of my performance, and maybe they say no, but at least you can go back and argue like, look, I told you this is going to be a problem, it was a problem, and I shouldn't be penalized for it.

Lee Burgess: Right, but just remember your school is out there to help you. Hopefully.

Alison Monahan: Hopefully, yeah. Some people at your school might be sympathetic. Yes, exactly. Some might not be. But again, I mean, you know, by the same token, if you ask for something and your school's like, absolutely not, we're not providing that, you can't let that derail your preparation.

Lee Burgess: For sure. Yeah. I mean, you have to continue to move on and march on. That's to do the best that you can. What about-

Alison Monahan: And also, it's only school.

Lee Burgess: It is only school. Life does not stop for school and it is just school. And even if you get disappointing grades because something crazy happened in your life, you can talk about that in interviews and things like that.

It's not going to end your legal career. You're going to be fine.

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Alison Monahan: It's a very good explanation for like, oh, what happened on this test? You're like, you know, my grandmother who raised me passed away the day before the exam.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Moving on. Next question. Exactly.

Lee Burgess: And they're going to be like, I'm really sorry for your loss.

I totally get that. You know, lawyers are humans too. Most of them.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Believe it or not.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. So the other thing that you don't want to delay on getting in line, is if you have applied for or are granted accommodations because of a learning disability, a physical disability, anything like that, you want to make sure that you have that all squared away, that you understand what you are going to get as far as accommodations and how that's going to work out.

Because you don't want there to be some confusion on exam day about whether or not you're taking the exam in a different room, how much extended time you have. Sometimes different parts of the exams can have different amounts of extended time, so just make sure you know that going in so you can be ready for it. Confusion around exam time is not going to help with anxiety and being distracted and things like that on exam day, so just get out your thought straighter.

Alison Monahan: That s true even if you re not getting accommodations. If you have an exam that says like you know partially multiple choice and partially essay. You want to know before you want to understand You know, preferably before you walk into the exam room. Okay. I have an hour for the multiple choice. It's closed book.

And then, you know, by two hours of essays, they're open book, whatever it is. You don't want to be confused about how this is going to work.

Lee Burgess: Is it starting to stress you out? I'm starting to feel like-

Alison Monahan: I know, I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm totally stressed out.

Lee Burgess: Oh my gosh, I'm actually looking out my window and like some of the trees are starting to turn.

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I was like, it's fall. It's almost exam time. Oh my gosh.

Alison Monahan: Anyway, it is, it is stressful and stress, you know, managing that stress is really one of the biggest keys to success because stress and anxiety can absolutely destroy you during the exam period.

Lee Burgess: It's true, it's true. I'm trying to learn about essential oils as a way to manage stress.

Maybe you can diffuse some stress away essential oils in your house to keep you mellow.

Alison Monahan: I think I gave one of my friends one of those when we were working in the law firm, and she claimed it was really helpful. I gave her like a lavender one.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And before she would go like into a partner, like office to talk about something, she would put like a little dot on her forehead.

She's like, it was very calming.

Lee Burgess: I mean, hey, I have some friends that have found it very helpful. So yeah.

Alison Monahan: Well, I think too, just having like some sort of ritual, you know, can be really helpful, even if it seems silly, you know, particularly like before you go to sleep, you know, take 10 minutes, you can listen to a guided meditation, you can turn the lights down, you can put your essential oils on, You know, those are the things that can help relax you, and it's not that time consuming.

Lee Burgess: No, it's really not. But you're right, the little rituals do, they're very comforting.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: All right, so what about the actual game day? So I think, you know, the first thing is to make sure that you are awake and on time for your exam.

Alison Monahan: That is the most critical piece of information we can possibly give you.

Do not show up late to your exam.

Lee Burgess: They will likely not let you take it.

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Alison Monahan: Or if they do let you take it, you will have an hour less time than everyone else. So, you know, you want to triple check the location of your test. You want to make sure you know where it's happening, when it's happening. Give yourself plenty of time to get there.

If you know, inevitably this is a day you'll your car will be like running out of gas and you're stuck in traffic. Like you don't want those things to happen. I mean, I, you know, in some cases I've even heard of people who lived far away from the school who would actually book a hotel across the street for the-

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: The night before their exam. Just because they're like, I don't wanna be driving an hour in traffic.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. It's like the bar exam. That's why most people book hotels for the bar exam. I live, I took the bar exam in Oakland. I lived in San Francisco and I had a huge fear of having to drive over the bridge or take transportation.

Yeah, I was like, no, no, no, no, no, that's not going to happen.

Alison Monahan: Basically, I mean, in an ideal world, you would like to be walking distance to your exam.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: Easy walking distance.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So you need to come up with creative ways to make sure that, you know, you are up and out the door on time. So if you have an early exam, depending on how early your exams will start at your school make sure that you have two alarm clocks.

If you're one of those people who can accidentally turn off their alarm or one year my friends and I had a very early exam and we had a phone tree that we all had to test each other to confirm that everybody was awake by a certain time to make sure that we all, you know, could get there. So, you know, get creative.

It can be very helpful.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely. I think having people double check on each other is great. It doesn't have to be law students. You know, it could be your parents, your significant other, your best friend, whatever it is.

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Lee Burgess: Yep. And keep your stuff organized. You don't want to show up at the exam and realize you don't have everything that you need.

We're going to kind of go through our list of like, must have things, which is kind of hilarious in a little bit. At least we think it's hilarious. But I had a friend who forgot her ID and she gets to school and she realizes she doesn't have her ID and you actually couldn't get an exam without showing your ID.

So she had to drive home to, luckily she lived not that far from school, but she is like frantically driving home. She comes back, she's like, I'm so stressed out. I like ran a red light on accident. You don't want that to be your morning of the exam ritual. So make sure all your stuff is in one place.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, like pack your bag the night before, just ready to pick it.

I mean, you know, you can even put your clothes out if you're like, I want to just want to don't, you know, the fewer things you have to think about, like, what are you going to eat for breakfast? Go ahead and like, you know, have it ready to go. These are not decisions you need to be making the day of your exam.

Lee Burgess: No. Did you guys have evening exams or were all of your exams in the morning?

Alison Monahan: Oh, we either had morning or afternoon.

Lee Burgess: So we had sometimes a 6:30 exam.

Alison Monahan: Ugh.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Which is, yeah, which was kind of frustrating. And I think for those exams, what was tough is. It's kind of keeping the adrenaline going so you are ready to go at 6:30.

It was a 6:30 to 9:30 exam block. And yeah, it was tough. So if you do have a situation where you have an exam late in the day like that, it's really important to plan your day so you're not burned out by 6:30. Because some people would say, well, then I could study for eight hours and then I could go take the exam.

And that's not really a wise use of your time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, no, I mean, for me, if I had a, I think our afternoon exams were at like, you know, one or two. And so I usually would try not to study. I'd, you know, sleep a little late, maybe go to the gym, have some lunch, get my stuff ready. But you know, you don't want to burn yourself out studying before an exam.

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And you also don't want to try to burn yourself out by studying after an exam.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: You know, if I, if I had an exam in the morning, I would almost always try to take the rest of the day off.

Lee Burgess: Yes. A hundred percent agree. What about eating before the exam? I always liked to go into the exam with a full belly because I didn't want to be distracted by being hungry.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, if you're hungry, you're not thinking straight, so.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but make sure you don't experiment with new foods. Maybe not a good time to try the new ethnic restaurant around the corner that you haven't tried before.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you think about something that's going to give you some energy, sustained energy.

You probably want to have some protein. You don't want to just be eating like white bread. That might not be like your brain food. But, you know, we'll talk about this later. You can also, you know, assuming you're allowed to, you can take in sort of high energy snacks like nuts and things like that, you know, to keep you going.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think I've definitely had students tell me like, well, my energy was low in the exam because I went and had a gigantic burrito for lunch. And it's like, well, if a gigantic burrito puts, I love gigantic burritos, don't get me wrong, but if that's going to put you to sleep, Sleep or if your Turkey leftovers from Thanksgiving are gonna put you to sleep, please do not have that for lunch before your test, so.

Alison Monahan: No, definitely not. You know, something that's like stable, decent number of calories gonna last for a while. Yeah. And you know, and be careful with the caffeine too. Like, yes, you probably want some caffeine if that's what you normally do. You know, I've heard a story of someone who literally would drink so much caffeine before every exam that she would throw up during the test.

And you're like, huh, that does not sound like a really pleasant scenario for you to be in. Maybe you should. You know, cut back by a cup or two.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, for sure. That's a lot of coffee.

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Alison Monahan: No, it was really, like, wow.

Lee Burgess: Was it coffee or was it, like, Red Bull or something like that?

Alison Monahan: I don't even know. I think it was coffee, but, I mean, like, if you're puking, like, regularly during an exam, maybe there's, like, not ideal.

Lee Burgess: No. Ugh. I wonder if she, like, chased it with smart water or coconut water or something.

Alison Monahan: God, I don't know.

Lee Burgess: Did you know that they're now making coconut water coffee drinks?

Alison Monahan: Huh, interesting.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's, I wouldn't recommend them, but it is the hydration, dehydration all in one package.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, just stay stable.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but it yeah, I wouldn't recommend it. But if, because if you need that, you know, go for it.

Alison Monahan: Well, I think, you know, the point is by this point in your life, hopefully you have some understanding of how your body functions and like what you need in order to be optimized to perform at a certain level.

But keep in mind, as you go into that exam, you're probably going to already have an adrenaline rush. So, you might be able to cut back the coffee a little bit.

Lee Burgess: Yep. Yeah, and sleep. Let's talk about I was just complaining before we got onto this call that I was tired. So, let's talk about how your brain doesn't perform well without sleep.

Alison Monahan: No, and lack of sleep is also really bad for memory. Yes. So let's think about whether that might be bad for your exams. Yes. Yes. And on that note, do not stay up all night the night before your exam. No.

Lee Burgess: Such a bad idea. We are not 18 anymore guys. We cannot.

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Alison Monahan: Well, and also, also nothing that you're gonna possibly learn in those few hours is going to be better than having like some fresh, I'm not saying you have to sleep, you know, eight or nine hours preferably, but even having five or six hours of sleep.

It's so much better for being able to analyze difficult questions, which is what you're going to be asked to do.

Lee Burgess: So what about when we get to the exam room? I mean, I know you and I have talked in the past that we each had an exam playlist on our iPods, or I guess now they'd be our phones to date ourselves, but that we would listen to when we were getting to school and kind of getting stuff set up.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, you're, you want to be in your zone. And, you know, what are the things that can get you in the zone? Things like music are great. Things like not being distracted by other people and things that can really take you out of the zone instantly are your classmates, frankly, you know, if somebody is like freaking out and like, oh my God, did you read this case?

Like, what about, what do you think about, you're like, That's not helpful.

Lee Burgess: Yep, exactly. And so I used to leave my headphones in until the last minute when they basically told us to take them out.

Alison Monahan: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I would sit there. I would, you know, from the basically like the time that I left my house, I would have my playlist on, you know, I'm like listening to Crazy in Love and being like, yeah, yeah.

And yeah, I'd walk across campus with all my stuff. I'd go set myself up and you know, people are like trying to talk to you in the exam room and I'm like, can't hear you. Got my headphones in. And yeah, you know, basically until the proctor walks in and says, okay, you can't do this anymore. Even if I didn't have music playing, sometimes I would just sit there with that head thing with like the earbuds in so that no one would talk to me.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Oh, that's so true. And don't sit there with flashcards and stuff like that. It's such a waste of time. It's just going to make you nervous. Like just sit there and be in the zone. That's yeah. You know everything you're going to know for the test.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. This is the time to, you know, do some little like deep breathing, mindfulness exercises.

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If you find yourself like stressing out, you just think that's a thought. Yep. Love it. Let it go.

Lee Burgess: Yep. Exactly. Breathe.

Alison Monahan: Nothing I can do about it right now. Just focus on the breath. Take more breaths.

Lee Burgess: I know. Exactly. If you're taking your exam on a computer, you know, make sure that you're there and it's up and running, and you've turned off any software that needs to be turned off, and you know, either

Alison Monahan: And that it's plugged in.

Lee Burgess: It's plugged in. You're connected to the wireless. You're not connected to the wireless. Whatever it needs to happen, make sure you're not doing that, you know, two minutes before the exam's supposed to start.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you want to, you want to show up to the exam and get yourself ready and be in a nice calm place when they hand it out.

Lee Burgess: Okay, so now my favorite list to compare are what we took into the exam room because Alison and I, we have a lot in common, but we are also very opposite in a lot of things, and here's one of the ways that we are opposite. So.

Alison Monahan: I'm like cracking up. Lee has copied this list from a list I sent her, apparently, of what I would actually bring to a typical exam.

Lee Burgess: Oh, yeah. It's enormously long. It's ridiculous.

Alison Monahan: I'm gonna read the whole thing. My people wouldn't even believe it. I'm looking at it now. I'm like, this is crazy. But you can keep in mind, in fairness, all of my exams were open book, and so I think your exams were closed book, so that might have influenced a little bit what you brought with you.

Lee Burgess: Huh.

Alison Monahan: But here is what I would bring to a completely typical law school exam. All right. Go for it. All right. How much time do we have left?

Lee Burgess: I know. All right. Hold on to your hats, guys. We're going on a long ride.

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Alison Monahan: Yeah, so I bring, of course, my textbook and any supplemental materials, because you never know, you're gonna need to look something up in your supplement.

I'm joking, you would never in a thousand years do that. At least one commercial outline, sometimes two, printed copies of all of my class notes in a binder. Why? I have no idea. Printed and tabbed copies of my own outline, sometimes more than one, and other study materials, and at least one other student in a binder.

Scratch paper, flags or post it notes, a bottle of water, a chilled Starbucks double shot, red Gatorade, a bottle of caffeinated soda. This is so ridiculous.

Lee Burgess: I didn't even know how you got to school. Like, did you have to take a cab from your house?

Alison Monahan: No, I lived a block away. I had to carry a lot. Alright, we're still going.

We're not even halfway done. Fruit cut up to bite sized pieces, peanut M& Ms, not regular peanut because I figure the protein and fat better nuts just in case I didn't feel like chocolate, Cliff Bar in several different flavors depending on what I felt like. Oh my god, this is crazy. What was I thinking?

Lee Burgess: I don't know.

Alison Monahan: A sandwich.

Lee Burgess: How long were your exams at Columbia?

Alison Monahan: Like four hours, I might get hungry. I don't function well without food.

Lee Burgess: I know you don't, but still.

Alison Monahan: Gum, mints, chocolate. I guess in case I wanted only chocolate, not peanut M& Ms. Earplugs. My iPod preloaded with an exam soundtrack, highlighters in several colors, at least three pens in case one wasn't working or two weren't working, a backup pencil in case all of my pens simultaneously lost ink, an eraser, a manual watch, approximately a million hair ties, Advil, Kleenex, eyedrops, oh my gosh, extra contacts, backup glasses, my laptop, a power cord, and an external mouse.

But I actually saw people at Columbia with external keyboards, so I don't think I was actually that absurd for Columbia standards. So that was what I would carry to a typical exam.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's a very impressive list. You're such an overachiever. I still would love, I have this picture in my head of you with like, a bag, your messenger bag, and like, carrying shopping bags full of stuff.

Alison Monahan: That's pretty much what it looks like. I would like, come in early and like, set up on like, four different chairs. But in reality, you know, with the exception, probably I don't think I ever ate the sandwich. But you know, I would get hungry. I think I would actually bring like, shot blocks and stuff from Clif Bar too like I was going on a hike.

But I like to, I really, I, you know, I feel like. I like to stack. I had to keep my energy up.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah, this is true. I will say guys, when I was pregnant, I started carrying lots and lots of food around with me.

Alison Monahan: It was heaven.

Lee Burgess: I know. And Alison was in heaven. Like we'd be sitting at a conference and she's like, what do you have in your purse?

Alison Monahan: I'm like, what do you got there? I got some macadamia nuts. Ooh, those are good.

Lee Burgess: Oh, and some, and some chocolate to follow up with the macadamia nuts.

Alison Monahan: It's amazing. So the point is, know yourself. If you know that you're a snacker, you know, four hours might be a long time.

Lee Burgess: It's true. It's true.

Alison Monahan: So Lee, what did you bring in your minimalist approach?

Lee Burgess: In my minimalist approach. So I always brought my laptop because basically all my exams but one had a computer component to them. Make sure you had your power cord. And then back in the old school days, we had to use ethernet cords because when I started law school, my school didn't have Wi Fi. So I had to make sure I had my ethernet cord, but I don't think that's the same thing anymore. I like to bring pens. I would bring a couple, but blue only. I think pens of other colors are superfluous because when you circle and highlight things on a question, I like to have a blue pen because it's easy, good contrast.

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Alison Monahan: I'd say I'd like blue and red because I would like of different items I was highlighting in different colors.

Lee Burgess: That does not surprise me. I only had one color of highlighter because I actually don't like to highlight things on exam questions personally. I just like to underline and circle things because I would frequently find I would just highlight the whole question, and that was kind of pointless I would only bring pencils if there was a multiple choice section of the exam, because I actually hate pencils, unless I need it for the exam. I did bring earplugs but I hate to wear them, but sometimes you'd have somebody doing something crazy or somebody like Alison constantly eating in the exam room. It was so annoying. There was a woman in my class and they used to break up our class into exam rooms by your the alphabet, so you'd end up taking the exam with the same people, and she would always sit in the very front row, and she would set up camp, like, it was basically, it was Alison's-

Alison Monahan: Like me.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it was like Alison on the West Coast, and I would just always look and be like, we are only in here for four hours, and I would have to constantly make sure I could ignore her, like, snacking, it was like a, like a squirrel, just like snacking all the time in the nuts.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that was totally me.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Okay, but I don't like earplugs unless I need them. Because I, you can hear yourself swallowing.

Alison Monahan: But everybody should bring them.

Lee Burgess: But you should always have them. I did always have something to drink. But I was a Diet Coke addict back in that day. So I was still, which is yucky because I gave it up a number of years ago.

And I would never have Diet Coke anymore. But I still drink caffeine. But I would typically never take caffeine into the exam room. I would have it before. My exam rooms would always get cold. So I'd have layers.

Alison Monahan: I definitely forgot about that. Yeah, I'd have that too.

Lee Burgess: Add that to your list.

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Alison Monahan: Or like a scarf, you know, if it was really chilly.

Lee Burgess: Yeah And I always had my iPod and headphones so that I could listen while we got things set up and then I would always have Advil with me because, you know, you can start to get a headache, or it's, like I said, it was cold season, you know, some PMs, people have colds, it's always just good to have stuff like that.

If I did have an open book exam, I did bring, like, a binder with outlines. I don't ever think I took all of my printed class notes with me.

Alison Monahan: But I mean, that's absurd. There was no reason to do that, but.

Lee Burgess: But you did anyway. I did. So I definitely was not one of those people who would bring everything on the list, but you do need to think down, you know, through what you need.

I was a bit more anal about where I sat in the exam room. That was kind of where my neurosis came out, and I always like to sit on the left hand side. Right on the edge, so nobody could sit next to me.

Alison Monahan: Oh, never sit in the middle of the room.

Lee Burgess: Never sit in the middle of the room, because if something happens, like for instance, your computer crashes, which mine did, in a few different exams, you need to be able to get to the proctor, raise your hand, like flag down the proctor, If you need to go to the bathroom, you do not want to crawl over anybody.

Like, try and get there early enough that you can get a prime spot on the end. And I don't know why the left side of the room, but that was just the side of the room I picked.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I didn't care. I just wanted one in the room. It was like being on an aisle in the airplane. Like, if I wanted to get up, I wanted to be able to get up.

Lee Burgess: Yeah some people really like to sit in the front because then they couldn't look at what other people were doing. And if you're somebody who can get anxiety by, you know, than watching other people start typing before you type and things like that. I also think about whether or not you want to sit at the beginning of the room.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I preferred like back, I don't know, it was like, my brain wanted something to look at like I got nervous by setting the very so the point is, again, like you

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know yourself just do whatever works for you and get there early enough that you can find the seat you like.

Lee Burgess: So but what I will say is that you should check with your school about what you're allowed to bring in. But just because you're allowed to bring it doesn't mean you should.

Alison Monahan: Fair point.

Lee Burgess: Unless you're Alison.

Alison Monahan: Okay. Well, let's run through quickly some basic exam day advice.

Lee Burgess: Okay. Time management is key. You've got to think of the exam as a whole. You know, not working on the final question because you wrote the most brilliant answer to question number one is probably not going to do great things to your score. So.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, so what I would do is when, as soon as I got the exam, I would look through it. I mean, hopefully I already had a sense of like how many questions it was going to be and that sort of thing, but just to double check. And I would literally do a time breakdown of, you know, this is the time I have for question one, this is time for question two, this is time for question three.

And I would check throughout the test, like, am I on point? You know, am I going to hit those targets? Because the point is, as soon as you hit that target, For moving on to question two, you have to stop writing and move on. Like, there is no better way to destroy your grade than to screw up your time management.

Lee Burgess: Yep, so super key. Another thing that students do that drives me crazy every time I've ever taught and read exams is they copy and paste. Like, if you've said it once in your exam, please don't say it again. You can always say see above.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, if you're laying out the law, you don't need to write the rules more than once.

Lee Burgess: No.

Alison Monahan: You can say, as discussed above, blah, blah, blah.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So, torts is a prime example for this. Sometimes you're going to do a negligence analysis over and over again. If you've already presented the rule for

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negligence, please don't write it again. Don't copy and paste. It drives professors crazy, crazy, crazy.

They don't want to read something they've read before.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Don't go crazy, like, nitpicking your language, you know, especially for an in class exam. Professors understand that this is a timed You know, exam.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you should not be, you should not be proofreading.

Lee Burgess: Right, but it should also not be riddled with so many typo, typos that it's illegible.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean you want to use basic spelling, grammar, you know, use periods, use capital letters, but at the same time you're not going to get extra points because, you know, you went back and you corrected that you misspelled like the word doing or whatever, like just like keep going.

Lee Burgess: So what if you start to panic and feel like you're having an anxiety attack in the middle of the exam?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think it's not an unusual reaction. I think that's, you know, it's something that if anxiety has been an issue, you want to be prepared for, you want to have some techniques, but it can happen to anyone. And the first time I took an exam in law school that was luckily like a practice test for the class.

It wasn't graded, you know, I'd never had any anxiety in my life. And then suddenly I was like, came back after, read the question. I was like, okay, went to the bathroom, came back. There was a blank page. I basically started hyperventilating. It was like, I have no idea where to start. You know, it was a physical reaction.

So I think taking some deep breaths you know, someone we know, who does mind over bar, which is a course on like anxiety on the bar. She kind of likens it to a snow globe. So if you shake up the snow globe, you know, the snow is going to be flying around, but if you wait, it's going to calm back down. And so, you know, your mind can go blank from anxiety, but you just have to know that if you calm down and sort of, you know, sit with your breath for a minute or two that you will be able to start thinking again.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah, I also found going to the bathroom to be helpful sometimes in those scenarios to just like walk away. You know, splash water on my face. Regroup.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, again-

Lee Burgess: Know yourself, but, but have a plan of what you're gonna do. So you're not caught off guard if, if you are in that situation.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And you know, even going out in the hallway and like pacing back and forth for a minute or two while you're not thinking about the exam consciously, you know, you're, you're consciously just counting your breath or doing whatever it is to help calm you down.

Lee Burgess: Yup.

Alison Monahan: I think can be really effective.

Lee Burgess: Yep. And it's very important in the exam room to not get distracted by what other people are doing.

I have heard stories about people thinking someone was cheating and becoming very obsessed with the fact that someone is possibly cheating on the test, and that is not going to help your score. So, worry about yourself, and that's it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, or if something crazy happens in the room, I mean, all kinds of crazy, again, like, we've heard all the stories, we've experienced all the stories, you know, crazy stuff happens, and there's a commotion, and everybody's, you know, the proctor's talking to someone, or someone's computer is dying, and it's like, it's not your problem.

Not your circus, not your monkeys.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. And when you leave the exam room, do yourself a favor and don't talk about the test. Put your headphones back in and go home.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I mean sometimes people will really try to push you on it. I got in a huge fight one time with one of my classmates at a happy hour after a test, where he was like, you know asking me questions and I politely said, look I don't, you know the test is over. I'd really prefer not to talk about it and he wouldn't stop and it basically ended up almost being like the shouting match where he's like, but I just want to know like what you thought there's gonna be and was like, I am not talking about this.

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And I literally left. I was like, I'm not like I will not have this discussion with you. There's no point, nothing-

Lee Burgess: Nothing is ever going to come from that.

Alison Monahan: Nothing helpful is ever going to come from that. Just like time to move on. You Move on to your next exam. If you're finished with your exams, move on to your holiday.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And Alison, you took a bunch of take home exams. Do you have any kind of, I know we've done an episode on different types of exams where we have some tips that you can check out, but some kind of tips for surviving that period of time that would fit into what we're talking about here?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, well, I think it's the same as anything else that you have to plan for it.

So, you know, where are you going to take it? Are you going to take it to the library? Are you going to take it at your house? If it's 24 hours, you know, do you have food on hand? Are you ready to go? You just You want to minimize your distractions so you can focus on writing the best exam that you can do, you know, if you have children, like who's going to watch the kids, you know, that kind of thing.

Like, are you going to go to a hotel? You just want to prepare yourself to do, you know, for success, basically.

Lee Burgess: Yep. And then as we have said, you know, earlier in this podcast, don't forget a little rest and relaxation between exams.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. I mean, the time after an exam is not quality study time. You're going to be much better off taking a nap, going to the gym, going on a walk, doing some yoga, hanging out with your friends, your significant others, your family.

You know, these are not the time to try to study.

Lee Burgess: Yep. So with that, we are out of time. If podcast, please take a second to leave a review and ratings on iTunes. 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 myself or Alison at Lee@LawSchoolToolbox.com or Allison@LawSchoolToolbox.com, or you can always contact us via our website contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening and we'll talk soon. Good luck with your final exams.