Episode 63: Dealing with Self-Sabotaging Behavior in Law School

Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're talking about a super fun topic, self sabotage in law school. 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 that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be.

Together we're the co creators of the Law School Toolbox, the Bar Exam Toolbox, and the Catapult Career Conference. And 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, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the contact forum on LawSchoolToolbox. Com, and we'd love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we are talking about something almost everyone has to figure out. How to create accountability for yourself, along with making sure you aren't engaging in self sabotaging behavior. And with that, let's get started. So, Alison, why is this such an important topic to talk about?

Alison Monahan: Well, because I would say almost every person that I talk to who's struggling in law school, part of what they're struggling with is how to stay accountable, how to manage their time, and how to get everything done. And I think part of the reason for that is just that law school is so self directed in terms of you're only really tested once, typically at the end of the semester, and you've got a lot, you've got to get, you know, got a lot to do on an ongoing basis.

It's just a lot of stuff. And I think a lot of people don't necessarily have the skills. To stay accountable and to figure out how to, you know, do this on a daily basis, but also how to do the bigger picture stuff that we've talked about, about deep thinking, practice exams, things like that. You know, it's really different.

It's just a much more, so much less structured environment than what a lot of people are really used to. And I think that can cause some problems before people develop the skills they need to stay accountable.

Lee Burgess: And I think it's just different than undergrad. I mean, typically. If you went to undergrad full time, you might have been living in the dorms, you didn't have a lot of family responsibilities, you maybe had a part time job, you could survive on a lot less sleep, maybe survive even better hungover. , you were younger. I mean, it's just a totally different ball game. Your ability to procrastinate when

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you're, you know, 18 to 21 or 22 can be a lot different than your abilities when life becomes more complicated and the workload becomes much more intense. I mean, I remember thinking in undergrad that there were times when it was incredibly busy, and that's true, but I think generally speaking, my incredibly busy times in law school were busier.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And I think. As an undergrad, the only time you might have that sort of really, even remotely equivalent to the sort of free form work that you'll do in law school is something like an honors thesis, you know, there, and it's like this year long project, but even then, you know, you're probably having regular meetings with an advisor who's helping you do stuff and, you know, telling you what to look for and making sure that you're doing your research and making sure that you're writing.

And nobody's, you know, nobody's going to do that for you in law school, typically.

Lee Burgess: No, I will say writing my honors thesis was when I got a little cuckoo crazy when I was in college.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but I mean, I think that's good training for people to do something like law school because it is this more self directed activity.

Whereas in most undergraduate classes, it's like, oh, you have a quiz this day and you have this assignment to turn in. And so you can't really like fall behind that far, or it's going to catch up with you pretty quickly. Whereas here, sure, maybe you're going to class, you're doing most of the reading, but that's kind of all you have to do for someone not to yell at you.

And even then, it's like, you know, if you miss doing the reading for a few days, as long as you don't get called on, there really aren't any repercussions.

Lee Burgess: Well, I mean, immediate repercussions.

Alison Monahan: Immediate repercussions, exactly. There's no immediate repercussion. No one's going to come and say like, you have to get back on track.

You know, you're not doing your work, blah, blah, blah. No one's going to do that.

Lee Burgess: It's true. And I think that without that feedback loop throughout the semester of having a lot of assignments and having people check in with you you know, I

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think law professors too believe that everyone's an adult and kind of has to take care of themselves.

And I think that's a true statement, but they're not going to be worried about what you're doing. That's not really their job.

Alison Monahan: No. And you know, when we talk to people who are interested in tutoring, this is one of the, this is one of those like light bulb moments when they go, oh my gosh. Like someone will actually like assign me something to do and they'll follow up with me if I don't do it?

I'm like, yeah, that's kind of what you're paying them for.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: And it's like, oh wow, that's really different. And it is really different. And I'm not saying everybody has to run out and get a law school tutor. You can if you want to, but I think you've got to figure out ways to keep yourself accountable.

And part of that is a lot of the work is just not that fun. You know, it can be kind of tedious. It can be sort of boring. And I think, you know, your mindset in terms of how you think about the work is sort of one of those ways that you can make it easier for yourself. So, you know, if every single time you open your books, you're thinking, oh God, this is gonna be such a nightmare.

Like, it's so boring, I'm not gonna understand it, it's gonna take forever, you know, that's going to kind of bring you down.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true.

Alison Monahan: You know, whereas if you try to approach it like, oh, this is another piece of the puzzle. This is what we're learning about. Let me figure out some questions that might get answered here.

You know, that's going to make it more interesting and more engaging. And so stuff like that in terms, I mean, that doesn't help you get it done necessarily. You still have to sit down and do it,

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: But I think having a more like inquisitive type of mindset for this work can make things more interesting.

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Lee Burgess: And if you really, really cannot stand everything about law school, maybe it's time to also take a moment.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, if you find that like every single day, every time you take out your books, you're just like, oh God, there's nothing I wanted to be doing less in the world than this. Every time you go to class, you're like bored to tears.

You hate it. You're like, oh, I just hate everything about it. It's like, just quit.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like you don't have to be there.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. In fact, we got an email from a student recently who just quit and was like, I went through my first couple of weeks of law school and it's clearly not for me.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, they're like, I'm taking another path.

We're like, good luck with that. Like, I don't think badly of him. I'm like, good for him. You know, good for this person for like, going there and admitting that this is just not what I want to be doing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I mean.

Alison Monahan: There are lots of people who dropped out of law school and are perfectly fine.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, fine. So like,

Alison Monahan: Think about Carly Farina, I think dropped out of after one semester of law school, went to business school instead.

Did okay for herself.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. So I think it is just important to be checking in with yourself if you're truly miserable.

Alison Monahan: But I mean, there's like a difference between there's just like, I'm not, this is not the right place for me versus like, I'm perfectly fine with like doing this, I want to do it, you know, no one's forcing me, but I'm just having trouble like getting the work done.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So, I mean, what are some ways that people can start to create some sort of accountability for themselves? I mean, something we've

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talked about on podcasts before, is creating not only a study schedule, but also a life schedule that you can stick to. So blocks of time to study, blocks of time to exercise, blocks of time to, you know, cook food, blocks of time to see friends and family, things like that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean this all sounds really boring if you're like, I have to schedule a time to go to yoga, but the reality is, you know, you're gonna be much more likely to go to yoga or much more likely to go out with your friends if you do schedule it in advance.

That's just the reality. You know, time tends to get away from all of us if we don't actually pay attention.

Lee Burgess: For sure, and I think the other thing that can be a benefit of scheduling some of this time. It's guilt free time. I mean, if you have scheduled in enough time to get all your work done, you're getting all your work done, then you should go spend time with your significant other or your friends or your dog or whoever that makes you happy, because you can.

I mean, I think that's what's one of the mistakes law students make is they are so guilt ridden about not doing work when they're not doing work that they don't get any R&R because they're just worried about work the whole time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I talked to somebody the other day who's like, well, I decided I was going to leave my study group when someone in it said to me, well, if you're sleeping, you're doing law school the wrong way.

And she's like, I just didn't really think that sounded right. Does that sound right to you? I'm like, you know, that was a good choice to leave that study group. Like you can't do a semester at law school and do well without sleep.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: That's just stupid.

Lee Burgess: That's pretty ridiculous.

Alison Monahan: Like, I don't know. Like, no, that's just stupid.

Like that's not correct. Please go to sleep, you know?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, no. Yeah. Yeah. And that's the kind of crazy stuff you'll hear from other people in law school. So it's important to constantly be checking in with yourself

and saying, like, maybe these are not the people that I should be creating accountability systems with.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and this was somebody who had a lot of other responsibilities, and she's like, you know, I try to schedule my time. Is it okay that, like, I spend a little bit of time with my kid? I'm like, yeah, it's okay that you spend time with your kid. Like, you're allowed to do that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And I think some of this is about making choices.

I mean, if you have nothing else to do, you could, fine, study all the time. I don't care. But if there's anything else you'd like to do, you need to prioritize that because it's perfectly fine to do other things and it probably makes you a better person and a better law student. I mean, some of the people who did the best in my class were Mormons who took one entire weekend day off every weekend for religious reasons.

And they still managed to be on the law review. You know, it's like that like 12 hour period that they were not studying did them no harm and in fact probably did them good.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true. I mean, when we talk to people at the bar exam, which is a more intensive studying experience than most people do in law school, that's one of the things that we always highly recommend is you have to take time off.

Like you absolutely have to because burnout is worse than, like, not studying because unproductive study time is terrible. And I think the more disciplined you can be to make the most of the hours you put in, you'll be fine. Like, you can take that time off. If you want that time off, you can take that time off.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think it's, I mean, the hard part about accountability is about finding this balance. Like, yes, you have a lot of stuff to do. You need to be responsible about getting it done. But that does not mean that you need to be working 18 hours a day every single day. You cannot do that. No one could do that.

Lee Burgess: No.

Alison Monahan: You're not a robot.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

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Alison Monahan: So it's really this question of, okay, you know, you've got to sit down, say at the beginning of every month and kind of plan out your schedule for the month. And then you do that every week. And then you do that to a certain extent every night, you know, for the next day, so that you're constantly have this sort of iterative process of like, okay, what do I need to get done?

I mean, maybe you're triaging on things like this is the most important. And then again, there's this distinction between important and urgent.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: So what might be most important for your grades is actually these deep thinking tasks. So things like, you know, really thinking about the law, like making study aids, making an outline, making a flow chart.

These are going to be critically important, but they're not urgent.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: What's urgent is, oh my god, I have a meeting for this club, or I have a legal writing assignment due, or I have a class that I know I'm going to be on call, or even just your reading could be, feel urgent.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: And it's easy to do those things that are urgent and then get to the end and realize you don't have any outlines, you haven't even looked at a practice test, you have no idea what you're being tested on, and then you're in a mad panic like a week before your exams, which is not a good place to be.

Lee Burgess: No, it's not. And I think keeping your eye on the endgame is one of the best ways to prevent yourself from getting into that, onto that hamster wheel that we hear from students all the time, which is all I can do is prepare for class.

I don't have any time, you know, all I can do is do my legal writing assignment. All I can do, all I can do, and it just never you never get off that hamster wheel, and then all of a sudden, you know, exams are there, so-

Alison Monahan: Well, and I think, I mean, if we go back to the self sabotage aspect of this, sometimes people are so afraid of what's coming,

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

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Alison Monahan: That they just can't make themselves deal with it.

Lee Burgess: That's true.

Alison Monahan: And so if you're so terrified about, ugh. This exam is, oh my gosh, I don't know, that you never even look at an exam to see, like, look at a practice exam to see what it's actually like, then you're basically self sabotaging because you're so afraid of looking at it that you don't want to deal with it.

And then you get to the end. And you haven't dealt with it, and then your self fulfilling prophecy of you're going to do badly comes true because you didn't study properly.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like, this is to be avoided.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Because part of the thing is, like, if we're talking about a fear situation, what can dissipate that fear is familiarity.

You know, if you've never seen a law school exam before you walk into one, of course it's terrifying. But by the time you've done 10 questions on negligence, it's like, oh, pff I got that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah, I think that that's very true. And that for me was always something that was comforting in an exam is, you know, always to sit down and have my exam plan set up so I knew that no matter how crazy the question was, I kind of knew what the first thing I was gonna do and the second thing I was gonna do. And that's comforting and you can only create those systems and plans through practice.

And in order to do practice, you have to have done outlining and set aside time to do those activities. And if you hide from the practice, which is something that will probably make you feel uncomfortable, then that is a self sabotaging behavior.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And so I think, you know, if people are listening to this and they're like, oh, but I don't have any idea how to, and the problem is a lot of people actually just don't have the skill set for organizing their life.

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I mean, particularly if you've never worked and somebody has always been there telling you what to do, you know, you might actually like literally have no idea how to make a study schedule. So we will tell you right now. Yeah, basically get out a paper calendar, highly recommend paper. You can transfer it later to your Google calendar or whatever, but I think it helps people think on paper.

Get out some pencils, colored paper, colored pencils, markers, whatever, and actually sit down and block out like, oh, okay. Every Saturday from noon until 4pm or whatever, I'm going to do some sort of deep thinking task. And then you actually put that on your calendar. And in this case, you can switch it to Google Calendar because then you just make a recurring appointment.

Fine. Make a recurring appointment with yourself on Saturday at noon for four hours of deep thinking work. And like right now, you don't even have to know what that means. Right. Just trust us. You're gonna need some time.

Lee Burgess: Right, exactly.

Alison Monahan: You put in all of your other stuff, like your classes, blah, blah, blah. And then you're like, well, what do I need to do?

Like, what do I do in law school on a regular basis? Well, first thing, probably you're gonna need to do some reading, right?

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And so your goal. It's to think about, well, how long is that typically going to take me? I would say about 10 pages per hour. If you're starting out, it's a good place to start.

But you want to kind of pay attention to, am I faster than that? Am I slower than that? Are there certain classes I'm faster or slower? Because you really want to get this right, you know? You don't want to pretend that you're going to do your entire reading for the week in two hours because that's not going to happen.

You know, so then you're like, okay, I'm going to need like a total of, say, 20 hours of reading time a week. Well, then it's time to look at your schedule. Where are you going to put that?

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, literally, are you going to read from 7 until 9 in the morning? Are you going to read from 7 until 9 at night?

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I don't care. Do whatever makes sense, you know, do whatever is where you're the freshest. But you actually literally need to block that time out. And you might find it, you might look at your calendar and be like, gosh, this is really like not going to fit during the week. Probably not. You're probably going to have to do some reading on the weekends.

But these, like, you have to go through this process of actually creating this schedule and then seeing if it's working. You can't, I mean, all of your good intentions aside, you basically can't just be like, oh, I'll do my reading during the week.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: That's not, that's not a schedule.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And you know, it's interesting, when I was at orientation for undergrad, I remember the president of my college saying that if every undergrad student put 40 hours of work into school each week. Everyone would be incredibly successful and get everything like done during the week. And I remember sitting there going, well, I'm sure I'm gonna study more than 40 hours a week. And I'll bet if I could go back and visit 18-year-old Lee and clocked how much time I actually spent studying and doing work in those early days, I don't, I don't think it was 40 hours. I mean, there were probably like periods of time around exams or when I was working on a big paper that the time, you know, got really intense, but there was a lot of time, you know, at the dorms and hanging out and whatever, whatever.

Alison Monahan: And there's nothing wrong with that.

Lee Burgess: No, and that's part of the experience, but I think that there's this idea that we just assume that we're doing so much And if you had asked my 18 year old self, I would have told you for sure that I was studying, you know, as much as I needed to, if not more, when probably if I tracked my time, I wasn't.

And so that's why we oftentimes encourage students in law school who are saying they don't have enough time to get things done is to track their time and find out where the time is going so you can make these study schedules. And then own them. You know, there are free time tracking softwares out there.

Toggl is one of them, but you can just Google there are a lot of different options, where you can just enter how you spend your time, find out where your hours

are going and tell yourself, you know, I can't spend three hours in the library, not getting anything done.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And a lot of the advantages, I mean, the advantage of these time tracking software is that they literally have timers like in your browser.

So, you know, if you pretend that you're going to the library to read for three hours, And you stop to do something else in your browser, like, why not turn the timer off?

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, and then turn it back on when you start working again. Because you'll find that that three hour period you were supposedly doing your focused reading was actually more like an hour by the time you had a bunch of distractions You you know were chatting with a friend a little bit about some other You know some club issue that you're trying to organize a speaker for and then you were also, oh, you had to check in on like Instagram and Facebook for a little while just to see how everybody was doing, oh, then your mom called, you know, you're gonna find out you're not actually working.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's it's amazing I mean I swear, you might be shocked, shocked where the hours are going.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And I think part of this is procrastination. And that's another, you know, huge self sabotage thing. And I think for the procrastination, A, you've got to notice that you're doing it, and then B, you've got to figure out what's actually going on here.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, like, why are you not doing this work? Do you just not feel like it? You know, are you trying to do your reading, for example, when you're too tired? And it's just not the right time for you to be doing your reading. Everybody has different times during the day when they're fresh. And ideally, that's the time where you want to be doing these cognitively demanding tasks like reading cases, which is not an easy thing to do.

Lee Burgess: No. And you can't be yawning and falling asleep while you're doing it.

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Alison Monahan: Well, you can, but it's just going to waste time. I mean, you know, what I say to people, like, look, if you're in a situation where you're so tired that you're reading the same page over and over and it's not sinking in, just stop.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: Go to bed.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like, you know, you're gonna be better off going to sleep, getting up in the morning and doing your reading in the morning than you are if you're so tired at night. I mean, for me, I was a night person, so that was the time it was best for me to do the reading. And I just did it after dinner for like three hours every night.

Lee Burgess: Mm-Hmm.

Alison Monahan: But again, like a lot of people, I mean, almost everyone, I would say is gonna have to do a lot of their reading for one of the days of the weekend.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that that's true. Did you ever have any accountability partners? Did you and your friends ever set up any accountability systems?

Alison Monahan: I guess sometimes, I mean, I would, like, meet someone at the library, for example, if we were, like, you know, had something we had to do, or I guess sometimes on the law review, actually, like, after I'd done whatever assignment I had as a 2L, I'd often, like, stay, because other people, other people were doing work, and so you know, you kind of felt like, oh, I'm not so alone if we're all sitting in the same room doing our work together.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I had a friend that sometimes we would like check in with each other on how projects were going. We were in some like research and writing classes together, you know, just to kind of be able to say, like, have you been doing it or, you know, that kind of stuff. I know I have a hard time making myself study.

I'm one of those people who has to have like somebody to meet me to go for a run in the morning or that kind of stuff. That's, that's the area of my life that I need more accountability.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I pretty much just pay people to come exercise with me.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah. That's what I do now.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Like right now I have a boxing trainer who comes to my house twice a week.

Yeah, and they're like, oh, did you go to the gym? I'm like, I don't go to the gym. That's why I pay you. Like, if I was a person who could just join a gym and go to the gym, I would do that. It's a lot cheaper. However, I don't go. Which is why you show up here twice a week to make me exercise.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, yeah.

Alison Monahan: So, and you can do this with school. I mean, I have friends who are professors and they actually have a private Facebook group. And they literally like announce when they're going to start working and when they're going to stop working. And if other people happen to see it, because they're procrastinating on Facebook you know, they'll cheer them on and be like, Yay!

Or sometimes they'll be like, oh, you inspired me. Like, I'm going to start doing work now, too. And I think that can be very helpful.

Lee Burgess: I think it can, too. And I think, you know, you can even create accountability systems for yourself using even websites that allow you to give yourself money if you do certain tasks or give away money to organizations you don't want if you don't do certain tasks or meet certain goals.

There are all sorts of software that you can download onto your computer to help you stay off the internet which I think, or just block certain time waster websites like Facebook or Instagram or New York Times, or I don't know, I could go on and on and on about all the ways I can waste time on the internet, but you know, I think even things like Google Chat and turning off Google Chat so your friends in the library don't start talking to you, whatever you can do to just take away some of the need to make decisions about wasting time.

I think that for me. Like, I perform really well when I have strict rules, so it's like if I'm not allowed to check my email for the next hour or two, then that's easier than me starting to say like, oh I should check my email, oh no I shouldn't. Oh, but I might just do it quickly. Oh, whoa. I should respond to that.

You know, I think it's almost like if I just don't have internet,

Alison Monahan: I'm going to get more done. I think Gretchen Rubin has a whole theory about this. It's like some people can have a candy bar in their house and they'll have

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like a bite of it and it's no problem. Whereas other people like her, for example, she's like, if the candy bar's in my house, I know I'm going to eat all of it.

So I just have to have a hard and fast rule that there's never candy in the house. And I think that, you know, some people are the same. It's like, some people, for whatever reason, can just like pop on to the internet and actually be there for five minutes. Other people could not. So just, you know, you gotta, yeah, you gotta know yourself here.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: I mean,

Lee Burgess: I know.

Alison Monahan: I agree with you. I think most people are less disciplined about wasting time on the internet than they think they are.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So that makes me remember one of my favorite scenes in Sex and the City and all of the like, seasons of Sex and the City was where Miranda like, I think makes a cake or something like that and is only going to eat a couple bites of the cake.

And then she like, throws it in the trash can. But then she goes into the trash can and starts eating it out of the trash can. So she has to like, put the dish soap. Just leave it on the cake so she won't eat the cake on the trash can. Because it was so brilliantly honest.

Alison Monahan: True. And I mean, I think that's worth thinking about.

You know, like if you're if you claim that you want to eat healthy food in law school, which is a very valiant thing to say that you want to do. You can't just expect that's going to happen.

Lee Burgess: It's not going to magically appear.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's not like, it's not like the fairy or the magic genie is going to come and deliver you healthy food when it's time for you to eat it.

Like if that's something that you want to prioritize, you've got to think about how you're going to make that happen. And it might mean that you don't buy a bunch of crap.

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Lee Burgess: Right. It might. And when you're stressed, you know, if you have to, you're one of those people that likes to eat chocolate when you're stressed.

Maybe it's not a good idea to keep a bunch of chocolate in your house. Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Whereas like with me and my roommates, we would order boxes of our personally selected See's candy for the exam period. We would usually have some leftover at the end just because none of us had that personality where we were going to go at like midnight and eat all the chocolate.

Lee Burgess: I will be honest, I could not keep a giant box of See's candy in my house during, it would not last all of final exam period.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, like we would have like one piece if we were studying, you know, and like, but that's fine because we knew that we could do that.

Lee Burgess: Right. Everybody's got their own demons about things.

So it's just about being honest with yourself. I think that's a lot of it is being self aware.

Alison Monahan: Well, and treating yourself with kindness. Like everybody does this. It's not like you're a terrible person because you ate all the chocolate. It's just like, you know, you can reflect on this and be like, you know what?

Next time, maybe I should buy, like, one bar instead of a whole case, because I know that eventually I'm going to go and eat all of the chocolate.

Lee Burgess: And that's, and that's totally, that's totally fine. It's self awareness, it is kindness, and just setting yourself up for success. You know, what do you need to get to your goals?

Probably one of the other self sabotaging behaviors we should talk about that we see all the time in law school is drinking.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Yeah. There are, there are a lot of potential negative repercussions of excess drinking in law school.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah.

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Alison Monahan: And it's very common. I mean, people are under a lot of stress.

The social conditions typically manifest as like, oh, let's go for a drink or let's, you know, there's just a lot of drinking in the culture. And particularly, I was in school in New York. And so you've got like, New York is a heavy drinking town. Law school is heavy drinking. Put those two together. And I was like, I have never seen people drink like this in my life.

Like You know, and I went to like, some pretty hardy, like, party schools for an undergrad. I was like, I've never seen people drink like this regularly.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Yeah, it can really be something you have to watch out for because if you're constantly hungover, you are also not going to be able to get your work done, and then that's, It's going to be definitely self sabotaging behavior, and it could lead to all sorts of the substance abuse problems that happen in the legal profession as a whole.

So it's just something you just want to be aware. I mean, not saying don't go out to a bar night and have a good time, but when it becomes a crutch and prevents you from doing the things you need to do, it's probably worth taking a moment and examining what's going on.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, like I had a friend, for example, at a different law school in New York his first year, and he later told me that he was basically spending every night reading his, you know, his case is in the library until about midnight, and then at midnight, he would leave, but he would realize his brain was too wired to go to sleep. And so he would go by himself to this bar and, you know, order what was supposed to be like one drink to kind of calm him down. Basically, he would turn in a three or four, and then it's two in the morning, and I've been drinking for two hours, and I was doing this every night.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's something you may want to examine.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, like, you know, whatever. I mean, he got through law school. It was no problem. But, you know, in retrospect, he was like, and I was also not telling anyone this, because I kind of knew that it wasn't a great idea. You know, and he's like, I made sure to go to a bar where I wouldn't run into anyone.

So, you know, it turns into all this, like, I'm hiding this, I know it's sort of a problem, but I'm not really dealing with it. You know, I mean, like I said, he survived, but he's like, you know, in retrospect, there probably were better ways

to handle this feeling of like, there's so much stuff going on in my head that I can't sleep.

Like maybe I should have like gone and listened to a guided meditation or something to like bring me down.

Lee Burgess: Or stop studying earlier. Don't study till midnight. So you can go to bed on time.

Alison Monahan: Like, yeah, I mean, there are lots of options.

Lee Burgess: Other things I have definitely seen I have seen students shut down and just binge watch TV shows for like weekends or weeks on end.

That's a favorite. And you know, okay. I like a good TV show too, but it's probably not a good time to binge watch Netflix while you have a lot of other work to be done. Now, again, if you can be disciplined, I think having a TV show or something like that that you look forward to watching to wind down after you finish all your studying can be fun.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, or like I would, for example, go at lunch and I'd have lunch in my apartment with my roommates and we'd watch two episodes of Sex and the City. And then we did that every day and it was just kind of like, oh, if somebody missed it, it's like, oh, here's what you missed. It was a social thing, and it allowed us to take a little time, eat our lunch, chill out, and then go back to school.

Lee Burgess: But, you know, if you're doing that seven hours a day, that's a different story. Yeah, exactly. During final exams, I would always pick some sort of a TV show that I hadn't seen. And of course, this is before, to make myself feel old, this is when you would get the, like, DVDs of the TV shows. But I lived down the street from a rental, like, a movie rental place, and so I would, like, pick up one of the DVDs, of course, that had, like, four or five shows on it.

But, you know, that was my reward for, like, studying all day and then I got to like watch one or two episodes and I get to go to bed and the next day I get to watch a couple more. I mean, it can be, it can be something that you can reward yourself with, but when you're studying for final exams, you probably shouldn't be watching, you know, six hours of Dexter during the day, which is what Sven's student did that was working with me.

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She's like, I literally watched an entire season of Dexter this weekend. I'm like, I don't think that was the best use of your time, but now it's over. So we just have to move forward.

Alison Monahan: Guilt, not productive, like just figure out where to go from now.

Lee Burgess: Exactly, exactly.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And I think this idea of like a mini reward can be helpful.

I mean, I have a time management technique called the circles, which is kind of like the purest form of this, which is, you know, you kind of figure out what you need to do. You do it a circle for each hour of work you're going to do on something. And then if you work for 50 minutes straight, you get to mark that circle off.

So it's like this kind of. Really silly sounding reward of like, really? Just because you get to like color in a circle you're gonna do it? But it's highly effective and you know it can be all kinds of things like if I finish this, ok, finish the reading for this class I'll go walk down the street and you know walk around the block or whatever or I'll call my friend and we'll talk for ten minutes.

You know these, it doesn't have to be anything big or elaborate Just the idea of having anything there That you're gonna reward yourself with can really help with accountability.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's really true.

Alison Monahan: You know, take the dog on a walk, like whatever it is.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Ideally, get some exercise. Get outta the house.

Get out of your books.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, for sure. I think another thing that can really happen to students is just not taking care of yourself, so you end up probably getting sick, and I think that this is something that happens all the time. We were talking about trying to eat healthy food, or not eating the entire box of chocolates, but you know, if you're not sleeping, or you're just eating pizza, and you're not 18 anymore,

Alison Monahan: And you're living on like a continuous infusion drip of caffeine.

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Lee Burgess: Right. It's likely that once, you know, everyone goes home for the holidays and Thanksgiving, you're going to come back and everybody's going to get sick. That's what's, you know, what seems to happen.

Alison Monahan: Well, and again, like getting sick can be this sort of self fulfilling prophecy that gets you, lets you off the hook for not doing well.

Right. You know, we talked 2Ls and it's like, well, you know, what happened your first year? Well, things were going fine, and like, then I started to kind of fall behind, and then I got really sick, and it's like, okay, like, things happen, but maybe do you think anything about your lifestyle was contributing to that?

And then it's like, you're just down a bad path, like, oh, and then I couldn't take my exams, and then this, and then that, and blah, blah, blah. It's just better to avoid that.

Lee Burgess: It is just better to avoid that and if you do get sick come up with a plan of how you're going to take time off to get better and then try and triage the situation.

I think where it can become a very slippery slope is it's like, well, then I got sick and then I got behind and then I failed my exam and then yada yada, where it's like, I have worked with students who like had to have their appendix out, but then like, took time off and got better and then came back and said, well, I'm just going to do the best I can.

And then they still ended up doing okay, because they tried to save it.

You know, it's, a lot of it is how you come back from some of these frustrating situations of life that will happen, or if you're just looking for that excuse to say, well, now that I've got the flu, I'm just going to fail law school.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And you know, sometimes it's better to just take two or three days off if you are truly sick and get better than to, you know, the other thing people do is they just like, oh, I kept dragging myself to class. And then I was taking even longer to do the reading and I wasn't getting any sleep. So I was sick for like a month.

Yeah. And it's like, good Lord, just go to bed.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. I think that that is. Definitely, definitely true. I think it's also important to note that if stuff really gets extreme, you know, you're not sleeping, you're, you know, participating in some serious self sabotaging behavior that maybe is affecting your health or affecting your mood or affecting

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how your relationships with other people, it might be time to go ahead and seek out some professional support to try and fix this stuff because you, you know, we've talked about in the podcast before that depression and anxiety and things like that in law school can really, really get ratcheted up quickly and if you're starting to get a little worried about yourself, or you feel like you just cannot overcome some of these things, then it's time to reach out for some additional assistance.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I was depressed my second, beginning of my second semester of my first year, and I just literally stopped going to class.

Like, I wasn't doing the reading, I wasn't going to class, I just was like, I can't get out of bed.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And granted, this was New York in January, and it was like five degrees outside, so it was kind of understandable. Yeah, but at some point I was like, okay. This does not seem like something that is going to be a good thing for me.

Yeah. Like why don't I deal with it?

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And you know, I went and I got a therapist from the Student Health Center and she was awesome. And, but it, you know, was really the better part of the semester before I was like, okay, I feel like I can cope with life again and actually, like, you know, try to get my shit together.

I remember at some point she kind of looked at me and she's like, do you really think it makes sense to flunk all of your classes just approve a point. And I was like, yeah, I guess probably not. And this was like literally a few weeks before exams. Like she was literally like, if you don't get it together, you're gonna fail all of your classes.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And it was this moment of like, okay. And she was like, you know, you, she like, you can do that, or you can take leave. Like, you know, nobody's telling you not to, but you have to make a choice. Like, are you gonna try to pull this together or not? And if not, like, go withdraw from classes.

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Lee Burgess: And I think that's a really interesting point because so often I think there are those decision points, you know, are you going to go all in, or are you going to just, you know, cut your losses or, or truly just sabotage yourself to make sure that you aren't successful.

And I think we see that in varying degrees with students all the time. I remember talking to students who had trouble writing under time pressure, and I said, okay, what I want you to do is practice exam, and I want you to stop at 60 minutes. And he sent it back to me and he said, well, I couldn't stop. And I was like, I was like, I say this with love and support, but you couldn't take your fingers of the laptop? I mean, like, what do you mean?

Alison Monahan: Like, you're like, that's actually just not true.

Lee Burgess: Right. But you know, it's interesting how we can really convince ourselves of very extreme things when we're, you know, when we're stressed and we're in, in negative places.

And. And I think sometimes talking to somebody else, whether it be a therapist or a tutor or a professor or a mentor, to kind of talk out some of this stuff, so you can almost hear how silly it might sound to say, I could not stop writing, when I'm like, yes, you could, you know, but he just really felt like that was his reality that he was living in.

And so if that is you, if you are living in a reality where you really feel like you're kind of, you know, in a place where you like can't remove your fingers from the, Keyboard, then I think it is a good idea to talk to somebody about it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, because I mean, part of this is like if you're really in this like extreme self-sabotaging place, it can be the sign that you're not on the right path.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: That you have not come to a point where you can consciously admit that.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And you know, I think a lot of people are under pressure from various directions, you know, to go to law school, to stay in law school, but at some point, ultimately it's your choice to be there. No one's forcing you. I mean, even if your parents are telling you they're going to withdraw money from your funding, you know, they're not going to pay for your life if you drop out, you still have a

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choice. Yeah. You know, you can basically go to them and say like, look, with all respect, I'm going to do what I want.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: You know, like this is not the right place for me to be. And I would rather work as a barista than stay in law school.

Lee Burgess: And you're an adult.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You're a grown up. You can do that.

Lee Burgess: You can do that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. So like, this might be a sign that like law school is not for you. It might not be, you know, there may be other things going on and you can deal with those other things, but just, you know, allow, allow the possibility that maybe this is your id talking to you in a way that you're not getting.

Yeah. Because eventually this sort of thing, if that's the case, it just tends to get worse and worse.

Lee Burgess: I think that's very true.

Alison Monahan: Until suddenly like you're having a physical breakdown because you can't handle the stress and the pressure of doing something that's so fundamentally wrong for you. And that's just not a great place to end up in.

Lee Burgess: No.

So don't do that, please.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, don't do that. Well, unfortunately, with that, on that uplifting note, we are out of time. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on iTunes because we'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything.

Typically, our new episodes are on Monday. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to me or to Alison@LawSchoolToolbox.com or Lee@LawSchoolToolbox.com. And you can always contact us via our website contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening. We'll talk soon and good luck with your accountability.