Professor Lefton: Hello, I’m Nicole Lefton, Director of Academic Success and Bar Exam Preparation at the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University. I’m here with three colleagues: Melissa Hale, who’s the Director of Academic Success and Bar Programs at Loyola University Chicago, Steven Foster, the Director of Academic Achievement from Oklahoma City University School of Law, and Laura Mott, from City University of New York School of Law. In this podcast, we want to talk a bit about ways you can manage pandemic stress, which we’re all feeling, as you navigate law school.

It’s not an exaggeration to say that the past two years have been incredibly tough. As law school is a stressful time, even under the best of circumstances, the added stress of attending law school in the midst of a pandemic can make even the most centered person anxious – and that can certainly impact the law school experience in every way.

As Academic Support professionals, we often meet with our students to help them develop better strategies for succeeding in law school. These typically cover both study strategies and test-taking strategies. And they can often include ways to improve time management and better handle stress.

Over the past two years, the advice we have given to our students often focuses on strategies for dealing with the impact of the pandemic.

So we thought it might be helpful to offer this advice in a podcast. While not all students have faced the same level or type of stress, we hope the following advice might give you some tools that will lead to success in law school during these tough times.

In this podcast, we will give advice on how to best manage the following byproducts of the pandemic:

The feeling of increased isolation,

Trouble staying focused on work, particularly during Zoom lectures,

Difficulty drawing the line between work and home life, as our home space melds with our school space, and

The sense of emotional and mental exhaustion we are all feeling.

I’ll start the ball rolling.

Our school is located just outside New York City. So when COVID first hit, we were impacted almost immediately. In fact, we were one of the first schools to shut down the physical campus and move to remote learning.

Needless to say, the sense of panic we all faced – particularly at the beginning of the pandemic – stemmed in large part because the future was unknown. We didn’t know how the Zoom classes were going to work, we didn’t know when we would be able to get back in the classroom, we didn’t know who among us – colleagues, friends, family – would get sick, and we didn’t know whether our loved ones who did get sick would be okay.

One thing I’ve seen that has had a huge impact on my students is the sense of isolation we all felt. Without the presence of the law school community – both faculty and students – it became incredibly hard to navigate these uncharted waters.

Even though many of us have returned to campus, we still aren’t “back to normal.” That is, many professors still have limited or online office hours, and beneficial group activities like study groups tend to be less prevalent.

It’s important to recognize, that while much of the work we do in law school is an isolating experience – that is, we often study more effectively in a quiet, isolated spot – there are definitely important benefits of connecting with professors and classmates. And feeling like you’re missing something without these connections is entirely normal. That sense of isolation can certainly increase one's level of stress. So, here are a few pieces of advice:

Do your best to take advantage of law school **group activities** – be they in-person or on Zoom. We’re all a little out of practice here, so it may feel awkward to start up again.

Consider **joining a club or participating in other law school activities** like moot court. While these activities can take time away from your studies, they can be really valuable to your frame of mind and help you develop or hone an interest in a particular area of law.

If you can join a **study group**, particularly one that works for you – and here’s a plug, there’s a CALI lesson on study groups that might be helpful – study groups are a good way to reconnect with your classmates.

Another strategy, take advantage of **professors’ office hours**, even if these are still online. And if you’re feeling confused in class, feel free to reach out to your professor or TA to ask for a **one-on-one meeting**.

Finally, it may seem odd to recommend that you take time away from law school, but outside group activities that help us improve our mental health and alleviate stress are particularly important. For example, attend exercise classes or yoga classes, join a gym, or go for a jog or even a long walk with a friend.

By trying to break the sense of isolation we are all feeling, you will hopefully make the law school experience more productive and enjoyable…and less stressful.

Now, let's hear from Professor Hale.

Professor Hale: I’d like to build on what Professor Lefton has said, because I completely agree. Our school very much prides itself on community, and specifically “breaking bread” together, so moving everything remotely really hurt our students…AND our faculty and administrators. Not being able to gather has really hurt us all, so I very much agree with the advice you just heard.

In addition, to further build on Professor Lefton’s comments about taking time away from school, I danced, fairly seriously, from childhood and through my undergraduate career. However, I quit dance for law school because, in my mind, I didn’t have time and it wasn’t a serious enough endeavor for law school. It’s one of my few regrets in life, mostly because it’s so very important for your mental health to have these things outside of the law. So keep them! And don’t feel guilty. It will help you come back to the law recharged and feeling better.

I also know another complaint, or rather, a pandemic challenge, has been staying focused and paying attention during Zoom. We get it. Most of your faculty have had to also adapt to Zoom faculty meetings, Zoom conferences, Zoom trainings. I think we all find it much easier to pay attention in person.

I find myself getting easily distracted during Zoom conferences – topics I'm genuinely interested in with speakers I really admire and respect. But still, the temptation to check email, switch to another online tab, or if your camera is off…wander the area, get a snack, etc. I’ve been there. So here is what works for me:

First, keep your camera on if you can. It’s easier to pay attention when your facial expressions are front and center! This is similar to in-person activities. And again, I get it – very tempting to just turn off the camera and zone out. But trust me, you want to get the most out of your legal education, so keep the camera on.

Second, turn off other distractions. Turn off email notifications, or shut down your email. Shut down other browsers or tabs. Sure, you can still open them, but remove the temptation where you can.

Third, in between Zoom meetings or classes, stretch, walk around. Do something that doesn’t involve a screen.

I also realize that most of us are trying to get back to normal, and that can mean different things for different schools. However, even before the pandemic, there were plenty of study aids, like bar prep, that were online. Now you don’t have a camera option for those, but if the video is not live, you DO have the option of pausing the video to stretch, get a snack, and do what you need to do. Those breaks can help you focus and pay attention. And the other advice for removing distractions still applies, even when it’s an asynchronous study aid.

Finally, in either a live or asynchronous setting, force yourself to take notes, perhaps by hand if that works better for you. I realize that in law school classes, you are almost certainly used to taking notes. Pretend that the class is a live one and that you can’t go back and review. Take notes much the same way you would in person and use that to help keep your focus.

What advice do you have Professor Foster?

Professor Foster: Professors Hale and Lefton illustrate what most of our students experience. The additional challenge my students and I experienced was the inability to shut everything down. The quick transition to remote learning caused many people to set up workspaces in different areas of the house or apartment. Individuals with kids had to create space to work and to home educate. I worked from my kitchen counter so that I could also help my kids with their school work. It worked well during the day, but the work sat there after the workday ended. Making dinner, my laptop with unanswered emails stared at me. I went to the refrigerator for a snack, and I thought about the one small task I could complete. The inability to walk away was exhausting. To combat this, I suggested a few tips to my bar takers:

First, create a dedicated workspace. Do all the work in that area, and when not working, go away. It can be the corner of a room or a separate room. Doesn’t matter as long as it is separate.

Second, shut the laptop. This sounds silly, but if my laptop is shut, then I probably won’t open it to work on emails.

Third, take breaks. This is common advice for all studying, but when exhausted, breaks are critical to staying fresh.

And lastly, put everything away if possible. Clean up books or move things out of sight to make it less likely you see it during non-working hours.

The pandemic exhausted many students with new responsibilities and ways to learn. Creating a good environment is critical to keeping energy up.

And with that, Professor Mott has a few last comments to tie everything together. 

Professor Mott: Thanks so much, Professor Foster. The fantastic professors you’ve heard from have almost all of what we have experienced here at CUNY covered, so, I’ll only add a few comments.

Overall, we are all so much more exhausted than we were before 2020. But despite this new normal, remember, you are here for you, and this is your education, so take ownership of it – whatever that means to you.

As Professor Lefton recommended, take advantage of any opportunities to connect with your colleagues and professors. The “disconnection/isolation effect” from the pandemic is real and it restructured the way we relate to each other. However, learning is a social activity – we go further together. So whether it be group activities at school or off-campus, study groups, or office hours (in person or remote), open up, and allow your future colleagues and mentors to know you.

As Professor Hale emphasized, paying attention during Zoom meetings and classes can be challenging. This is why taking breaks, shutting off devices, or moving them to other rooms when you aren’t on them or using them, as Professor Foster discussed, is critical. And when you are studying, put your cell phone in another room, or somewhere that you can’t see it unless you get up and walk across the room. And definitely, definitely, definitely, taking notes in either a live classroom or Zoom setting is one of the most important things you can do. And if you can’t type anymore, use a notebook with colorful pens or colored pencils that can help you refocus. Your notes don’t have to be perfect. They’re only for you. It’s a way to stay engaged and remain an active listener in the conversation versus a passive one, letting information just kind of wash over you. Make conscious decisions about what information streams you will allow to claim your attention. That’s a time management and focus tool that will help you on your way in law school AND in your career!

Going forward, we all – you, your professors, the world – have a huge transition to make as we continue teaching and learning back in person. We are renegotiating our relationships with physical space and distance, calculating our risk tolerance levels and our attention spans, and getting to a place where we can all fully concentrate again in three dimensions. You probably now have a permanent work-from-home space set up in your house. Maybe you feel more comfortable getting work done there – that’s great! In fact, you are the first generation of law students/soon-to-be attorneys who will be experts at navigating hybrid legal workplaces. Be generous and patient with yourselves and your colleagues as we all adapt to “the new normal.” And stay positive. And with that, I’ll turn it back to Professor Lefton to wrap us up.

Professor Lefton: That was so helpful! Can I ask all of you to give our audience one take-away based on the advice you shared here?

I guess I’ll start. Make an effort to re-engage with people – it’s tough to reconnect, but it will make the law school experience more enjoyable and rewarding. Professor Hale?

Professor Hale: Definitely minimize distractions where possible, and take breaks where you can.

Professor Foster: You should absolutely create a dedicated study space for work, and then, get out of it when you’re done.

Professor Mott: Embrace the study and classroom engagement tools that work for you, and take the time to find out what those are.

Thanks, everyone, we hope that you found this podcast helpful.

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