



Lee Burgess: Welcome to the Bar Exam Toolbox podcast. Today, as part of our “Quick Tips” series, we are talking about some tools you can use to handle distractions during bar study. Your Bar Exam Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess, that’s me. We’re here to demystify the bar exam experience, so you can study effectively, stay sane, and hopefully pass and move on with your life. We’re the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the career-related website [CareerDicta](#). Alison also runs [The Girl’s Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on your favorite listening app, and check out our sister podcast, the [Law School Toolbox podcast](#). If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the [contact form](#) on BarExamToolbox.com, and we’d love to hear from you. And with that, let’s get started.

Lee Burgess: First things first. Have you ever done a diagnostic check on your phone to see how many minutes, or even hours you spend on particular time-sucking apps or websites? Well, let me tell you, I’ve been having students do this recently, and it can be really sobering! When studying for an exam, you don’t have a lot of extra time to go down the rabbit hole of social media or get waylaid by other distractions online. Some studies show that it can take as long as 20 minutes to get back in the zone after succumbing to a distraction online. You definitely don’t have time for that!

Lee Burgess: For most of our students, the typical culprits when it comes to distraction are: TV streaming apps, gaming, email, and social media and other online platforms. However, a lot of students also get distracted by other things, such as texts with family and friends, and even reading about the exam! The few minutes you spend here and there can really add up, and taking unplanned break time out of a task that is supposed to involve compete and total focus can really hinder your productivity. So, my advice is to lock yourself out. If you can avoid the temptation on your own, congratulations! You have more self-control than the average person. If you need help with this though, try downloading a blocking app. You can put the settings as strict as you want. You can block both apps and websites that typically drain your attention. You can set timers for yourself, so certain platforms are only accessible at night when your studying is done. There are lots of free apps out there for both phones and computers. There are also popular paid apps like [Freedom](#) that do the exact same thing. Set yourself up for success by blocking whatever is distracting you.

Lee Burgess: Second: Have you ever wished you had a study buddy without all the distractions that can come up when two friends or classmates get together face-to-face? If so, have you heard of body doubling? If you struggle with staying focused and want to team up with a partner who is also trying to get productive



at the same time, you can use a site like [“Think Divergent”](#) to match you up with someone who can help you stay accountable. Sessions are free, and you have unlimited access, so you can use these sessions as often as you’d like. Body doubling lasts for 30-minute stints. That other person is a stranger and is probably working on something unrelated to a law school or bar exam, so there’s no temptation to chat. Just get matched up, quickly share your goal with each other in the chat window, stay focused for half an hour, and then give yourselves a pat on the back for getting your tasks done. Once your 30 minutes are up, you can start another session right away or move onto something else.

Lee Burgess:

Third tip: Time yourself. The Pomodoro technique is a really useful and super simple way to stay on task and fight distractions. Basically, you give yourself a set time for highly-focused productive work, and if you finish that block and stay on task the whole time, you get a mini celebration and a short break. Then, you move onto the next round. You can do this all throughout your study day in increments of one hour or even half an hour. There are a lot of options; just try searching for “Pomodoro timers” in both app and online formats. There are also some clever variations out there. For example, a free app called [“Forest”](#) lets you plant a little seedling tree that grows bigger and bigger based on how productive you are. Side note: The little tree dies if you run out of steam and get distracted. You can build a whole forest of tiny trees, which doesn’t sound like it would be motivating, but there are cute, colorful graphics and little rewards to unlock, and it’s actually pretty fun. [“Engross”](#) is another free app that works with the same concept.

Lee Burgess:

Or you could go old-school and do it yourself on paper. We’ve talked on our blog and podcast before about the on-paper [“Circles” method](#), and we use this one with students a lot. How does it work? To sum it up, you get a post-it or a piece of paper and draw an empty circle for each hour of work you plan to do that day. Make them small, like the size of a pencil eraser, so they’re easy to fill up later. Set up 5, 8 or 10 empty circles – however many hours you plan to spend that day. No need to label them with task names; just keep it as simple as possible. Then set a timer for 50 minutes. Each circle represents one hour total. If you complete 50 minutes of your best, focused work for the full 50 minutes within that one-hour window without getting distracted, you win! You can color in the first circle and spend that leftover 10 minutes taking a break and doing whatever you want. Again, this sounds really simple, and it is – that’s the beauty of it. But it’s also super motivating. You might be amazed how gratifying it is to color in a circle, and how much a 10-minute break every hour can do to clear your mind and get you ready to jump into the next task. This is a great method to use when you have a mountain of work ahead of you and you’re not even sure where to begin. Sounds like exam studying, right? Just jump into the first



circle first thing in the morning, spend 50 minutes doing your very best, and then reassess at the end of the hour before deciding how to spend the next one-hour block.

Lee Burgess:

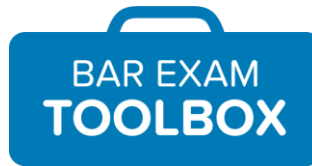
Okay, tip number four: Get noisy. You've probably heard of "white noise", but did you know there's also "pink noise" and "brown noise" too? The color classifications have to do with sound frequencies. Higher frequency sounds at a constant are great for blocking existing background noise around you, like if you live next to a construction site or have disruptive neighbors. White noise can be, for example, the sound of static or a recording of a high-intensity waterfall. These kinds of sounds can help insulate you in your own little bubble while studying. On the other hand, lower frequency sounds that vary in their intensity can help with focus by removing the total silence, which can itself be distracting, but also not adding in any music or lyrics that can make you lose focus. For example, think of sounds like rain falling or a bonfire crackling. You can find hours of noise cancellation and "study music" on YouTube. Just make sure you use a browser with an ad-blocker, so you don't get interrupted with commercials. If you don't want to deal with YouTube, and are looking for sounds specifically geared toward focus and concentration, you can try "brain.fm". It's a paid app, but seems to be pretty popular.

Lee Burgess:

There are also lots of white noise apps that let you tailor your sounds and mix and match volume across various sounds. For example, loud slow waves crashing and quiet birdsong in the background, or you can set up underwater bubbles along with soft instrumental music. Get creative! As you get closer to exam day, you may even want to try and make a playlist of ambient noise similar to what you might face during the bar. For example, you can find playlists with background noises like traffic, a milling crowd, or a coffee shop. It can be helpful to acclimate yourself to sounds that are the opposite of peaceful and actually detract from focus. Why? Well, with all the paper shuffling, shifting around and typing of hundreds of nervous exam-takers in one place, inside the exam room can be really loud if you're not ready for it, so it's something that's good to incorporate into your practice exams. Plus, this is the perfect opportunity to test out your ear plugs, which we always suggest trying out before you have to use them on exam day. We recommend bringing in this kind of disruptive noise later on in your study, though, and not using it all the time. Try it out during a timed practice exam a few weeks before the test to see how you fare.

Lee Burgess:

Finally, another way to include some beneficial noise into your routine in order to fight distractions is by using sound to help you fall asleep at night. Many students find it hard to turn their brain off at the end of the day, and listening to



an audiobook, podcast, or monotonous “sleep sounds” on a loop can be just engrossing enough to help you stop ruminating and drift off. There is usually a “Sleep” category on white noise apps, so these tracks are also easy to find.

Lee Burgess:

For our fifth tip, make some habits and rack up rewards. Again, there are apps for this, but you can also go the easy route and just grab a pen and paper. A student told me one time, “I just wish I got a gold star for finishing every essay. I remember being super motivated by that as a kid.” So, what’s stopping you? Go buy some star stickers. Put them on a paper calendar. The caveat here is just to not spend so much time setting up your chore chart that you end up wasting valuable study time actually using it. If you want to do this electronically, you can use a program like Asana that has fun little graphics that pop up when you check off your to-do list. Or make it more tangible and set aside a special snack, activity, or guilt-free TV episode for the end of the evening – whatever it is that pushes you along throughout the day and keeps you on task. I had another bar student who wanted to watch a movie with her partner in the evenings, but never felt like she “deserved” it or had enough time. But you can! As long as you stay focused throughout the day and plan for it, there is no reason why you can’t cook a nice dinner, watch a movie, or do something else that’s fun once you close your computer for the day.

Lee Burgess:

Look, there’s always more law to learn and more essays to write, but you always need to give your brain and body a rest and take a little time off here and there as well. So, ask yourself what would make you more eager to jump into each new task, and give yourself a literal or figurative cookie if you hit your goal. I had a student a long time ago who put a candy jar in their kitchen while studying for the bar, and went and got a Sour Patch Kid each time she finished a new essay. Now, I’m not saying you should overload on candy or unhealthy snacks, so obviously keep your rewards sensible, but sometimes even the smallest prize can have a motivating effect. And gold stars don’t just have to be for study tasks. You can give yourself points for other study habits, like drinking enough water, getting outside, or even exercising. The point is to find something that works for you, then remain disciplined and stick to your program.

Lee Burgess:

Or if you find you’re more inclined to commit to tasks with negative consequences, you can always check out “[stickk](#)” – which is spelled with two Ks – S-T-I-C-K-K. We’ve talked about this program on our blog before, but basically, if you fail to finish your essay or do less than the desired number of multiple choice questions, you might just find your hard-earned cash being sent off to an “anti-charity”, whose values you are diametrically opposed to. And there are lots of charities on both sides of some very controversial issues, so I’m sure you can find an organization you would hate enough to motivate you into getting



your tasks finished. Personally, I'm not sure if I would find this motivating or just super stress-inducing, but it's worth a mention since some of our students have really liked this idea.

Lee Burgess:

Sixth on the list for minimizing distractions: Try a mindfulness app. Mindfulness and studying might not sound like they go together, but getting into a daily mindfulness practice can help anyone get more focused and stay calm when faced with anxiety-provoking tasks, like practice exams. There are even some one-minute meditations to get you back in the zone if you find your mind wandering. These can be great for the last minute of your 10-minute break before jumping back into work using the "Circles" method I talked about a minute ago. For some totally free mindfulness apps, you can check out "[InsightTimer](#)", "[Mindfulness Coach](#)", "[Smiling Mind](#)", or "[Healthy Minds Program](#)". I really like the "bite-sized" guided meditations on the "Smiling Mind" app, for example. There's one that is just two minutes long and follows the acronym "STOP":

- Stop
- Take a breath
- Observe what you're thinking and feeling
- Proceed in the way that is going to help you accomplish your goal

Of course, you could simply read this acronym to yourself, but starting the app, listening to the speaker, and actually taking the breaths and pausing to re-group is a great way to quickly come back if you find yourself daydreaming or getting sidetracked. Added bonus – most meditation and mindfulness apps also have a section on sleep help, so these apps can also be a useful tool for winding down at the end of your study day or when you're trying to fall asleep at night.

Lee Burgess:

Finally, if you're feeling distracted while studying, it can be helpful to take stock of the type of distractions that are coming up for you, so you can figure out how to keep them at bay. What we've been talking about so far today are the kinds of momentary dips in focus that can come up for anyone studying for an exam. There can be other types of distractions too though. For example, if you've been putting in long study hours and skimping on breaks, and you feel yourself getting distracted, your body and mind might actually just be rebelling from what you're putting them through. I had a student once who had been working extremely hard, but then one night, just couldn't stop clicking "Next" on Netflix and ended up watching two full seasons of a reality show, staying up the entire night, and then physically couldn't stay awake and study the next morning. This kind of distraction is also a form of self-sabotage, and we see this the most often with people who have neglected giving themselves any kind of breaks. If this is happening, you probably need to take a day off and re-group.



Lee Burgess: As we wrap things up, I just want to say that studying is a holistic experience. Yes, you're putting your brain and body through a lot, but it can also be an emotional rollercoaster, especially if you've struggled on exams before. Even if you don't ordinarily work out or eat super healthy, studying can be a very sedentary endeavor – you're sitting practically the whole time. And it's therefore a great opportunity to incorporate some positive changes that will help change up your day and alleviate overall stress, anxiety. And yes, staying healthy can help you beat distractions and stay more focused too. So, get out there, take a walk or a run, snack on veggies, and make sure you're drinking enough water and getting adequate sleep.

Lee Burgess: And with that, we're out of time! If you enjoyed this episode of the Bar Exam Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app. We would 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@barexamtoolbox.com or alison@barexamtoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website [contact form](#) on BarExamToolbox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

RESOURCES:

[Private Bar Exam Tutoring](#)

[Freedom](#)

[Think Divergent](#)

[Forest](#)

[Engross](#)

[The Girl's Guide to Law School: Need to Get More Done in Law School? Try The Circles.](#)

[brain.fm](#)

[stickK](#)

[InsightTimer](#)

[Mindfulness Coach](#)

[Smiling Mind](#)

[Healthy Minds Program](#)

[How to Avoid Distractions During Bar Study](#)