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**The Bar Exam Taught Me Something! Or How Bar Prep Advice Helps Me Manage Life in Lockdown**

By Heather Varanini, Associate Director of Academic Achievement and Adjunct Professor at the Golden Gate University School of Law

There’s a refrain from most law school graduates: law school taught me nothing about the practice of law and the bar exam didn’t test any of the skills that will make me a good lawyer. But what about the other things you learned in the process?

I’m the kind of person that hates it when my time is wasted, so I don’t like being busy, I like being *productive*. When I spend my time on something, it should be for a reason. So I’m always looking for the takeaways and the fun facts that will help me score points while yelling at my TV watching *Jeopardy!* But more importantly, I want to find the lessons that I can keep using to make my life a little easier and a little more fun for the years ahead.

The bar exam is a time-honored tradition of stress overload: get all the rules (and their exceptions!) into your brain and then dump it out on test day. After the long years you put into law school (and many, many, many dollars) and the grueling months of hard work prepping for the bar exam, is the best we can expect while awaiting results and our bar card the post bar blues? I wasn’t satisfied with the idea that all I would get was cold sweats any time someone mentioned the word “bar” and “exam” in the same sentence.

When the shelter-in-place orders went into effect in California, my school already authorized most employees to start working from home (WFH). I am deeply grateful to have the privilege of a job that allows me to WFH, a safe home to work from, and equipment to do my job (e.g., a

working laptop, internet, home printer). The main challenge? Working effectively during one of the busiest times of the semester.

I quickly came up with a plan, and I relied heavily on my experience studying for the California Bar Exam to WFH well. I hope that in sharing my experiences, it may help you, too. Here is what I did, what I am doing, and how I think it can help:

## Create a Dedicated Workspace

It's important to create a space devoted solely to working, with plenty of light, free of clutter, and within arm's reach of the materials you need (e.g., books, office supplies) regardless of the amount of physical space you have available. This allows your brain to associate a specific place with work, just like you would your workspace at the office, and it allows for mental breaks when you physically walk away. The light, clutter-free space, and easy access to materials all aid in focus; distraction is already a challenge as most of us have been uprooted from our daily routines.

Making a study space was the first thing I did when I started bar prepping. I moved my small desk near a window and a bookshelf, and I restocked office supplies for the things I needed most. When the pandemic hit, my study space was semi-intact from bar study, but needed reorganizing and cleaning, so I got to work. And I make adjustments as necessary.

## Have a Routine That Works and Stick With It

Creating a routine that works in the midst of stress or chaos can help reduce that stress and anxiety. A lot of advice I received about studying for the exam revolved around creating a daily routine and not deviating from it. Day in, and day out, I woke up at the same time, watched lectures, ate lunch, then practiced MBEs and essays until it was time to exercise and eat dinner before I relaxed, and went to bed.

Despite the uncertainty of the outside world, my day-to-day life is predictable. Now, without a commute, I wake up about an hour later than usual, and get ready. I still get dressed like I'm headed into the office to put my mind in "work mode," grab coffee from the kitchen rather than the downstairs cafe at school, and get to work. I take a lunch break and stretch every hour. At the end of the day, I exercise before eating dinner, relaxing, and heading to bed. Sound familiar?

## ...But Be Flexible and Give Yourself Space

There will be days when you are more productive than others for a variety of reasons. That's okay, even when it doesn't feel like it. This is something that many lawyers and law students struggle with because we tend to be high-achieving people, meaning that we like to be busy, we like to be productive, and we don't like it when things get in our way of success!

I experience chronic migraines. I worried that, despite everything I do on a daily basis to keep them at bay, they would take over and I wouldn't be able to study for the exam or I would get behind. Guess what? That's *exactly* what happened. I had migraines like I do every month and I managed them like I normally do. I had to be okay with the fact that they were part of my life and

I needed to manage them in the best way that I could. No amount of putting extra pressure on myself was going to make it better.

The same has been true since I started WFH. Since my setup changed, I'm prone to additional headaches and migraines as my body adjusts. I have to be okay with that and be kind to myself. If I need to move appointments or meetings and I'm able to, I do. Being kind and flexible with myself allows me to be kind and flexible with others who are doing the best they can to manage in the face of the pandemic as well.

## Limit Distractions

This may be one of the most widely discussed but most difficult to implement pieces of advice. Focus is critical to accomplishing tasks effectively, but it's a considerable challenge due to the constant ping of notifications, the nagging worry that accompanies uncertainty, the difficulty of working in changed home environments thanks to the virus, and more. To the extent possible, do your most difficult tasks at the time of day when you're most productive to maximize efficiency. Consider block scheduling to complete tasks, even if the blocks of time are five to fifteen minutes long. And use technology to your advantage, both on your mobile device and your computer: turn off notifications that don't require immediate attention, use alarms liberally, set up the "Do Not Disturb" feature for when you need to focus the most, delete apps that simply take up space, and don't hesitate to turn the ringer off.

It was seared into my brain that I would have to treat studying for the California Bar Exam like a full-time-plus job if I wanted to pass. I felt confident I could do this because I attended law school looking for a second career and graduated from an evening program. I put my phone on silent and left it in another room while I studied, checking it only during lunch and after I finished working for the day.

Now, I use social media to interact with colleagues across the country as well as to find and share resources. I limit distractions by turning off most notifications, using the "reminder" feature to keep track of my to-do list, and use headphones when the noise is just too much.

## Take Care of Yourself

Without an end date to the pandemic and a barrage of changing information on a daily basis, taking care of oneself is more important than ever. When it comes to managing stress, usually no singular thing fulfills a person's needs in a way that works 100% of the time. And things that worked in the past may not work as effectively now. It's important to try different things that engage you actively (e.g., gardening, exercise) and different things that help you relax passively (e.g., watching TV, taking a bath).

My professors were clear: to succeed in law school and on the exam, you must manage your stress. I've adopted this philosophy. Generally, there are two components to law school and the bar exam: mental and material. The mental component refers to one's ability to handle stress effectively and continue despite hardship. The material component is one's mastery of the substantive law and ability to master the skills necessary to complete the task at hand. Students must master both to pass the exam.

I meditated throughout bar study using free apps, took walks around my neighborhood, and read before bed. While I continue with short meditations each week and walks after work, I

cannot manage to read more than a page at a time for pleasure. Instead, I'm enjoying time in my town of "Greenacre" in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

Reaching out and asking for help is important, too. I told my husband that I would need help with motivation throughout bar study, so he wrote (and drew) me a different motivational Post-It note almost every day. Now, I am joining Happy Hours (something I don't do normally)—virtually, of course—and scheduling law school class reunions.

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