

Candidate Webinar Series: Mental Health and the Law School Enrollment Journey

FULL TRANSCRIPT

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Law School Admission Council Candidate Webinar Series: Mental Health and the Law School Enrollment Journey. Recorded December 1, 2021.

Gisele Joachim: Welcome to the LSAC candidate webinar series. This series of webinars is designed to provide candidates with information and tools to navigate through the law school admission process and to provide relevant information and insight into legal education and beyond to careers in law. I am Gisele Joachim, executive director of Education and Ambassador Programs, and I will be hosting our broadcast. Today we have a very special program planned, recognizing the need for prioritization of well-being and destigmatizing mental illness are conversations we all should be involved in. It is important to explore and address the challenges and issues we face, both individually and within our communities. As part of a community of aspiring law students, we recognize that you may have struggled with anxiety and may have seen some of your peers struggle.

Today's webinar will focus on common mental health challenges faced by students preparing for law school. Additionally, we will discuss some anxiety and stress producers that are common to everyone. It is now my pleasure to introduce my guest for our broadcast. Janet Haag is executive director of NAMI, Mercer, New Jersey, a robust, independently operating affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. She has been in this leadership position for over six years. NAMI Mercer engages in education, outreach, advocacy, and peer-led support so those affected by mental health challenges can build lives of quality and respect within communities free of stigma and discrimination. Janet is frequently invited to speak on topics relevant to mental well-being. Janet has spent her entire career in human services, higher education, and nonprofit management. She has always had a keen interest in and appreciation for those in the legal profession. Janet holds two graduate degrees, one in clinical psychology and one in formative leadership and spirituality. Janet, thank you so much for being with us today.

Janet Haag: Thanks for that introduction.

Gisele: Let's get started by having you tell us a bit about the work that you do and your organization.

Janet: So I'm the executive director at NAMI Mercer, and we are really a macro level mental health organizations. So we do not do direct clinical services, but rather we're involved in, as you pointed out, education, support, and advocacy. And we focus really on helping individuals be healthy, and we do that through peer-led support groups of various kinds, for example, we have a general connection support group, we have an eating disorder support group, we have a social support group that helps people who have mental health challenges connect with one another, and build friendships, and have fun together. We work to help create and build strong families through family-to-family educational program that helps family members better understand and support their loved ones who might be dealing with a mental health challenge. We have family support groups, we have a family support group for those who struggle with mental illness and addiction. We have a parent support network for parents of kids who are dealing with mental health challenges. And then we're really focused on trying to create thriving communities. So we do a lot of community education around stigma and discrimination. We host a huge walk every year that is intended to be kind of sign to the community that we all need to be about promoting mental health for all. So those are the kinds of specific activities in which we're engaged, and all of that can be found on our website, which is NAMImercer.org.

Gisele: Great, that is very helpful. I want to come back and talk about the importance of support groups, which was a lot about what you mentioned your group does, but let's dive into this a little bit and talk a little bit about anxiety, which I think is a really prevalent concern. It seems to be more prevalent, maybe related to COVID-19. Have you seen an uptick in general anxiety? And can you speak a little bit about sort of what you're seeing in terms of sort of regular anxiety, if there's such a thing?

Janet: So basically the answer to that question is yes, there has been an uptick, and part of the issue is that the COVID pandemic has really exacerbated whatever anxiety was already there within individuals, within our culture, because all of the uncertainties and the fear that we have that's associated with the pandemic, just kind of heightens that, because really a lot of anxiety is created by fear, and stress, and uncertainty. And so the pandemic simply exacerbated that and made it worse. And then a lot of people, I think, who really didn't experience anxiety before, suddenly found themselves coping with anxiety and going, like, where did this come from? You know, what's going on with me? Why am I feeling the way I'm feeling? So yes, it has certainly, we have seen an uptick. It is the number one reason that college students often will seek counseling, so it is certainly very, very prevalent.

Gisele: And so what advice might you give to folks who are feeling either a heightened sense of anxiety from maybe what their, you know, prepandemic level of anxiety was, or for people who maybe never even experienced anxiety before, and now given the situation and the fear, as you mentioned, that we all sort of are feeling, what sort of advice might you give, both in terms of sort of, you know, red flags that they should be looking for in themselves that maybe they need help or other things that they should be aware of?



Janet: So I think it always starts with acknowledging what you're feeling. So being able to own whatever the feelings are that you have is really important. Not being afraid to talk about it, to share it. We always say that, you know, the road to recovery begins with conversation because it's about being able to really speak up and say, this is what I'm experiencing, this is how I'm feeling, and request, you know, support and assistance. Because people can't help you, they can't support you, if they don't know what it is that you're experiencing or that you're struggling at all. So I think it starts with really acknowledging it and then being willing to talk about it. There are certainly all sorts of things that individuals can do to try to help them to manage their own anxiety.

It's important to acknowledge that when you need to get professional help is when anything that you're experiencing, like the signs and symptoms, are extreme and persistent. Those are the two key words I think for people to keep in mind, because sometimes people are like, I don't know, like, do I really need help or does this person that I love need help? And that's really the kind of benchmark: is what's going on extreme and persistent? And the "what's going on" can really fall into a number of different categories. For example, someone might be having a lot of unexplained physical ailments, you know, it could be the headaches, stomach aches, nausea, I mean, it could be not being able to sleep, you know, not being able to eat properly. It could be intense emotional mood swings. It could be, I can't think straight, like really disorganized thinking, which can actually go into having hallucinations and delusions, which we sometimes think like, that's really weird, like that's sort of psychotic, but that disorganized thinking in our brains can then lead to that next kind of step. And then of course there are certain behavioral changes, like if someone starts abusing substances, or is acting very different from how they've acted before, either withdrawing or being very hyperactive. So there are lots of different things that we can look at that point to whether or not someone really needs to seek professional help and support.

Gisele: So let's talk about that, sort of maybe if you think you're recognizing any of that in somebody that you love or care about, sort of from that perspective, what might you recommend to the person who thinks that they see somebody struggling?

Janet: I think it's important to remember that you want to create an alliance with that person. So you're not going to go to them and say, hey, I think YOU, you know, but rather like, I've noticed that you haven't seemed like yourself lately. Like you want to kind of speak to what you've observed, how can I help? You know, and then be prepared to help. So maybe you do a little research ahead of time about what resources are there, so that you can say to a person like, you know, you haven't seemed like yourself lately, you seem like you're really stressed out, what can I do to help? And they look at you and say, I don't really even know what to do myself. And you can say, well, you know, I've heard that there's this or that support group, or you know, I went online and I looked up, I know that there's therapists, you know, that are in this area that specifically address this kind of anxiety, or, like you just want to be prepared to offer something, to guide them in some direction really. And then care enough to ask, you know, how's it going? How are you feeling? Or, you know, I noticed you seem anxious, so can you talk to me about that? Like, are you feeling anxious? Like open the door so that they can share with you what they might be experiencing or feeling?

Gisele: Yeah, I mean I think oftentimes people are hesitant to ask those questions because they fear the answer and are fearful that they won't know what to say then. So in addition to



your own organization, recognizing that our audience is really across the entire country, if not beyond, what our resources, sort of general resources, where might somebody look to find, as you say, something to be able to say to somebody who they recognize is struggling, here, this might be something you can look at? Like, what are dependable sources?

Janet: So I think, well, you know, [coughs] excuse me. I always say, I'm a person who says Google search it, you know, and then vet that resource, so you don't believe everything you see on the internet, but certainly being able to go there and look up like, you know, support groups in this area. Or like, if you plugged in even psychologists or therapists, like you could say, therapists who treat anxiety near Newtown, Pennsylvania, and you'd be amazed, like "Psychology Today" will pop up a list of those people who have agreed to appear on that listing. There's photos there, it talks about what their specialties are, you know, like there's so much at our disposal that we don't realize. There are NAMIs all across the country, but they're all different, because we're each independently operating. So some NAMIs are going to have more programming than other NAMIs, but you know, that's a resource. There are lots of different mental health organizations and lots of different support groups. And again, just a pure Google search on it is going to produce a lot of things. What I always instruct, we have something that's called a helpline, and so people will call in and we have volunteers that will answer those calls, and kind of point people in a direction of what it is they might be looking for. And basically we'll tell them, you know, like vet that resource, like, so they might make a phone call and kind of find out like, what do you do, or like, are you still in business? Like, what kind of insurance do you accept? That kind of thing. So there's a lot to be had, it just is a question of kind of researching it a little bit.

Gisele: Great. So we have a question, Janet, that's a little specific, so I'm going to generalize it out a little bit, and it says, is it the best career choice to go to law school if you suffer from mental disorders such as high anxiety, depression, panic disorders? According to a recent stat, the job of a lawyer is one of the most stressful, unhappy jobs, I'm sorry, I know this is a hard question. So the way I'd like you to think about that, because you're not here necessarily to give career advice is just in terms of life choices and stepping into things that you know are hard. The impact of sort of having this recognition that you're somebody who already is coping with anxiety or depression. Is there some words that you can give the participants about sort of making those hard choices and things that they should think about, and ways that if they make those choices, that they can keep themselves centered.

Janet: Right, you know, it's all about really every individual person, because it's not going to be the same. So there is no like one universal answer to that question. I think what it is is you have to recognize what are your own limitations, what it is that really makes you happy. Like if this is something that you have long held as a dream, someone who struggles with anxiety or depression or any other kind of mental health challenge can live that dream if that dream is so compelling and so important to them that they are willing to do all the other things that they may have to do in order to manage that well. And so it's all about like knowing yourself and learning what it is that will work for you the best in terms of what you can do. So I don't think there really is a universal answer to that, it's really about what you want and what you want most in life, and if you want something, then you will line up everything else to kind of support that and allow you to achieve that. So that's kind of a philosophical answer, but.



Gisele: That's great. And then that moves to a question that we wanted to cover anyway today that maybe makes it less philosophical, more reality. Are there some coping methods that you might be able to recommend?

Janet: So there's lots of coping mechanisms that individuals can participate in. You can do things, for example, I always start with, breathe. Like, you know, like you have to remind yourself to breathe. And when I say that, I really mean to consciously think about your breath, because a lot of times we don't recognize how stressed we are, or how fast we're breathing, or how shallow we're breathing, because we're just kind of like at that pitch, right? So stopping and taking a deep breath is a great place, I think, to start. Now building out from that, for example, there's lots of people who find yoga to be something that really helps them to sort of center. And what is it about yoga? Well, it's about breathing and it's about mindfulness. And so those two things, you know, are part of what yoga leads you in the direction of. And so you can choose, like you could say, okay, it's about the breathing, and so I really want to be like focused on my breathing, like actually use breathing as a kind of mindfulness meditation, you know, breathing in, breathing out, concentrating the mind on that breath, that's a possibility. It could be that mindfulness meditation for someone else might be all about finding a word or a phrase, like a kind of mantra we say, where you're looking at, like for yourself, what is the word that kind of captures for you, is it peace, is it centeredness, is it love, like whatever it might be, and then really concentrating on that mantra and repeating that for yourself several times throughout the day. So mindfulness meditation, yoga is a great thing, some people journal, like some people find that, I have a friend who every morning when she wakes up, the very first thing she does is write in her journal, do you know? And it's like a way of kind of setting herself up for the day. So writing and journaling can be something that you do. Some people like to draw, sketch, doodle. I mean, there's all kinds of ways, you have to figure out for yourself, what is it that is particularly helpful? Someone recently I was talking to was saying that they had taken a walk and they found this little stone, and on that stone they just wrote the word gratitude and stuck it in their pocket. And their way of kind of grounding every day was to stick their hand in their pocket to kind of feel that stone and to remind themselves of something they wanted to be grateful for. So it can be that creating that like attitude of gratitude in your life. So there's so many, again, different ways. I think, you know, for some people it's about exercise. I have a daughter who's a runner, and if she doesn't run every day, she feels like something's askew with her life, like she's not right. So it can be about, you know, exercise. It's just, I really think again, it's about looking at all the different possibilities and figuring out for ourselves, what is it that for you makes the most sense in terms of feeling centered, grounded, safe, calm, peaceful.

Gisele: Great, that is really helpful advice. We do have a couple of questions, but I want to come in, I want to be sure that we have time to talk about something that I think is really near and dear to our participants, and that is specifically diving a little bit into test anxiety, which I think, from a layperson's perspective, like I am, that seems, you know, both really common for people who don't struggle from sort of a more prevalent, you know, anxiety about many things. Is there anything different that you can say about something that's so specific like that, that I suffer from this when, you know, it's a high-stakes test or, you know, in particular situations.

Janet: So I think it's really important to be curious, right, about that anxiety, to ask yourself a few questions about what it is, you know, to kind of delve into thinking about it, like, what is it about taking this test that's causing me to be so anxious? You know, because usually what it is is it's because there are expectations, hopes, and values that are like attached to that. Like for



example, I need to do really, really well on this test if I'm going to get into Harvard, for example. And so the story that you're telling yourself is like, if I don't go to Harvard, my life is not going to be complete, right? It's a story that you're telling yourself about that's what I have to be able to do. So by being curious about where that anxiety is coming from, you can then ask yourself, will my life be over if I don't get into Harvard's Law School, do you know, like, is there a backup plan here? Like you start to open up your thinking, because what happens is the anxiety is very much trapped by what it is that you've attached to that particular issue or that particular task, right? So you're anxious about taking the test, but it's not the test, it's what that's going to do for you after that test is over, it's where it's going to position you or lead you. And so you have to be able to be curious about what your values are, what your hopes and dreams and all of those things are, and how they're tied into all of that, so that you're more aware. And then you can ask yourself, is that the story that I want to hold on to? Or might I broaden that story a little bit to include some other things? So I think that's one thing. I also think that the fact that like a rigorous test, like the LSAT® is going to be also timed, and so there's a pressure around not only do I know what I need to say, or do, or how I need to respond to this, but also will I have the time to do it? So you're dealing with that pressure as well. So I think recognizing that you need to pace yourself, and I'm sure that there are lots of like practice tests that lead up to that so that you can start to get a handle on, what does that mean to pace yourself? Like how long can you give yourself for each question, you know? So that you can kind of plan ahead and think about, you know, how am I going to manage this?

Gisele: Yeah, so it sounds like the same advice that we would give from the perspective of, you know, just sort of doing well on an exam or the LSAT, which is to prepare, that also is going to help you in terms of bringing down the level of anxiety.

Janet: Exactly. And I think so you need to have good study habits about it, right? But you can't put so much pressure on yourself, right, that you can't even think straight, because that happens too. You know, again, even with the preparing for it, you have to pace yourself. You have to know like, how long can I be at this before I need to take a break and kind of schedule into it, right? Or I can't expect to not sleep, like if I'm going to try to do this on three hours of sleep, but I'm a person who needs eight hours of sleep to be functional, that's not a good thing. You need to figure out how are you going to get those eight hours of sleep and then study. If you're a morning person versus being a night person, right? Like, I was always a night person in school, and so I had to push it out at night, because there was no way at 5:00 AM I was going to get up and do that study. So you have to know what your own biorhythms are and then adjust accordingly as you're preparing, I think, for that test.

Gisele: Great. Alright, let's move to some of the questions we have now. So what is the difference between anxiety and depression, and what might be some of the symptoms?

Janet: So let's see. So I think in anxiety there's a lot of like kind of fear, and uncertainty, and like a hyperawareness, a hyperattention to whatever's going to be happening, right? It's kind of like a fever pitch in a way, like the anxiety just is about like feeling really nervous and anxious, and I don't know what to expect, I'm really concerned, you know, that kind of thing. Whereas depression tends to be almost like the flip side of that, there tends to be a kind of, I'm not going to be able to do anything, do you know? Like I don't have any energy, you know, like with anxiety, there's almost like too much energy, emotional energy, that's going into this thing, and so you feel exhausted before you've even done anything. Whereas with depression, there's a



tendency to be more passive and to just to be more like not wanting to engage, you know, feeling like what's the point or wanting to sleep a lot. You know, like just not really having the energy to cope with life. So I think that kind of is the simplest way to kind of describe the difference between those two things. But they are often, by the way, linked, I mean, we talk about anxiety and depression in the same voice, like in the same sentence, you know, as words together, because they're hardly ever completely separate from one another, there's always kind of both things happening.

Gisele: Yeah, and our next question definitely gets at that. It is, I am someone who suffers from both anxiety and depression from childhood trauma. How can I control my anxiety when having to hear about a case or topic in law school that could be triggering? I want to go to law school, but I worry that it will, you know, add to the deterioration of my mental health. So I think this is, you know, sort of something worth exploring when you hear sort of traumatic experiences that mirror your own, you know, what might you do about that?

Janet: Right, so the person already understands the difference between the trigger and trauma, right? So that awareness alone is something that you're already ahead of the game, I guess, by acknowledging that awareness. Because when you get triggered, it's an automatic kind of reaction, right, to something, but like it's not the actual thing. So you're saying to yourself, like, why am I feeling this upset about this when it's not me, right? But because you can pull away enough to recognize that, you have the ability in that moment to decide what you want to do next, because the minute that you know that you're being triggered, you can already do something about it. And so I think it's about that, it's acknowledging that when you have that awareness, you actually are more in control of that situation than you think you are. So you're correct, things will trigger it, but if you know you're being triggered, then you're already able to do something different. And so it's really important, again, to be attuned to yourself, to know what's going on and to ask questions about that, to be again, as I said, to be curious, versus just going into it, you know, to be able to pause, and step back, and say, why am I feeling so hurt? Or why am I feeling so angry at that person, right? Well, okay, because they remind me of my father, you know, like, or something to that effect. Okay, but they're not my father, right? So now I can make a difference, I can distinguish that experience.

Gisele: Yeah, it feels like so much of this is about sort of self-awareness, as sort of the starting point.

Janet: It is. Right.

Gisele: So here's another one that we haven't really talked about yet that I think is not uncommon in law school students. I struggle with imposter syndrome, which, from what I understand is rooted in anxiety. How can I learn to overcome feelings of inferiority and imposter syndrome in law school?

Janet: I'm going to repeat kind of like what I said before about the self-awareness, so you're feeling inferior, right? And so you have to, first of all, acknowledge that's what you're feeling. Like I'm feeling like I'm not good enough, like I'm never going to be able to do this, I'm not going to be able to live up to what the expectations are. And so if when you hear yourself saying that to yourself, if you can learn to ask yourself the question, is this the story that I want to tell myself, is this what I want to believe about myself, right? Because if you can be aware that



that's what you're feeling, that awareness creates the space for you to choose to think differently. You're not stuck with that thought the minute that you're aware of it. So it's really about that pulling back, having that second to say, I feel awful, I feel like I'll never be able to do this. Okay, that's one way to think about it, that you'll never be able to do it. Are there other ways to think about it? Of course there are. Do you wish to repeat that mantra to yourself? I'll never be able to do this, I'm not good enough, I can't achieve this, or do you want to change that, that mantra, that story that you're telling yourself? Because you can, just tell yourself a different story. And it's easier said than done, but the reality is you have to acknowledge that that's a story that you're telling yourself. So you have to be aware that that's what you're doing.

Gisele: So this seems like a great moment to come back to this again, there's a few questions about, sort of, if I need help, where do I get it? In particular, support groups. How might one find a support group? Maybe that's the place where they find that they can tell themselves a different story.

Janet: Right, yes, because when you're talking with other people, you discover that they're telling themselves different stories, right? So obviously you can look online, you can try to find support groups that way. A lot of places of employment, so if you happen to be working, if you're not a full-time student, or even if you are a full-time students, you know, colleges and universities frequently have counseling centers and those counseling centers frequently host support groups. Obviously there are NAMI support groups. There are probably support groups out there, I'll bet you, for law students specifically. There are support groups that are hosted by your place of employment. You know, you can go through your, is it EPA? I think that's what you call it. And like, there's usually a phone number you can call, or you can ask about support groups. There's a lot of places of business I know right now are starting like the employee resource groups for mental health, where people can go and just, you know, support each other and talk about what's going on with themselves. So there's lots of, I think, ability out there, it's about finding it. You know, you can call a therapist and ask them if they know support groups in the area. There's lots of organizations that host various support groups, you know, various mental health organizations, various treatment facilities, and sometimes psychologists or psychiatrists themselves have support groups for people. So I think it's just a question of doing the search, like doing the homework to find it.

Gisele: I think this next question is also one that is common amongst aspiring lawyers. I am someone who feels other people's pain very deeply and often takes it on as if it were my own. I feel their joy too, but it's more problematic when it comes to pain because it is hard to let go of it. As a lawyer I will work with people in difficult situations, and I wonder if you had any advice on how to let go after the work is done?

Janet: That's all about really being able to kind of turn it off, I guess, or to hold things lightly. And once again, you have to recognize that that's what you're doing, because what's going to happen is when you're a very sensitive person that way, you walk away from that situation, let's say you go home, right? And you can't stop thinking about this individual, you keep pondering it, you know? So you have to find for yourself what is going to be the way in which I can "disconnect," you know? And that disconnecting might be that you have to, first of all, acknowledge that you're doing that and say, I am going to allow myself to continue to think about this person for the next three minutes, and then I'm going to turn it off, and then do that, right? And if you do that because you turn on the TV set, or you do yoga, or you do meditation,



or you do whatever you do that for you flips that switch, because you've got to figure out-- and again, it comes back to that, recognizing that you have to know what you're doing, you have to realize that you're doing it in order to say to yourself, do I want to continue to do this? Do I want to feel this way for a while? I mean, there's times when you might be really ruminating about you're angry with somebody, you know, and you keep thinking about that person, I should have said this, and I should have done that, and I should have done that. And there's times when I'll say to myself, okay, I really do want to do this for the next five minutes. Like I just want to get it out of my system, I want to think about all the things that I wish I could've or would've said, right? And then I'm going to let it go. And again, just by engaging in that sort of mental gymnastics, if you will, you are now able to do that, because you put it out there, you can see it, it's no longer having control over you, you're choosing whether or not you're going to let it have control.

Gisele: I think that's a good segue to sort of the idea of finding balance. So generally speaking, what sort of advice might you give to people about sort of finding balance in their lives and sort of knowing when they need to tamp down and talk themselves in a different direction?

Janet: Right. You know, sometimes I think it's really good to ponder that question and kind of think about for yourself, like what are some of the things that really do work in terms of finding balance, you know? And maybe you're not going to do all of these things, but maybe some of these things will really work for you. One of the things is about disconnecting, and maybe disconnecting means turning off your cell phone, maybe it means closing the laptop lid, you know, like maybe it means like turning off the television set, or maybe it means turning on the television set, and turning off the cell phone, right? It means that you have to give a rest to whatever it is that kind of is like filling your life and your time in a way that you just need to turn it off for a bit. I think it's about recognizing that you have to decide what are the things that you most want and that are most important to you, and then letting go of the things that, like you have to learn to say no, I guess is what I'm saying. Like, no, I can't do everything. You know, no, I can't prepare for my law exam and continue to volunteer at the animal shelter, much as I love doing that every Saturday, right?

So what do you want more at this particular moment and point in time? And then you need to trim your life because you can only do so much, there's only so many hours in the day, you only have so much energy. So it's about trimming things down. You want to pay attention to your health, like I can't overstate how important it is to get good sleep, to eat well, and to engage in some kind of activity, some kind of physical activity, some kind of exercise, whether it's just taking a walk, you know, but you need to do something to get your body moving. You want to minimize the things that are kind of toxic around you, and I don't mean just things that you would put in your body, but like even toxic people, like if you're surrounding yourself with people who whine and complain all the time, that's going to wear on you after a while. So you have to decide who's the circle of friends, who are the people that you want to surround yourself with? Or even if it's like social media, if you're actively engaged in social media, I finally got to the point where I said to myself, you know what, I need to snooze so-and-so for 30 days, because I can't deal with that anymore. Or I need to like disengage from this particular group that's constantly sending out this information, because it's unsettling, it's disturbing, it's not making me calm and happy.



You want to be able to know, like, when can you spend some time alone? Can you just be in company with yourself, do you know? Like so that you can be quiet, you can be calm, you can just settle a little bit, right? So finding space in your day for that, I think it's recognizing that what are the really key, important relationships in your life? And then, you know, really massaging those, making sure that you're spending the time that you need to spend with the people that you love the most and who love you, and support you, and affirm you, and build you up, and making time for that. I think it's recognizing that sometimes you have to treat yourself, you have to go buy the Starbucks coffee that costs \$7 now, or you need to, you know, get a bouquet of flowers in the grocery store, right, and put them on your desk, or maybe you need to get a massage periodically, that's my go-to thing. Like you just need to do things that say that you value you and that you're willing to take care of yourself and invest in yourself.

I think sometimes it's about exploring the world, you know, like I think, you know, again, you could go take a walk, maybe you go to a town you've never been to before that's only a few miles away. Maybe you pretend like you're a tourist in your own town and discover what's there. I've lived in Bucks County for 30 some years now and I just discovered this beautiful mansion that's down on the Delaware called Andalusia, like about three weeks ago. I'm like, how do I live for all these years and not know about this, right? Because sometimes we don't take the time, right, to find out what's around that we might be interested in. So if you love gardens or you love mansions, obviously that would be something to look into, you know? Or Grounds For Sculpture over here in New Jersey. Like there's things around locally that we can do that help to make us feel like we're exploring the world a bit, you know, we're taking a break and doing something different than what we normally do. And that's another thing you can do, expand your awareness, right, expand your horizons, you know? Maybe you would like to paint and you've never tried it, and so you might do that, you know, or you might just try something that you've never done before and find out that it's a lot of fun. And then remember to have fun, like laughing, you know, having a good sense of humor, being able to be amused at things is a really important thing, I think, to maintaining good mental health. You know, it's about being able to see what's really kind of funny in life because there's a whole lot of it, but a lot of times we don't recognize it, right? So it's again, because I think if we can take more of a curious attitude towards the things that happen, we're more likely to find them funny, because they really are.

Gisele: That's great. That was all so helpful to hear, and it did remind me of one, before we go back to the Q&A box, something that I wanted to talk about, because I myself have found it really difficult, one more sort of COVID topic, if you will, and that is, you were talking about relationships and finding the balance, also spending time alone, but diving into relationships. This time of social isolation I think has been really, really hard on folks. What can you tell us about that?

Janet: You know, I mean, it has been really hard on people, there's no question about that. Because what happens is social isolation also tends to lead to like an emotional isolation, right? And the more kind of alone we feel that, and the less connected, because we're very much people that need people. Like that's kind of what humans sort of do, even if you're an introvert, you still need people. And I think that is has been really, really difficult. And so I think that it's about making sure that we almost have to be more intentional about our relationships, about connecting and reconnecting with people, even if it is like this, like on a computer screen, if it is by making a phone call, you know, or FaceTiming somebody, like making sure that you don't just let it fall by the wayside. Someone just mentioned to me this morning that they had



Thanksgiving with a family and they hadn't had that last year, and they said, we've taken that for granted for so long in our lives, that recognizing how wonderful it was just to be sitting around the table with everybody was really valuable. So I think it's just about not letting ourselves fall into the habit of like, okay, so since I can't be with them, I'm not going to connect to them at all. It's about, no, find the ways then to connect and to stay connected to people. It's also been an opportunity, I think, for us to recognize who are the really, really important people in our lives. And again, to build those relationships and make sure that we're nurturing those, right? Because when push comes to shove, that's what's really important. So I don't know if that quite answered the question?

Gisele: No, it definitely did, for me anyway. So let's go back to the Q&A box. You mentioned the anxiety that is persistent and extreme. Can you speak to the difference in how one should deal with or understand extreme feelings that are persistent and extreme feelings that are acute?

Janet: So look, if you're having even extreme acute feeling, you know what I mean? Like if they're that extreme, then chances are you need to find some sort of support in the short term, right? If they're extreme and persistent, it's probably an indication of a more, like, long-term kind of mental illness that you may have to manage over the long haul. But if you're having extreme feelings and they're acute, like right now, then you do need to do something about them, you don't ignore it, like you need to talk to somebody. Maybe it's going to be like short-term therapy, you know, like maybe you just need to find someone that you can engage with, and share this with, and find, you know, like some immediate support. Also the acute thing can be kind of like, I'm thinking like if somebody is having like suicidal ideation and you're like, where did that come from, that's just like all of a sudden? Okay, obviously you're intensely stressed and anxious. Well, you don't want to ignore that, you're going to do something about it, or you should do something about it, because if you don't, then it's going to get worse. So it's not like if it's acute that you should ignore it, I'm just saying, extreme and persistent is usually an indication that there is like a diagnosis that you may be dealing with over your lifespan. You know, like it might be something that's not going to ever go away, but you're going to have to learn to manage it as you live out your life.

Gisele: I sometimes struggle with taking standardized tests, how do you handle taking the test again after you didn't get a desirable score initially? So we spoke about sort of the going into the exam and managing anxiety. Now, if you've had the experience of, you know, not scoring where you wanted to score initially, is there anything different in terms of your mental preparation you might advise?

Janet: I think you probably are going to want to look back at like, okay, so was there a certain section that you didn't understand, you know what I mean? So then you're going to want to improve like the way that you study for that particular section so that you might do better on that. If it is more like you just have a lot of trouble with taking standardized tests, then you might even want to consider like biofeedback or some other kind of like therapy that would help you to be exposed to that over and over again in a way that you can change what your kind of reaction is. You might need to recognize like what is it that's actually happening whenever you're taking that test? You know, like is it that you're strung out about the fact that it's timed? Or is it that you feel like you just don't know the material well enough? Like you have to get at, like, what is kind of the source of that anxiety that happened in that test? Because you do want to go into it and obviously do better. There are also people that just really don't do well on standardized tests, no



matter what. So are you doing well enough that maybe again, it's about, what's your expectation level? Like, what do you need to do to pass it, versus what do you need to do to get into Harvard, right? So it's like figuring out, like, can you be satisfied with something less than maybe where you wanted to be? Can you be happy with that then, and move forward from that point? So it's managing that sort of level of expectation. I hope that helped.

Gisele: So we'll do you one last question that's on a topic that we expected to come up with, and then we have a different topic I want to dive into with the last couple of minutes that we'll have, and this is the question, my applications are in and I might get a response anytime between January and June. If I get in, we would be selling our house and potentially moving our family across the country. Every day I feel the weight of the unknown and not knowing where I'll be in a year's time. Any advice on handling the pressure while I wait?

Janet: So, you know, it's interesting, this could either make you more anxious or less anxious, but recognize that there's a whole lot that we don't have control of in our everyday lives, including that. And so many things can happen, right, that shift and change maybe what our plans were, or what our thinking was, or where we were going to go, or what we were going to do. So I guess what I encourage people to do is, okay, you can't live tomorrow, today, and you can't live yesterday, today, you can only live today, today. So it's important, I think, to ground yourself in the present moment, right? You're right, you'll have to do all of those things, but you can't do them now, you can't do them today. So worrying about it doesn't make you any better able to do it when you're going to have to do it, right? It just makes you worry today. So trying to like, just sort of put it in perspective and recognize, when the time comes, we will kick into gear and this is what we will do, because that's what we can do, because that's the way we've done things in the past, you know, maybe look back at something else that was completely unexpected, and you rose to the challenge, and you met that, and you weathered it, and you got through it, and everything worked out okay.

I also think it's really important, and I know that this will sound wifty to people, but to put positive ideas and thoughts out into the world, to be affirmative about what's going to happen versus being negative, because there's so much that we don't have control over, so many things that we don't know. And so we can either kind of approach it from a perspective of, gee, I wonder what will be around that corner and how will we manage that? You know, we're going to be able to do it because I believe in us, like, I know we can do this. Or you can approach it from, we'll never be able to do it, it's going to be terrible, I'm not sure how we're ever going to manage it. You know, like, what do you want to put out into the world? You know, like, because you put that sort of positive attitude out there and it sort of attracts that kind of positive response, that positive reaction. And the same thing's true if you do the negative thing, right. So where do you want to be on that, you know? And you're right, the uncertainty is terrible, but there is so much of it that there's a point at which we have to say, you know what, the good news is I can't do anything about it, the bad news is I can't do anything about it. So, you know, it's live in today, like get focused on what's in front of me right now and how can we enjoy and celebrate this moment?

Gisele: The self-talk just seems so important in all of this. So.

Janet: I think it is.



Gisele: Yeah, so there was one last topic with the last couple of minutes we have left that Janet and I wanted to talk about, and that is given that it is December 1, so let's step outside of the fact that, you know, we have aspiring law students with us today and just talk about being human beings and the fact that holidays are around the corner, and Thanksgiving's already happened of course, and that this is traditionally a time of great stress and maybe anxiety as well for folks, and what advice might you give in terms of the holidays specifically?

Janet: The first thing I'm going to say is manage expectations because the problem is a lot of what happens with the holidays are we have big expectations of ourselves and of the people around us. So you know, like I just think about even a gift, right? So you're going to give a gift to somebody, and if that person expects something from you and doesn't get it, then there's a lot of disappointment, right, on their part, and then you're disappointed that you didn't make them happy, right? But it's all about managing those expectations, right, like the holiday doesn't have to be perfect, right? It doesn't have to be perfect in every way. What is it that you really want out of the holiday seasons? So how do you want to manage your expectations? Like I want to have a good time with my family, I want to spend time with them. I think you want to be realistic about what you can and can't do about what, about who are the people that are around you, who's the family that you're going to be with?

You know, like I recall one time, I'm trying to think about the show, I can't remember what it is, she says something, I think it's Molly, and she says something about, I always have these expectations about how this family dinner and this family celebration is going to go, and then I get to the table and I realize who's the family that I have, right? And so it's about again, recognizing, you know, who's going to be at the table with you, who's going to be celebrating those holidays with you, and being willing to accept people for how they are. Again, approach it from more of a curious, like, I want to know a little bit more about that person or how they think, even if I don't agree with them, even if I don't think that they are very good, you know, like, or I don't really like them very much, but it's about, you know, that's the family you've got or that's the group that you have, so maybe try to learn a little bit about what makes them tick. Try to find out a little bit more about them, be curious. I think you have to set some kind of limits and boundaries. Like, you know, it's even like knowing what your budget is, you know, before you go out and make all those purchases that you're going to regret in January, whenever the credit card bill comes due. I think it's just recognizing again that we think everybody should be happy and the holidays should be wonderful and bright, and sometimes you don't feel that way about them. So again, it's about acknowledging your own feelings and being able to recognize what they are and why they are what they are, and then go from there.

Gisele: Great, I feel like that's all super helpful. So in our last couple of minutes, any other words that you can share with our participants?

Janet: I think it's just recognizing that, you know, mental health and physical health are on a continuum, and so it's always changing. Like, you know, you can go from being perfectly well to being a little bit symptomatic, to having like a mental illness, to feeling perfectly recovered and well, do you know, like it's just like physical health in that it's on that continuum. And so it's just knowing that there's like an ebb and flow to that, and it's realizing that just like physical health, it's not about--like, you can't just say to somebody who's struggling mentally, get over it, you know, or man up, or you know, you just have to be strong, you know, like that's not going to help. The same as it's not going to help if you said to somebody who just broke their wrist, just



get over it, you know, like there's things you have to do, you need to treat it, you need to take care of it, you need to be helpful. Like a lot of times, whenever somebody is struggling with some physical ailment, you know, we're taking casseroles over to them, right, and we're spending time with them and we're sending cards, but when somebody struggles with a mental illness, or they're struggling with some sort of mental health challenge, we tend to like back away from that, it's like we're scared, we don't know what to do, we don't know what to say. Just be yourself, just be there with the person, just be supportive, just be kind, just listen, you know, because it really isn't that different from if somebody's struggling with some sort of physical ailment.

So I think that's important and everybody has mental health and anybody can have a mental health problem, and it can be for some reason or for what seems like no reason at all, and so it's just acknowledging that it is what it is, you know, so let's explore it. And I think the one kind of interesting thing that's come out of this pandemic is that I think mental health is having a moment, because I think we're all very much aware and very attuned to the fact that this is not some weird thing that somebody else who's like psychotic and homeless and on the street is dealing with. This is like me, and my family, and my neighbors, and my colleagues, and you know, my fellow students, like we all have struggles with that, the same as we all have struggles with physical health. So it's very common, more prevalent than one might imagine.

Gisele: Yeah, I've definitely seen that in my own life, Janet. Well, thank you so much. I want to say I'm so thankful to Janet for joining me today and hope that our participants found this to be a helpful discussion. On behalf of LSAC, we wish you all a wonderful, stress-free, healthy, and safe holiday season. And thank you again, Janet.

Janet: Thank you. Be healthy and hopeful. Thank you, it was great to be with you.

[gentle instrumental music]

Voiceover: Visit [LSAC.org](https://lsac.org) to learn more.

[music fades out]