



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 16 -
Setting Boundaries, Managing Guilt, and
Prioritizing: Juggling the Demands of a Non-
9-5 Career and Life

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Amanda Cipriano: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Amanda Cipriano, an associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at [lowenstein.com/podcasts](https://www.lowenstein.com/podcasts), or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Amanda Cipriano: Welcome to the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. My name is Amanda Cipriano, and I'm an associate in Lowenstein Sandler's White Collar Criminal Defense Practice Group.

Megan Monson: I'm Megan Monson, partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Employee Benefits and Executive Compensation Practice Group.

Nicole Fulfree: I'm Nicole Fulfree counsel in Lowenstein's Bankruptcy and Financial Restructuring Department.

Rachel Dikovics: And I'm Rachel Dikovics, an associate in Lowenstein's White Collar Criminal Defense Practice Group.

Amanda Cipriano: On today's episode, we're talking about the guilt that women in careers that require working long non-traditional hours often feel towards friends and family for missing out on other parts of life. Working outside of the traditional 9:00 to 5:00 often means missing weeknight dinners with friends, school events, and date nights. It also means that weekends can be unpredictable, and last-minute cancellations can become par for the course. As working women, we are passionate about our jobs and highly motivated in having a successful career, but that passion for work sometimes results in the guilt of letting other people in our lives down when we choose to make work a priority. Today we want to talk about tips for navigating this guilt and how to maintain relationships and a life outside of work. So do you all find yourself feeling guilty for missing events or having to cancel plans?

Megan Monson: A thousand percent, yes. This is a topic that resonates very strongly with me and I've found the longer in my career, I try to feel less guilt, but it doesn't always work out that way. And I think part of it also stems from the pressure

that I feel from friends and family who are not in a similar career. And so they also, I just don't think fully understand and appreciate what it means to work kind of in a more demanding job.

Nicole Fulfree:

Yeah, I think that's where a lot of the guilt comes from for me because not that our jobs are so difficult that no one can understand them, but a lot of times, unless you actually live with the person, you don't really know what goes into their job and how unpredictable it can be at times. When I'm experiencing a really crazy time in a case, I'll find my husband coming up to me at 11:00 PM and he'll say, what could you possibly still be doing? And he just can't even understand. When he sees me actively working, he can't understand that I could still be working. And so I think it's kind of hard with people who either have nine-to-fives or people who just have scheduled jobs.

I'm thinking of my brothers for example. They do have difficult hours too, but in a different way because they're teachers and coaches and so they have games on the weekends, but they're all scheduled. And I think that's the difficult part for our profession, that things can be scheduled whenever a client wants them to be scheduled, whether it's five minutes before the call or not. And so I think the unpredictability at times is really what makes it so difficult and guilt inducing for me.

Megan Monson:

And for me it also is not only feeling guilty for my friends or family that I'm canceling or missing out on events for, but I also feel then bad myself because I feel like I'm missing out on things that I'd like to be involved with. And it's kind of always that catch 22 of trying to be everywhere and doing everything for everybody.

Rachel Dikovics:

This I feel like resonates with probably every single person who listens to our podcast episodes. I know it certainly does with me. I think that the guilt that you feel or don't feel changes over time based on the kind of things you're needing to say no to, how senior you are in your career, and how much flexibility you have to say no to things or not. For example, when you are a really junior attorney, you can't say no to things. Whereas when you're more senior, you might have a little bit more of a leg to stand on to say, I can't make it at this particular time. Here are the times I can make it. So, I think that does change over time, and we'll talk about those concepts a little bit more later. But I certainly feel the same. And I think I find that I feel more guilty about missing things with friends because I don't feel like they understand what my job necessarily entails.

And I have a lot of surprise when it's eight o'clock and I say, sorry for the delay, I was on the phone with my boss, whatever. They're like, how could you be on the phone with your boss at eight o'clock? Like, well, I usually am. But things like that I think are pretty unique to not just the legal profession, but working in law firms. Maybe the only other thing that I think might be similar is working in high level finance probably. And so I think it's challenging for other people to understand that you're not just saying no to things or putting things off because you don't feel like doing them. It's because you have to prioritize work much of the time.

Amanda Cipriano: And I think the guilt can be twofold, guilt you feel towards others and guilt you feel towards yourself. So can you describe how the guilt has affected your relationship with others in your personal life?

Rachel Dikovics: I think one of the really important things for especially young women attorneys to think about when they are finding their life partners is whether those people will be able to understand that work often has to come first. I think it's critically important for you and your partner, not to mention your friends, but I think particularly your partner, it's extremely important for you to be on the same page about whether or not work is the priority. And maybe there are certain times when it is and it isn't. There are different seasons of our lives where priorities change, but I think it's extremely important for you and your partner to be on the same page about the priority that work takes in your life.

Nicole Fulfree: I totally agree, Rachel. I think this has been a really important thing for me in my relationship. And I'm thinking of one specific example where I just felt horrible about something because I was on trial in Alabama and had been flying back and forth from Alabama for a couple of weeks. And it was March and April, and my husband had bought me Dear Evan Hansen tickets to go to see a Dear Evan Hansen on Broadway for a Friday night of my birthday. And I had flown from Alabama to a speaking event in Atlantic City, and then I rushed home. And it was like 30 minutes after the time we were supposed to leave. And I was just looking at my husband and I was crying. And I was like, I'm just so tired, I really just don't want to go. Is that okay? And I think that if I had a less understanding partner, that could have been a major issue, but he thankfully had the sympathy and empathy for me to just realize what I was going through and be okay with it.

But I think it would've been a lot more difficult, to Rachel's point, if he wasn't so understanding about what our job entails. That being said, that was a time that I was in trial, and I had just so many commitments at once. That's not always how it is. And I try to make sure that's not always how it is, but it is important to have someone that really understands what's going on.

Amanda Cipriano: And what about feeling guilty on yourself or feeling like you're missing out on parts of your life? I sometimes make a joke with Rachel that sometimes you can feel like you're missing out on your youth or your prime years. So how do you deal with feeling like you may be missing out on things?

Megan Monson: So I think this goes to one of the points that Rachel mentioned before is that trying to set boundaries to the extent you can. And so if there are either events or activities that are important to you that you don't want to miss out on, and it's not those extenuating circumstances where you're on trial or there's something that's urgent, trying to push back if you're able to and say, I can't join the call at two o'clock, but I can join at 6:00 PM. And you'll be surprised, especially if you've built a good reputation for yourself that there is a lot more flexibility than I think you would expect.

Nicole Fulfree: I think another thing that's helped me is to embrace times when I'm having a little bit slower of a week instead of trying to email people and be like, hey, can I help out on this project? Or I have a little bit of time. If I'm naturally slow,

especially now that I have a daughter, I'll kind of embrace it and say, okay, I don't have anything scheduled for this afternoon. I'm going to take the rest of the day off, and take Savannah to the zoo, and then I don't feel as bad. I feel like it fills my cup with my time with her. And then in other times where I don't really have the option, I feel a little bit better because I know that I have previously embraced that time where I was able to be a little bit more flexible.

Megan Monson: Yeah, that's a great suggestion, Nicole. I feel like if you're able to take the time when you can and take time for yourself and do things that are meaningful for you when your work permits, it probably is much easier to get through the times when it's a little bit more challenging.

Rachel Dikovics: I think it's also a matter of prioritizing what you do, do in the free time that you have, because I think if you are consistently making time to do things that you care about, you're dedicating your free time to things you actually want to be doing, you won't as often feel bad for yourself when you have to work a later night or you need to do some work on the weekends, or you have a need to cancel something with friends that maybe wasn't super high priority for you in the first place. I feel like if you are doing things that are important to you when you have the time to do them, it's incredibly helpful in keeping your mental health stable and keeping yourself from burning out. I think it's really important to have a balanced scale when it comes to work and personal life.

Nicole Fulfree: Except for me, Rachel, nothing will ever make me not be sad about working on a Saturday. I will always feel bad for myself if it's a Saturday, Sunday. I'm okay, Saturday, I don't know why, I will always be pouting.

Megan Monson: I feel the same way, Nicole. So, I don't know. There's something about just that one day...

Rachel Dikovics: You need a break at the end of the week.

Megan Monson: And I have to say similar to what Rachel said, I know we've touched on this in prior podcast episodes, but it's also important to set boundaries in your personal life because as Rachel said, you want to be doing things that actually fill your cup and things that you enjoy. So it's also okay to push back and not do things, whether it's with friends or family that's not going to be really beneficial or advantageous to you. And that way I think you're using your free time in a better fashion for you, and that's going to make you feel more complete and full to be able to take whatever comes at you during the next week.

Amanda Cipriano: So when it comes to making plans with friends who may have more structured work hours, how do you communicate your situation and the possibility that you may have to cancel, or you may not even know until last minute whether you can make it to something?

Rachel Dikovics: This has definitely changed for me over time, and I think it's become easier as my friends have become a little bit more accustomed to what my work life is like. But it's also been a matter of me setting boundaries with people outside of work and not killing myself to make something work that isn't going to work for me. And so these days I typically don't say yes to weeknight

plans, for example, and weekend plans I generally am able to keep at this point. I think that when you're a junior attorney, it's a little bit more challenging to predict your schedule because you're asked to do last minute things much more frequently than you are as you get more senior.

But once you are kind of in control of your docket, your schedule can be relatively stable outside of a situation where you're at trial or something like that, where your best bet is to just not schedule anything for the duration of the trial because you will not be able to predict whether you're free or not. And you will probably be too exhausted in the times that you are free to really have much fun if you go out anyway. So yeah, for me it's a matter of figuring out what works for me. And if people don't like it, they can 'not like it.' That's probably an over 30 perspective.

Megan Monson: I agree with that.

Rachel Dikovics: I feel that way too, Amanda.

Megan Monson: One other thing I would add is because it's hard to make weeknight plans because as Rachel said, our schedules can be predictable, but if you have that Friday and it's nearing up towards four or five o'clock, it looks like you're going to not have to work that evening or can duck out early, use that as an opportunity to shoot your friend a text, see if they want to go to happy hour, right? Because if they have a more flexible schedule, they may be willing to meet you with limited notice. So it's really also kind of as we were talking about before, taking advantage of those opportunities and free time when it arises.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, I think those are great suggestions. I also try to be as communicative as possible with both sides. So if I have something that's super important in my personal life coming up, for example, if I'm hosting like a Christmas party, I'll tell everyone at work, just so you know, I'm hosting a Christmas party at my house on this date, it's starting at 3:00, so I will be absolutely not available no matter what happens and just be almost obnoxious about telling them about it. And so it kind of insulates me from anything that could possibly happen. And it's the same way when I'm communicating with my friends, if I have a deal that I know is a little bit unpredictable, I will be super communicative with my friends and say, if it's an eight person dinner, I'll just be clear with them and say, I'm going to try my best to come, but just so you know, I have a crazy deal right now and I'm not going to be able to promise that I'll be there or that I'll be on time. And I think my friends have kind of come to accept that.

Megan Monson: One other thing that I found was helpful, I do it less so now, but early on, if I was on a deal or something where it was unpredictable and it was possible that I would get documents that would come in, instead of necessarily canceling my plans, maybe I would still go, but take my laptop and set up with the possibility that I may have to leave early. So I think one of the benefits that we have in this much more flexible working environment is we really can log on and do what we need to do potentially anywhere.

Rachel Dikovics: And I think it's also a matter of, and we've talked about this before, understanding what is actually time sensitive and what isn't. And if you can ask someone, is it okay if I get this to you tomorrow as opposed to tonight? And maybe you tell them you have plans tonight that you've been looking forward to. A lot of times, they're going to say yes. And people just kind of fire things off when they're thinking about it, not necessarily intending that other people will be dropping everything to address their request. So I think it's often worth asking, and sometimes it can even be worth saying, can I get this to you on Monday instead of over the weekend, depending on what it is. And again, as you get more senior, I think it becomes easier to understand without asking what's urgent and what isn't and to understand different people's styles.

So if some partners will email you on the weekend, and for example, I know that if one particular partner emails me with a question on the weekend, he does not expect a response till Monday, whereas some other people expect a response right away. So I think it's getting to know the people you work with, but also understanding based on what you're being asked to do, whether it's time sensitive or not.

Nicole Fulfree: And yeah, Rachel, when I was a more junior attorney, I think I was too intimidated to ever ask that question. At this stage in my career, I often ask, is it okay if I get it to you on Monday? But I do suggest for more junior attorneys to get into the habit of doing that. No one will be offended by you asking for them to firm up their deadline. It's not offensive, it's just being communicative. So I would highly suggest and encourage junior attorneys to start getting into that habit.

Amanda Cipriano: And you've all touched on how friends or family have kind of gotten used to your work schedule. So how have you maintained those relationships?

Rachel Dikovics: Again, I think this is a matter of people being on the same page. If somebody is not on the same page as you and does not value your career to the same level that you do, you may not be able to maintain that relationship or that friendship. I think that it's just not possible if somebody's not going to be understanding. And especially for your spouse or your partner or your boyfriend or your girlfriend or whatever, they should want you to be successful too. Especially if you're potentially going to have a joint income, your success becomes their success as well. So I think a lot of times when there is a lot of tension around how much somebody is working, it's because the other person maybe doesn't feel comfortable with the position that they're in relative to the other person. And even if you are totally equal in terms of what you make and your hours, you need to be on the same page.

And I think it's different addressing friends and relationships because your friends don't see the benefits of your work the way that your partner does. And these are both financial benefits and just career advancement developments. Your partner or your spouse goes through those things with you to some extent, and over time should develop a pretty good understanding of what your work entails. But your friends only get bits and pieces of what you're doing, and it's harder for them to see the complete picture and see that working on a weekend or working on a weeknight is

probably worth it when you're making a really good salary and your hours are really good because they don't see the same benefits that people who are really, really close to you see.

Nicole Fulfree: I also think it helps if you're just generally understanding about your friends' lives in general as well, because yes, we have busy jobs and busy lives, but other people also have stuff going on. And their kids will get sick when you are supposed to go out to dinner one night or if they're taking care of their mom and they have to cancel plans, people have to cancel plans. That's just life. And if you're understanding with them about what's going on in their life, I find that they'll be equally as understanding with you no matter what's going on with your life.

Amanda Cipriano: And do you think this guilt is more prevalent in women?

Megan Monson: I'm going to say yes, at least for me personally. We've talked about number one, the women taking on kind of the mental load and having to really feel like they're doing a little bit of everything. And so just from the type of person I am, I feel like I don't want to let anybody down. And I feel like then that's kind of not me living up to my potential, whether it makes sense or not, I just feel like we tend to be much harder on ourselves versus my husband or even our male colleagues might be like, oh, I can't do this. Not a big deal and move on. I'll sit there and beat myself up over it for hours on end.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, I think we all started laughing when Amanda asked this question because I think being a woman and a friend I think is a completely different relationship than being a man and a friend. I mean, I know just for example, when my husband hangs out with his best friend in the world, he told me, oh, he's dating a new girl. And I was like, oh, well, what does she do? And he's like, I don't know. What's her name? I don't know. Well, can you tell me anything more about her? He said I think she has blonde hair. I'm like, okay. If I was having that conversation with one of my girlfriends, I would've known his entire personal history and family background. And so I think women put a lot more pressure on themselves and their role as a friend. So I think things like cancellations and just the standard of being there for each other is a lot higher in women's relationships than it is for men. And I think that makes it a lot more difficult on the guilt of something like a cancellation a lot more heavy.

Amanda Cipriano: I actually find this happening in family settings too. I have a brother and a sister. And I feel like it's often one of the sisters in families with multiple siblings that kind of gathers the troops. And so I feel like there's a lot of guilt too in just family situations of wanting to be there for everybody and feeling bad about missing something. Where I know my brother will go on a trip and he'll be like, all right, bye guys. But then I have the bridal showers, the baby showers, and if I have to miss anything, I feel so horrible. And that's actually just something that men don't have to deal with going to either. Those are just a whole set of events that don't cross their minds.

Megan Monson: I think it's also for, at least us attorneys, most of us are type A, right? So we feel like we should be at all of those things. And when we can't live up to that expectation, that's when I think the guilt starts to settle in.

Rachel Dikovics: I think that guilt of basically any kind affects women more than men. I think that, like Nicole and Megan said, female friendships are different than male friendships, and I think women expect a lot more of both themselves and each other in the same way that we expect ourselves to be kind of everything to everyone. We want to be a great attorney, a great wife, a great mother, a great friend, a great sister. You can't be everything to everyone at the same time. I think we also tend to expect the same from our friends. We tend to expect people to be available for us when we want to talk to them, to do the things that we want to do with us, to take an interest in everything that we do, when you can't fill your cup with one person for the most part. And I think it's really just trying to understand that both about yourself and about others, which is similar to what both Nicole and Megan said, being understanding with others will make other people more understanding of you.

And this is actually making me think of a conversation I had with a very senior male attorney recently. And he was saying that he's noticed for his daughters who are probably around my age or a little older and other women of our generation, we grew up without limitations that a lot of previous generations did have. And he said, you grew up knowing that you could do anything, but you didn't grow up knowing that you can't do everything at the same time. And I think that that's a lesson that a lot of women need to internalize because we really can't be everything to everyone at the same time.

Nicole Fulfree: I think we need to take a page out of our male counterparts page. I'm just thinking of a time around my wedding when I asked my husband for his list and I had my list, and about two weeks before the wedding we realized that he forgot to invite one of his childhood best friends to our wedding. And he only found out because his friend was like, hey, man, I didn't get an invitation. And my husband just completely forgot to invite him. And so they shook it off. They were fine. He was like, sorry, dude. And that was it. But if that was me, I would've been mortified and beat myself up about it for months. And so I think maybe we need to take a page out of their books, not "not inviting" our best friends to weddings, but maybe just lowering our standards a little bit and being more understanding if things like that do happen.

Amanda Cipriano: Are there conversations women should have with people in their life or people they may be starting out new relationships with about their workload and what may be expected of them?

Nicole Fulfree: I think the answer is definitely yes. Sort of along the lines of what I was saying before. I think being more communicative is always better, and setting expectations is important, I think, for many aspects of your life. And so if it's a new relationship, a new friendship, I think it's always important to just lay out the groundwork that this is your job, and this is what you should expect of me, and this is what you should not expect of me.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, I think I'm going to sound like a broken record answering this, but I think setting boundaries both at work and in your personal life is incredibly important. You equally need to have conversations with people at work about your personal life as you do with people in your personal life about work, because it can't be that work is 100% of the time the priority. That's just not

going to happen in your life. There are things that will come before work, and there are things that will come after work. So I think it's important for the people in your life, whether they're in your personal life or your work life, to understand what your priorities are and to understand when you have things going on in either work or personal life that are going to be the priority, whatever else comes up. So for example, for me, I'm expecting my first child, so I have a lot of doctor's appointments as all pregnant people do, and they're only going to get more frequent.

And I go into New York for my doctor's appointment. So every time I go, the day is basically shot. And I'll probably get a few hours in the morning, but I'm very clear with people who might be looking for me that I have a doctor's appointment, I'm going to be out of pocket, you can email me, you can call me, I'll get back to you, but I'm not going to be online. And that's the way it is. Equally, when I have important things going on for work, I'm pretty non-committal about plans. And I think it's sort of a long-term balancing act and understanding that different things are going to be the priority at different points in your life.

Amanda Cipriano: And how do you have those initial conversations without coming across like you think your job is more important than theirs or more important than your relationship with them?

Nicole Fulfree: I think it's always helpful to recognize that, like I said earlier, everybody has certain things in their life that get busy or could be a reason why they may have to cancel plans. And so I think if in initiating the conversation, you also recognize the fact that, I don't know what you do, for example, but I'm sure there's sometimes where you have really busy times at work, and I just want to share this about what I do. And so it's not just being self-centered and saying I'm the busiest person in the world, which is not the case, but it's kind of opening up that stage for an equal understanding from both sides and recognizing that they may have things in their life that are busy too.

Megan Monson: And then also being present when you can be, right. So if it's a time where you're not crazy and your friends want to get together or they're going through a hard time and want to talk to you about it, being able to step up when you can, I think still shows that they are a priority to you. And it's not that you are trying to put them on the back burner, but you have a lot of things going on. And we only have all so much time to do everything.

Rachel Dikovics: I think attorneys also frequently fall into the mental trap, I'll put it, of thinking that their jobs actually are more important than other people's jobs. And for the most part, they're not. We're not cardiac surgeons. We're not the president. We're not saving lives or typically dictating how people's lives are going to go day to day. Our jobs are not more important than the vast majority of other jobs. They have different expectations. They pay high salaries, which result in those expectations. And I think that that is really, it's just understanding what you are paid to do. You're paid a high salary to be available and to work hard and work a lot of hours.

And that's not the same in every job, but that doesn't make your job more important than someone else's. So I think the way that you frame things, it's

better to explain that there are expectations on you that your friends may not have in their roles than to try to convince them that your job actually is more important than theirs because it's not for the most part. And in many cases, their jobs might be more important than yours. And I think it's just a matter of explaining what you are and are not able to do.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, and let's get real. When you're a first-year associate, the main part of your job is probably sending out calendar invites. And so you could just be real with your friends. Say like, listen, I'm the low man on the totem pole and the woman on the totem pole. And if I get an email, part of my importance to the team right now is being super quick to respond and super quick to send that calendar invite. And so when you phrase it in a way that isn't overstating your importance and is being really real about what you're doing, I think that kind of, it adds a little bit of humor to it and helps them understand that you're not trying to say that you're more important than they are. But just like Rachel said that this is what's expected from me in my job at this point in my life, and this is just how it is.

Amanda Cipriano: I really love that tip. Do you have any other final thoughts or tips on how to get over the feeling of guilt or letting other people down?

Rachel Dikovics: I think it gets easier as time goes on to not feel guilty. You may still feel like you're letting people down in the first place, but you may find that it gets easier to explain why you, in this case, can't do something. And I think sometimes if you feel comfortable with the explanation that you've given somebody and you feel like this is what I actually have to do, then even if that person is upset, you will not necessarily feel guilty about it. Sorry if that was too harsh.

Nicole Fulfree: No, I think that's true. And I think this is from, I know I can't go one episode without referencing Glennon Doyle, but in a recent episode of her podcast, I think she said, setting boundaries is hard, but not setting boundaries is also hard in a different way. And so just think about, if I set this boundary, what's it going to be like for me? If I don't set this boundary, what's it going to be like for me? And giving yourself that kind of peace of mind I think is really helpful. And actually, standing firm too, setting your schedule the way it needs to be set.

Amanda Cipriano: Well, thank you all so much for weighing in on a topic that I know so many deal with on a constant basis. We hope that this episode opens the door for more conversations between women and their loved ones to take place about this issue. Thanks for joining us for another episode of the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. We'll see you next time.

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