

BY AMBER AULT

When we are better personally regulated, we can think more clearly, act more conscientiously, and bring more care to the issues that most concern us.



Amber Ault, Ph.D., MSW, is the new manager of the Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP). She invites you to find out more about how WisLAP supports lawyer well-being.

WisLAP Can Help

WWW.WISBAR.ORG/WISLAP

The Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) offers confidential support to lawyers, judges, law students, and other legal professionals as a benefit of State Bar membership. WisLAP staff can answer questions about mental health and substance use, provide guidance on well-being practices, and match members with attorneys trained in peer support.

To contact WisLAP staff: Call (800) 543-2625 or email callwislap@wisbar.org.

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988. Call or text 988 if you or someone you know may be going through a crisis or contemplating suicide. For more information, visit the 988 website at <https://988lifeline.org>.

Just Breathe

That advice might seem childish, superficial even, in a world filled with chaos. But think about it. When you calm yourself, do you not act more rationally and with more focus and purpose? That's the point.

At the Wisconsin Solo & Small Firm Conference in October, one lawyer lamented: "How do these wellness experts think deep breathing will solve our problems? Haven't they noticed that the air is full of smoke and toxins? The world is literally on fire, and these people just keep telling us to breathe."

It's a common and important question.

As a sociologist, I pay attention to how systems, structures, and institutions shape our lives. When they work well, these macro structures stabilize societies. This can be a blessing or a curse, depending on how the structures distribute power and how power operates inside them. When institutions change, the social impact can destabilize systems, and this, too, often has mixed effects: liberatory for some people, devastating for others.

As we experience multiple social, geopolitical, and environmental crises, a range of difficult feelings arise – from worry and angst to dread and hopelessness. We wonder how to make meaning of our individual and collective lives amid an onslaught of global and local challenges. Problems rooted so deeply in systems so large can appear impervious to influence. We often feel completely powerless to affect them.

The wellness worker's advocacy for self-care can seem superficial, silly, or clueless. "The world is falling apart, and you say, 'take a breath?'" my interlocutor asks.

I hear the frustration, fear, and despair in the question, as well as the misapprehension. "Taking a breath" won't immediately solve or eliminate the climate crisis, the outbreak of wars, the suffering of abandoned kittens, neglected children, angry clients, or disrespectful colleagues. It would be disingenuous to suggest it will.

Nonetheless, if we understand that macro systems and large events affect our individual health, we can also recognize that our individual behaviors contribute to these larger systems. When we are calmer, more able to pause, more responsive than reactive, more civil and respectful, more curious than contemptuous, we have more to offer. When we are more balanced, we can support others when they lose their footing. When we are better personally regulated, we can think more clearly, act more conscientiously, and bring more care to the issues that most concern us.

There's a saying, often associated with Buddhism but relevant to everyone: "Don't just do something; sit there." In the contemporary world, whether our work is lawyering, legislating, teaching, offering support in a crisis, parenting, partnering, or community building, many of us are drawn not only to "sit there" but also to act. When we take a breath before we act, we act with greater wisdom and skill. We know from lived experience that when we ourselves are in the care of someone calm and well-regulated, things go better for everyone.

The judge, the attorney, the politician, the colleague, the practice manager, the spouse, and the child who learn how to pause and to calm their nervous systems, perhaps through mindful breathing, offer us the possibility of charting new paths through a world in crisis. **WL**