

# When Lawyers Need Help, Where Do They Go?

**People often put off seeking help for mental health concerns until long after they first realize they need help. This is not unusual, but things don't have to be this way. The Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program is available, and we can respond with help, often within 24 hours.**

BY AMBER AULT

As deeply invested as they are in helping people by providing them with answers, support, strategies, remedies, protection, courage, and pathways to justice, lawyers and other legal professionals can find themselves disoriented when they need answers, support, strategies, comfort, courage, grounding, and hope for themselves. Joseph Bugni, author of the “Breakdown” feature in this issue, knows this to be true. His deeply personal experience, as described in his article, tells of his mental health crisis and the route he took to recovery.

## Dangers of Underestimating Exposure to Trauma & Overestimating Ability to Cope

Legal professionals can underestimate the corrosive effects of exposure to other people's traumas and the ways their high-demand work lives can diminish their emotional availability for family and friends, avocations, and the simple joys of life. They can also overestimate their own stress tolerance, coping mechanisms, and invulnerabilities, as though a license to practice law bestows on them psychological immunity from professional and personal difficulties.

Too often, lawyers discover too late that their diplomas make flimsy shields against the emotional blizzards, thunderstorms, and droughts that affect everyone sooner or later.

When that happens, lawyers recognize that their coping mechanisms are no longer adequate for the task of allowing them to function well across their multiple roles. Sometimes, they see themselves “beginning to slip.” Sometimes, they ignore or minimize the signs that they aren't doing well, assume the trouble will pass, or buckle down, as people, especially in the U.S., often do, to solve the problem by working

longer, harder, faster. Sometimes, they continue to power through – or trudge through, depending on your metaphor of choice – until they “hit the wall” and experience a more acute bout of emotional distress or psychological trouble. That state might involve doing more of some things, like drinking; or less of other things, like connecting with loved ones. It might involve the thought that others would be better served by life insurance benefits than by one's living, breathing presence in the world. It might involve stress-induced mania, sleep deprivation leading to psychosis, debilitating depression, isolation, anxiety, binge eating, or food restriction. Mental health crises among lawyers, precipitated by high standards, heavy workloads, and exposure to all the ways that life can go sideways, can be disorienting, debilitating, and even deadly.

Many people are drawn to the legal profession because of lawyers' special obligations to clients, the justice system, and the public. But



**Amber Ault, Ph.D., MSW,** is the manager for the Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP), which offers confidential well-being support to the legal community.  
[aaault@wisbar.org](mailto:aaault@wisbar.org)



a desire to serve, empathy for other people's difficulties, and vulnerability to the misguided belief that one can carry all the weight alone can also result in mental health challenges.

### Call WisLAP When You're Fraying Around the Edges

So, what should lawyers and other legal professionals do when they notice they are fraying around the edges – or worse, unraveling?

Many legal professionals are understandably reluctant to seek counseling from the psychologist or clinical social worker with an office on Main Street in the town where they practice. Many would be equally uncomfortable joining an AA, NA, OA, or other 12-step community that also serves clients. Like other people working in high-profile, confidentiality-centered, safety-sensitive careers, legal professionals often recognize the need for help long before they find a way of accessing it. Even after they discover the wonders of the virtual mental health care revolution, which allows people to access mental health care without entering a therapist's office, they still often face long waiting lists, even for initial consultations. One Wisconsin lawyer recently expressed her frustration to this author: "lawyers have as much trouble finding and getting in to see therapists as everybody else. It's daunting."

**WisLAP can respond quickly.** The same lawyer seemed surprised to learn that the Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) exists to serve lawyers and law students in need of emotional support, personal coaching, and consultation about a range of concerns that affect their work and family lives. For most of WisLAP's existence, the program has been staffed by licensed mental health workers, and we've never kept a waiting list. Lawyers and law students contact WisLAP seeking support, coaching, and guidance on issues as wide ranging as marital concerns, workplace stress, career and retirement

## ALSO OF INTEREST

### Become More Mindful about Lawyers' Mental Health

Interested in becoming more mindful about mental health and how having advanced knowledge about mental health concerns can benefit your law practice? Dr. Richard Davidson and attorney Jennifer Mohamed will take part in the State Bar of Wisconsin's spring programming.

Dr. Davidson delivered a livestream webinar on **"Healthy Minds in the Legal Profession"** on Wednesday, April 10. Webcast replays are scheduled for May 6, 14, and 23. Registration is open.

Attorney Mohamed will speak on **"How Mental Health Literacy Makes Lawyers Successful"** at Mental Health Literacy for Lawyers, a day-long seminar at the State Bar Center on May 31. Mark your calendars; registration will open soon.

For more information on these and other lawyer wellness events or to register, please visit [marketplace.wisbar.org](http://marketplace.wisbar.org). **WL**

transitions, preparing applications for admission to the bar, workplace discrimination, despair, hopelessness, grief, and suicidal thoughts and, of course, trauma, secondary trauma, and burnout. And we answer, responding to calls and email messages within 24 hours and providing direct support, referrals to WisLAP lawyer peer supports, and recommendations tailored to each person's unique situation.

There are many strategies lawyers and other legal professionals can use to address mental health challenges and true crises when they emerge. These include taking time off from work to become recentered; working with health care providers and mental health clinicians; leaning into support from others, whether friends, family members, or people in community organizations; spending time outside; increasing exercise; and finding ways to engage in playful recreation.

Most mental health concerns set in gradually and often benefit from approaches that include multiple sources of relief. Others occur in response to a sudden tragedy or overwhelmingly distressing developments. In both instances, WisLAP can help. WisLAP offers a range of confidential supports to lawyers, at no cost beyond your

membership dues. Provided by a professional mental health staffer, WisLAP services bridge the gap for lawyers who feel discouraged about their access to mental health support once they recognize the need for it.

### Conclusion

Whether you characterize your experience as a breakdown, a mental health crisis, or fraying at the edges, when you recognize the need for help, you don't have to wait. WisLAP responds to calls and email messages within 24 hours. **WL**

## WisLAP Can Help

[WWW.WISBAR.ORG/WISLAP](http://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](mailto: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>.