

Taking Care of Ourselves and Each Other

Ryan Billings became president of the State Bar of Wisconsin on July 1, 2024. During his term, he will focus on lawyer well-being among other issues.

BY RYAN M. BILLINGS

I am delighted to have been sworn in as president of the State Bar of Wisconsin, and I look forward to serving all our members in the upcoming year. In my inaugural column, I discuss a topic that is near and dear to my heart – attorney well-being. If you spend any time with me over the next year, you will hear me talk about this ... a lot.

Many studies demonstrate significant mental health concerns associated with the practice of law. Beyond the inherent stress of a legal practice, the adversarial nature of the U.S. justice system, and the challenging nature of our work, lawyers are tasked with applying specialized knowledge and skills to solving other people's (and business's) problems. Like physicians who disproportionately deal with sick people or law enforcement officers who often respond to situations in which laws have been broken, lawyers principally deal with clients who have substantial problems. We are called in to solve those problems, and it is quite natural in the process to make those problems our own, to internalize our clients' struggles and experience their strife as secondary trauma. That trauma can take a toll.

The solution is not to adopt an attitude of deliberate indifference to clients' problems or to turn ourselves into emotionless robots who perform our work mechanically without any human feelings. But recognizing that we are in part pulled along by the current of our clients' crises is an important step in addressing their effects on our physical and mental health.

There are no clear and easy ways to ensure attorney well-being. But the first step is to bring these conversations into the open and to encourage dialogue about these issues. There should be no stigma or shame in acknowledging that what we as lawyers do is hard and can leave a mark. That is simply a fact.

I want to highlight two resources that are already available to lawyers to help address these issues. My recent conversations with members throughout the state have revealed that these resources are not as well-known as they should be.

First, State Bar active members can earn up to six CLE credits in every reporting cycle on lawyer's awareness and understanding (LAU) topics, which include exploring issues such as stress management, work/life balance, mental illness, and substance abuse and dependence disorders relating to the practice of law. I encourage members to explore good health practices while also satisfying CLE requirements.

Second, the State Bar's Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) offers resources and confidential support for members. The WisLAP number is (800) 543-2625 or email callwislap@wisbar.org. Further resources can be found on the State Bar's website at www.wisbar.org/wislap. Importantly, WisLAP is *not* affiliated with the Office of Lawyer Regulation (OLR); any conversations with WisLAP are confidential and will *not* be shared with the OLR. WisLAP is a safe space in which to talk through problems and navigate crises that arise along the way. I encourage everyone to take advantage of these resources.

Take care of yourselves and each other. A career in law can be a bumpy ride. **WL**



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