



On Touching Grass

Even in times of chaos and trauma, simple things like taking time to get away from screens, go outside, and connect with nature can make a world of difference for our physical and emotional well-being.

BY AMBER AULT

In the aftermath of another tragic and highly publicized act of gun violence in the United States, Utah's Governor, Spencer Cox, Esq., offered a striking piece of advice during a press conference: "Go touch grass." His message underscored the importance of grounding ourselves in reality, fostering presence, and seeking genuine connection. Governor Cox encouraged everyone listening to "log off, turn off, touch grass, hug a family member, go out and do good in your community." He emphasized that humans did not evolve prepared to process a constant stream of violent imagery, warning that such exposure is detrimental to our well-being.

Lawyers and judges are uniquely familiar with suffering. In their professional roles, many choose to serve people affected by loss, harm, moral injury, and injustice. This work requires astute observation of the details of others' traumas. Moreover, lawyers sometimes find that vigorously defending their clients can mean inflicting pain on the opposing party, a reality that may result in its own kind of moral injury. Many legal professionals may feel frustrated by what they may perceive as dysfunctional systems, echoing Governor Cox's sentiment that "our nation is broken."

Gov. Cox's observations highlight a crucial fact: humans didn't evolve to bear the relentless overwhelm created by a nonstop barrage of distressing images on social media. Lawyers, whose responsibilities stretch beyond those of ordinary citizens, parents, family members, and workers, carry an even heavier load than other people; they make their livings intervening in matters central to social order and the rule of law and must pay close attention to the events around us. Yet, despite the extraordinary stresses of their extraordinary responsibilities, lawyers often struggle to incorporate practices and strategies that help counteract these

stressors, assuming they must simply "tough it out." Lawyers need regular reminders to "go touch grass."

Previous research on mental health and well-being among lawyers and judges delineates a number of reasons legal professionals resist conventional advice to prioritize "self-care." Legal professionals can regard self-care as self-indulgent, indicative of weakness, and a distraction from income-generating work. They often believe that generic well-being advice isn't relevant to lawyers, given the special experiences of training for and working in the legal profession. As a result, information about the importance of maintaining psycho-social balance must be framed for lawyers as key to professional success and endurance, an element of developing a competitive edge, essential to maintaining ethical practice, and packaged to



Amber Ault, Ph.D., MSW, manages the Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP), which offers confidential well-being support to the legal community. Access the digital article at www.wisbar.org/wl.

aaault@wisbar.org



easily integrate into hectic, demanding, unpredictable, and stressful careers.

Gov. Cox's recommendations to "log off, turn off, touch grass, [and] hug a family member" reflect strategies for balance he likely developed as a lawyer-turned-politician. They cover fundamental mental health principles succinctly. By turning away from screens and toward connection with the planet and people in our immediate

Lawyers and judges are uniquely familiar with suffering. In their professional roles, many choose to serve people affected by loss, harm, moral injury, and injustice.

vicinity, we receive a wealth of mental health and physical health benefits. We not only reduce isolation, stress, and distress but also increase resilience by focusing on the "local present moment" and co-regulating with people, animals, and the natural environment.

Ways to Foster Well-being

Here are several examples of practices built on these principles, designed to easily fold into the daily lives of lawyers and judges.

1) **Mindful Breathing:** Taking just a few minutes to focus on slow, deep breaths can activate the body's parasympathetic nervous system and reduce anxiety. Studies show this practice can lower cortisol levels and improve mental

clarity,¹ which is why these practices are part of the training of law enforcement officers, martial artists, competitive athletes, and Green Berets (U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers).

2) **Microbreaks:** Short, frequent breaks during the workday – providing time for a stretch, a walk, or a moment

outside – can decrease physical and mental fatigue. Research in applied ergonomics finds that microbreaks improve concentration and reduce stress.²

3) **Peer Support:** Talking with trusted colleagues about work-related stress can provide emotional relief and perspective. The American Bar Association recommends informal support networks as a protective factor against burnout.³ WisLAP is happy to facilitate confidential connections with our trained lawyer peer support volunteers.

4) **Setting Boundaries:** Learning to set realistic boundaries around work commitments and availability is crucial but can be an especially challenging habit for lawyers to develop. Social science research links boundary-setting with higher job satisfaction and lower stress,⁴ so finding ways to schedule and protect time that allows you to completely turn your attention away from work does pay off.

Motor Vehicle Crashworthiness

Since we opened our doors in 1979, Murphy & Prachthauser has been an advocate for safer products and practices. We have been nationally recognized for successfully litigating cases against corporations that design or manufacture defective vehicles, causing serious injuries. Such defects, to name a few, include faulty air bags, car roofs, seat belts, seats, park to reverse, and gas tanks.

In a case involving a defective vehicle, it is crucial that victims work with attorneys who are experienced in vehicle defect and crashworthiness cases. If you have a case involving a vehicle defect, we can work with you to provide mutual benefit to your client.

Please contact attorney

Thadd Llaurodo, Michelle Hockers, or Kate Llaurodo Scheidt
(414) 271-1011 | murphyprachthauser.com

**Murphy &
Prachthauser**
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

MILWAUKEE | GREENFIELD | WAUKESHA | MEQUON | WEST BEND



5) **Physical Activity:** Regular exercise, even in short bursts, helps reduce stress hormones and boosts mood. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends at least

positive emotions, enhancing problem-solving skills, and providing a healthy outlet for self-expression. Such activities act as protective factors against anxiety and depression by helping individuals

Information about the importance of maintaining psycho-social balance must be framed for lawyers as key to professional success and endurance, an element of developing a competitive edge, essential to maintaining ethical practice, and packaged to easily integrate into hectic, demanding, unpredictable, and stressful careers.

150 minutes of moderate activity per week for adults, which can be broken into manageable segments.⁵ Parking at the far end of parking lots, taking the stairs, and conducting work or social meetings while walking around the block all count.

6) **Gratitude:** Practicing gratitude has been shown to benefit both mental and physical health by promoting positive emotions, reducing stress, and increasing overall well-being. Research indicates that regularly expressing gratitude can decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve sleep quality, and strengthen interpersonal relationships. For example, studies have found that individuals who keep gratitude journals report higher levels of optimism and a greater sense of satisfaction with life.⁶ Bonus points for dropping a note of gratitude to a colleague, friend, or family member.

7) **Play and Creative Activity:** Engaging in play and creative activities has been shown to reduce stress and improve overall well-being by fostering

process emotions and build resilience.⁷ When we include others in playful or creative activity, we also build community.

8) **Appreciating Time Outside:** Spending time outdoors, even for brief periods, significantly lowers stress levels, improves mood, and boosts physical health. Exposure to natural environments decreases cortisol (stress hormone) levels and improves attention, while light physical activity such as walking supports cardiovascular health and mental clarity.⁸

9) **Offering Help to Others:** Helping others, whether through volunteering or simple acts of kindness, is linked to increased happiness, reduced isolation and loneliness, and improved overall mental health. Social science research has found that altruistic behavior activates brain regions associated with reward and can foster a stronger sense of purpose and social connection.⁹

Conclusion

Taking brief pauses in the midst of chronic stress, extreme situations, and

a range of crises to practice very simple, basic grounding strategies makes a world of difference for calming the human nervous system, improving decision making, and persisting in challenging environments. By incorporating small, evidence-based practices into daily routines, legal professionals can better manage regular stress and build a repertoire for functioning well in extraordinary situations, such as the one recently faced by Gov. Cox in Utah. Touching grass or taking a breath won't change public policy, but it will allow every lawyer who does it to continue doing the work they are trained to do and more deeply treasure the lives they have created. **WL**

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>.

ENDNOTES

¹Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, *Relaxation Techniques: Breath Control Helps Quell Errant Stress Response* (July 24, 2024), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>.

²S. Kim, S. Park, & Q. Niu, *Micro-break Activities at Work to Recover from Daily Work Stress*, J. Org. Behavior, 38(1), 28-44 (2017), <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-00303-001>.

³American Bar Association (ABA). National Study on Lawyer Well-Being (2017); <https://lawyerwellbeing.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Lawyer-Wellbeing-Report.pdf>.

⁴Susan Campbell Clark, *Work/Family Border Theory: A New Theory of Work/Family Balance*, Hum. Relations, 53(6), 747-770 (2000), <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2001-14649-001>.

⁵CDC, Physical Activity Basics, *Adult Activity: An Overview* (Dec. 20, 2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-basics/guidelines/adults.html>.

⁶Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, *Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier* (Aug. 14, 2021), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>.

⁷Kim et al., *supra* note 2.

⁸CDC, Physical Activity Basics, *Benefits of Physical Activity* (April 24, 2024), <https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-basics/benefits/index.html>

⁹Clark, *supra* note 4. **WL**