Stress Management

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525,600 minutes
How do you measure, measure a year?
In daylights, in sunlight
In midnights, in cups of coffee
In inches, in miles
In laughter, in strife . . .
How do you measure the life of a woman or a man?
In truths that she learned, or in times that he cried . . .[1]

Each of us has only so much time—according to the song from the musical *Rent*, we have 525,600 minutes per year. Into that time we need to cram work, home, family, service, things necessary for healthy living, some leisure, and so much more. There are times when it feels as if it is impossible to do more than what is needed to keep going. There can be a sense that everything is moving faster and demands continue to increase. The to-do list keeps getting longer. Sleep is sacrificed but the pressure keeps building. The result is stress. *Rent* spoke to a generation; it was a musical that spoke of choices, pain, friendship, loss, death—stressful situations. There were songs of feelings, priorities and what really matters when the day is over. Librarians lead different lives than those portrayed in the musical, but pressures exist in our profession and they can impact our health, our decisions, and our workplaces. Life is the interaction of many things. Our priorities say something about who we are and how we spend our times.

Stress can result from personal, emotional, or financial situations, work or home environments, world situations, health issues, and much more. Some things are in our control; some are not. "Stress is one of the most overused words in Western society today" begins Una Bryne's article.[2] The Oxford English Dictionary defines stress as "an adverse circumstance that disturbs, or is likely to disturb, the normal physiological or psychological functioning of an individual; such circumstances collectively. Also, the disturbed state that results."[3] The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health states "Job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury."[4]

Maybe the term is overused but there are a significant number of people in and out of the library profession who consider their lives to be stress-filled. So it has real implications for the individual, their work unit, their institution as a whole, and in their personal life. A review of the topic can provide perspective and remedies.

"Don't overwork a willing horse."

If you only have a few minutes, Bryne's article is for you. In six pages she defines stress, writes about the good and bad points of stress, signs of stress, things that can cause stress, and describes the "Wheel of Life," a tool to work out imbalances in life. This three-part wheel looks at priorities, outcomes, and actions. She states, "We need to recognize that we will never eliminate stress from our lives but must look more to learning to cope with it. We need to develop a stress management plan that works for us, and actively manage the stress levels we encounter. We are in total control of some but not all aspects of our lives, but our approach to managing both what we want out of life and what life throws at us is the key to a 'stress free' life."[5] This article is proof that good things can come in small packages.

By contrast, while lifting the *Handbook of Work Stress* may cause physical stress, the breadth and depth of the book makes it a basic resource for every manager.[6] At more than seven hundred pages, it is doubtful anyone will read this book from cover to cover, but it is an excellent resource to have available. At particular times and situations, individual chapters will have special significance. There are four parts: Sources of Work Stress; Special Populations (older, younger, gender, international, and part-time and contingent workers); Consequences of Work Stress; and Interventions. Chapters of particular significance include topics on harassment and discrimination, workplace aggression, technology, organizational politics, and terrorism; you will find good bibliographies after the chapters, as well. While not easy reading, this is

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an excellent one-volume resource that is a well-researched, worthwhile reference work, covering a wide range of topics concerning stress.

Managing Workplace Stress may be one of the best books to begin a look at the topic. Williams and Cooper note that "focusing attention on how to reduce or remove specific sources of pressure is much easier than trying to come to grips with something as vague and as emotive as the word 'stress.'"[7] Williams and Copper maintain that pressure is defined as demands or challenges facing people, while stress is unwanted outcomes of too much pressure. As they succinctly put it, under pressure, people can thrive, survive, or break. The book helps make the first option much more prevalent than the third. Graphics, charts, and bulleted lists walk the manager through a process to "collect evidence, understand the issues, interpret the information and take appropriate action."[8] This book is practical, without theoretical studies, bibliographies, or detailed definitions or descriptions. It is, however, easy to read and implement.

Consider stress. We've already looked at a number of definitions and books on the topic. Is it really that harmful? Or is it what gives an over-achiever the edge? Clarke and Cooper state that "stress arises when the demands of a particular encounter are appraised by the individual as about to exceed the available resources and, therefore threaten well-being, and necessitate a change in individual functioning to restore the balance."[9] They note that stressors are events, and strain is the person's response to stressors. One definition of occupational stress is a "negatively perceived quality which, as a result of inadequate coping with sources of stress, has negative mental and physical health consequences."[10] These stressors can be particular features of the job, tensions from the interaction of home and work lives, relationships, the organizational structure, an individual's job role, or other factors. The book focuses on risk management and stress, so it might be more useful for some types of jobs in the library than others; it does provide a very good review of the literature on topics such as environmental and social factors on occupational safety, stress and accidents, job stress assessment, and risk reduction.

"Habit is a shirt we wear until we die."

Managing Stress, one in the Harvard Business School's Pocket Mentor Series, is a small book that has a lot of information.[11] It uses simple definitions, bullets, and checklists to provide a non-stressful way of studying the subject. The book can be read in less than an hour but provides lots to consider. It is easy to see why it is one of the mentoring series–it almost seems as if a mentor is standing there providing support, encouragement, and reasonable advice. This is an excellent place to start, although most readers will want additional, more in-depth information on the topic.

While written for the business community, *Minimize Stress, Maximize Success* is easy and worthwhile reading.[12] The style is very casual with short, easy-to-read sections, and abstract illustrations and graphics to mark suggestions concerning how to release frustrations, mediation, relaxation, and improve fitness. There are a series of "work solutions" scattered throughout the book that are especially interesting. These include a personal stress audit, determining your "Jekyll and Hyde," physical and mental exercises to help relax, how to assert yourself, creating a personal vision, and more. Topics covered in short discussions include clutter, harassment, sleep, quality of life, overwork, confusion about the job, and much more. While there is no way this short book can actually solve all of these problems, what it does do well is provide some context and solutions to consider. Improvements in many areas may be fixable with the fresh insight from the book, and the lifestyle changes and emphasis on healthy living are helpful. Overall, this breezy book on crucial issues is an enjoyable read with simple, but useful information. As the author states, it might be worthwhile to take a few minutes and consider how you breathe. "Merely taking a moment to fill your lungs and breathe deeply can calm you when you find yourself pressurized."[13]

"Prevention of excessive stress is much better than helping people to cope once they are already suffering."[14] With this sentence in the first paragraph, *Organizational Stress* grabs the attention and keeps it for the length of the book. There are five parts: What Is Stress?—Background and Importance; Stress—An Organizational Perspective; Managing the Stress of Others; Understanding and Dealing with Stress—An Individual Perspective; and Conclusions. Each chapter can be read apart from the others, although it is recommended that the overview and conclusions be read by all. Especially useful is the chart at the end of the introduction that shows who (managers, trainers, decision-makers, and so on) should read what sections. One interesting decision was to put appendixes at the end of many of the chapters, instead of at the end of the book. These range from forms of somewhat limited usefulness to the very good warning signs of excess stress, values worksheet, and action plans. There are numerous bulleted lists and charts that increase the ease of reading the book. A short list of websites (which are United Kingdom–centric) are also provided. Overall, the book is full of practical information and is relatively fast reading. It is recommended despite its business and non-U.S. focus.

For those who are interested in stress issues in the workplace, read the four chapters in Part 2 of *Stress and Anxiety—Application to Work Place in Stress and Anxiety Application to Health, Work Place, Community, and Education*.[15] These chapters cover very specific aspects related to stress: social support, burnout, workaholism, and a study of psychiatric nurses. The last chapter is included for its table listing common stressors identified in focus groups; it doesn't take much imagination to apply the findings to librarianship. Categories include job demands (work-

load, time pressures, and increased responsibilities), role ambiguity, lack of control, job resources, restructuring, and more. While one must be careful about drawing analogies, it is a fascinating study. It is an interesting book overall, but only a small portion is applicable to the library.

Work Stress: The Making of a Modern Epidemic begins with the question: "Is work really more demanding and pressurized than at any previous time in human history?"[16] The authors then note that their "aim is not to show that work stress is false but to demonstrate that it is an historically specific and transitory phenomena."[17] Are we working harder, longer, and under more stress than people during famines, health epidemics, after natural disasters, or during wartime? The authors look at historical, sociological, and cultural resources for an objective perspective of the topic. They conclude with a chapter titled "Therapy or Resistance?" which examines two societal responses to work stress: "to locate the origins of work stress in the structure and organization of the modern workplace and to see the solution in terms of job redesign. The second approach is to locate work stress in the responses of the individual and see the solution in terms of therapeutic intervention."[18] This well-referenced, interesting, and serious look at the topic does not give advice that can be put into practice but is worthwhile for those interested in a more scholarly look at the topic.

"Talk doesn't cook rice."

The library is a service organization. As such, the stresses can be very different than the much-studied industrial workplace. Dollard, Winefield, and Winefield address this in the very scholarly, but valuable *Occupational Stress in the Service Professions*.[19] They look at sources of work stress, outcomes of exposure to the stress, research studies, and possible interventions. Groups studied range from social workers to prostitutes to clergy. There is no mention of librarians (or libraries) in the index, but chapters on teachers and academics are useful. The book is written by Australians and is focused on that country; however, they provide interesting insight, a good review of the research in the field, and very good bibliographies for additional research. They "note both the high cost of stress in the modern work environment and a body of evidence to suggest that much of the stress experienced could be prevented if organizations and work arrangements were developed, constituted and constructed in more sustainable way. . . . Change within organizations is rapidly taking place and it is incumbent upon managers, workers, unions, to remain constantly vigilant about current work contexts that are being constructed for workers, and the impact these may have on the health and well-being of service professionals and their families."[20]

Fighting for Time begins:

> The "natural" pace of life, in earlier times determined by the rising and setting of the sun, has given way to an ordering by church bells, bugles, factory whistles, and alarm clocks, all sending messages to engage in or cease various activities. Technology—from the invention of the incandescent light to the computer chip—has extended the possibility of work beyond the daylight hours and through time zones. . . . Time frames are internalized in individuals' psyches, structured as time frames are by social condition and cultural perspectives.[21]

The book organized around three themes: "Changes in Working Time and Timing and Consequences for Individuals and Families"; "Time and the Organization of Work"; and "Time Norms, Gender, and Work." There are several chapters that are of particular interest to librarians, such as "Understanding Change in American Working Time," which notes that the issue of time spent at work is more complex than many studies indicate, and national averages do not show the entire picture. They looked at hours worked, along with gender, family structures, occupational types, and more. They conclude that "focusing on average changes in working time contributes to misunderstanding the sources and shape of these new time squeezes, since we find that the average workweek for individual workers has changed very little in the last several decades. This apparent stability, however, masks important changes in the ways that jobs and families are structured. . . . This time divided among jobs tends to be reflected in an occupational divide, with long workweeks concentrated among managerial and professional workers and shorter ones more likely to be found among workers with more modest educational and occupational credentials."[22]

Changes in family life have also had a great impact, as job structure and intensity have changed, increasing stress. Non-work time has an important role, and parenting expectations and child-care issues are coupled with social criticism of those who rely on outside help in parenting. They note that

> finding solutions will depend on developing broad policies geared to the new needs of the twenty-first century families by altering the basic organization of our work and community institutions, including moving toward a shorter work-week norm, developing a wide array of childcare services and supports, and mandating more family-friendly and gender-equal workplaces . . . they are our best hope for providing genuine resolutions to the time squeezes that confront growing numbers of Americans.[23]

Harriet Presser's chapter is of special interest to librarians who rotate shifts, have variable hours, or work nights in a twenty-four-hour facility. She reviews studies of nonstandard work hours and surveys workers, concluding that

this is a complex subject but a critical one. Some of her suggestions for future studies include looking at the costs and benefits of non-standard hours on health, families, and parenting. While not providing answers, the chapter raises awareness of this issue that affects the increasing number of library employees that may work non-standard hours.

Sharone's chapter, "Engineering Overwork," may give some useful insight into personality types and work (despite its focus on one segment of workers—those in one high-tech firm). Long hours and overworking are common with many of our colleagues. While local work environments may try to foster a better work-life balance, Sharone states that

> professional associations and other worker-controlled institutions can reclaim from corporate management the standards for competence and define these in a manner that allows for useful economic production while also preserving the well-being of the communities and families currently under assault by rising work hours.[24]

Also, check out the chapter titled "Work Devotion and Work Time" for some insight into the cultural role of work in the identity of women who fit the definition of an ideal worker ("highly valued employees who can work long hours without being burdened by family responsibilities").[25] One more look at gender and work is Epstein's "Border Crossing," which "will analyze how time ideologies integrate with gender and work ideologies to undermine the ability of individuals to move beyond the conventional and historic role prescriptions for men and women–to transgress the role boundaries that define the structure of their lives and their activities."[26] Overall, *Fighting for Time* offers valuable insight into the basic research that will raise awareness of important issues.

"A good example is half a sermon."

In his preface to *Work Overload*, Gyrna states:

> This book views work overload as a failure of the design of the work. We must analyze the work to identify areas of waste, eliminate the waste, and then use the saved resources to eliminate the work overload and prevent it from happening again. In analyzing the work we must recognize the overload creates excessive mental demands due to job content and poor management practices. The book furnishes checklists to help redesign the jobs.[27]

He covers the topic well in this easy-to-read book. Definitions and philosophy are covered early: "Work overload is only one of many organizational factors that lead to stress. Other factors include role uncertainty and role conflict, responsibility for other people, job dissatisfaction, and job insecurity. . . . Sometimes, the result is . . . despair. This book transforms despair to hope and satisfaction."[28] The book is full of flowcharts, checklists, and bulleted lists that help you understand his points. It is action-oriented, practical, and very fast, essential reading. He begins and ends his book with reference to the book, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and the original movie by the same name. The parents in the novel were industrial engineers whose work involved increased efficiency, amusingly depicted in their story. For those who remember reading the book or watching the movie, it might be worth a revisit for inspiration. For those who only know the Steve Martin movie, take a look at the original for a look at really efficient living!

In Control might be useful for library employees.[29] The book provides a practical plan to cope with life and improve health. The authors use case studies and self-assessments as part of an eight-week plan to

> accurately read the work around you for clues to your best opportunities . . . react in ways that support your own needs and goals . . . master the keys to self-control . . . learn to have a considerable degree of control over your environment . . . speak in ways that get you heard and improve all facets of communication. . . . In short, in many cases, you will get what you want, and even more important, you will get what you need.[30]

The plan is a big task, but one that could lower stress and make work and life in general more pleasant.

Stress is real and, contrary to many common misconceptions, can serve a useful purpose. But it can also damage our health and destroy lives. The choice in how we deal with stress and how we allow it in our lives and our workplaces is, to some extent, ours to make. We need to consider the complicated patterns that make up our lives and the role of the stressors that we have. The proverbs that serve as headings in this column come from several countries and may look rather obscure, but all have real implications to the way we live our lives. Like all proverbs, they require some careful and creative interpretations, but the results are worthwhile. Each of us needs to ask ourselves, how do we measure our lives? Is it in the number of books cataloged or reference questioned answered? Is it in the meetings attended? Students taught? Or, is it in the people we've helped to discover the wonders of research and knowledge? Is it in the lives we've made an impact on, or the times we've been involved when "she learned," or cared when "he cried"? Can our lives be measured in the love of learning, of caring, of sharing over a cup of coffee, in laughter? Or is it just the minutes in the year and how we fill them? That is an important question, most likely with as many answers as there are people.

Author's note: Bold headings are proverbs (Russian, Chinese, and German) from Frank M. Gyrna, Work Overload! Redesigning Jobs to Minimize Stress and Burnout *(ASQ Quality Press, 2004).*

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