New and Noteworthy

You Too, Can Prevent Librarian Burnout

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Insomnia, forgetfulness, loss of appetite, chronic fatigue, depression, increased irritability – all are symptoms of a malaise common to librarians and information professionals: workplace burnout. Although people outside the library profession might find it surprising, many librarians face constant stress on the job. Ever-increasing demands for service, constant interruptions, understaffing, budget cuts, heavy workloads, low pay, and other problems all combine to produce an ideal environment for burnout. Of course, not all stress is necessarily bad, but prolonged exposure can cause cynicism, detachment, pessimism, and a loss of enjoyment in our profession. As library managers, how can we most effectively address burnout in our organizations, not only our own, but those of our employees? Are there any solutions for preventing occupational burnout in librarianship?

The term "burnout" first gained traction in the 1970s, and since then the concept has remained a perennial topic of books, articles, websites, blog posts, and videos.[1] As a metaphor for the exhaustion of energy, burnout brings to mind a flame that once burned brightly but wanes and goes out if not regularly replenished. Social psychologist Christina Maslach, an early researcher on occupational burnout, defines the condition as "...a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform" (206). Although burnout was originally associated with the helping professions and human services, i.e., those who work directly with people on a regular basis, it gradually expanded to include other white-collar workers, managers, and others whose work involves problem solving, mentoring, and responsibility for others.

Certainly, librarianship encompasses many of these characteristics. In recognition of the major impact that burnout has on librarians, *College & Research Libraries News* ran a useful list in 2016 of workplace burnout resources, "Keeping Workplace Burnout at Bay: Online Coping and Prevention Resources."[2] The list includes links to both general and profession-specific reports, quizzes, statistics, articles, videos, and websites; topics include occupational burnout, burnout prevention strategies, and organizational response. Good beginning resources on this list are a Burnout Self-Test from MindTools and a list of "TED Talks for When You Feel Totally Burned Out."

Librarian Maria Accardi's *Librarian Burnout* blog[3] is an interesting collection of useful stories, commentary, practical tips, and guest posts on a variety of burnout-related topics, including mindfulness, emotional labor, self-care, work-life balance, and rejection. Although not currently being updated, the blog remains a great place to read about others' experiences with burnout, not only in a general sense, but also specifically from librarians' unique perspectives. The blog is confirmation that librarianship, regardless of setting, is not a peaceful, relaxing, low-stress career. As Accardi states in her introduction to the blog,

"Burnout among librarians is a real thing, and it's a problem…Burnout can be isolating and upsetting and dehumanizing, and it may help you feel better to know others in your field have similar experiences and feelings."

Another interesting and useful guide for librarian burnout remains the 2013 Chandos title *Managing Burnout in the Workplace: A Guide for Information Professionals*.[4] The book makes an excellent case for why our profession should and must take the problem seriously. Nancy McCormack and Catherine Cotter, both librarians with extensive experience in Canadian law librarianship, provide an extensive discussion of burnout in the information industry, including definitions, factors contributing to burnout, sources of workplace stress, burnout research, burnout survey instruments, legal and gender issues, symptom recognition, and overcoming burnout. "Worldwide, the syndrome presents a serious problem for all kinds of business, organizations and the economy as a whole," write McCormack and Cotter, "…costs are incurred as a result of reduced productivity and revenue, decreased job satisfaction, increased absenteeism and sick leaves, job turnover, low morale, and the necessity for replacement workers, along with compensation, litigation and disability claims. Employees who are burned out are also less inclined to assist their colleagues on the job and less inclined to care about the organizations or its goals" (3-4).

Perhaps some of the difficulty may lie in a lack of recognition of librarian burnout among the people we serve. Certainly there is often little acknowledgement, let alone awareness, of librarian burnout among library patrons. For example, the stereotypical perception of public libraries as being quiet, uneventful places is universally incorrect. Mary Wilkins Jordan, writing in 2014,[5] identifies several common sources of public library stress, including frequent interruptions, difficulties with co-workers and management, deadlines, budget problems, excessive workloads, and so on. Similarly, researchers at Lund University in Sweden recently identified the most frequent stressors among a sample of Swedish public librarians to be task overload, technological stress, difficult patrons, management problems, and a feeling of isolation.[6] Strategies to help mitigate these problems include changing the organization of work and more stress management training for employees.

Among librarians themselves, burnout may be most commonly associated with public librarians. However, academic librarians also experience their own unique stressors contributing to burnout. Researchers Ellen I. Shupe, Stephanie K. Wambaugh, and Reed J. Bramble surveyed librarians at a random sample of 60 public, four-year universities and colleges in the Midwestern United States to determine the connection between work-related stress and burnout and two sources of that stress in particular: role ambiguity and role overload.[7] Role ambiguity involves the lack of clearly defined expectations about job-related responsibilities. Role overload occurs when employees perceive their jobs to require too many responsibilities and demands, thus causing them to be overworked as a result. This interesting, well-documented study measured a number of demographic questions as well as role ambiguity and overload, perceived stress, job-related burnout (using the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, or OLBI), life satisfaction, job satisfaction, work withdrawal, and health conditions. The study supported the theories that stress is common in environments characterized by inadequate resources, loss or anticipated loss of resources, and uncertain role-related expectations. The authors suggest several strategies for dealing with these issues, including job analyses, detailed and updated job descriptions, regular training, and better avenues for job-related information exchange.

Problems of burnout can often be worse for solo librarians than their colleagues working in other settings. Although many solo librarians may be found in special libraries (law

firms, corporations, government organizations, etc.), more and more librarians are finding themselves without immediate colleagues in small public libraries, academic libraries, and K-12 public school settings. In *The Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship*,[8] authors Moniz, Eshleman, Henry, Slutzky, and Moniz explore the unique stressors facing librarians who work by themselves, in particular the problems brought about by annual budget cuts, downsizing, increasing demands for services, and the nature of librarianship itself, which is a profession dedicated to helping others. Chapter Eight of the book is devoted to solo librarianship, and offers useful observations and suggestions for further reading. Recommended techniques for fighting solo librarian burnout include learning to say no, reasonable goal setting, involvement in professional organizations, participation in professional development opportunities, and practicing mindfulness, the overall theme of the book.

Finally, in her 2015 paper in *The Southeastern Librarian*,[9] Linda A. Christian seeks to answer the question with which we began, "What are the best solutions for preventing occupational burnout in librarianship?" Through analysis based on an extensive literature review, Christian offers three recommendations: integrating the idea of "emotional labor," emotional intelligence, and burnout in library science program curricula; enhanced management support including employee orientation program, learning opportunities, employee involvement in decision making, enhancing enjoyable organizational activities, and others; and more staff assistance programs and workplace training on emotional intelligence skills.

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[2] Bosque, Darcy Del, and Skarl, Susie. "Keeping Workplace Burnout at Bay: Online Coping and Prevention Resources." *College & Research Libraries News* 77, no. 7 (1 July 2016). Available at http://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/9525/10838.

[3] Accardi, Maria. *Librarian Burnout*. Available at https://librarianburnout.com. Accardi is also the editor of *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques, and Conversations* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017) and *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2013).

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