

Library Burnout: Recognizing the causes and dealing with the effects

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It's no secret that job stress can build up over time and lead to emotional exhaustion and eventual burnout. Despite the fact that librarianship is often stereotyped as a low-stress job, there are still many employment factors within the profession that can cause stress and eventually lead to burnout. Of these, emotional labor contributes largely to feelings of burnout and many librarians suffer from the emotional consequences related to any sort of work with the public, teaching, or customer service. There is a plethora of research and literature related to the burnout phenomena, but this is often focused on careers that are more commonly perceived as high stress by the public such as medical or law enforcement careers. It is important to recognize that burnout can and does affect library professionals. The teaching aspect of instruction librarianship in particular certainly requires a high level of emotional labor, which numerous studies have linked to burnout. This paper will provide an overview of the aspects of instruction librarianship that can lead to burnout and also a variety of methods for preventing or at the very least coping with the consequences of professional burnout.

Job burnout is a psychological occurrence related to excess stress in the workplace or even prolonged exposure to lower levels of stress. The Maslach Burnout Inventory, originally developed by Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson in 1981, is still one of the most frequently referenced tools used to measure burnout among professionals. In the original Maslach Burnout Inventory manual Maslach and Jackson identified three factors of burnout, which are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or negative feelings about clients, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). While the presence of these factors among employees does not necessarily imply a feeling of burnout, a high level of any factor or a combination of these factors is how Maslach and Jackson attempt to quantitatively define burnout in the workplace. Burnout factors can, of course, be present in any profession but research has shown a high level of correlation between jobs that require emotional labor and the factors defined in the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

The term "emotional labor" was first coined by Arlie Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. In this work, Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labor as a type of labor which "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). Literature suggests that both sincere and insincere attempts to act in a way that pleases clients can lead to job burnout. Hochschild believes that employees who are too invested in providing friendly, personalized service are at the most risk for burnout. She suggests that this type of employee, by being overly eager to provide personalized service, has a harder time distancing themselves from inappropriately personal behavior towards them. This leads to increased stress in the workplace and Hochschild believes that because of this stress the employee "stops caring and becomes

more detached from the people she serves” (p. 187). This description aligns very well with Maslach Burnout Inventory, which identifies depersonalization or a sense of detachment from the clients being served as a key factor in cases of burnout. On the other hand, recent studies such as that conducted by Andela, Truchot, and Borteyrou (2015) have also shown that attempting to fake personalized customer service can also contribute to burnout.

A 2015 study by Andela, Truchot, and Borteyrou looked into the connection between emotional labor and burnout and the effects of surface acting and emotional dissonance specifically. Andela, Truchot, and Borteyrou (2015) explain that surface acting is when employees “work at suppressing their true feelings and display more emotions than they feel by amplifying their emotions or feigning the required emotions” (p. 322). The authors go on to explain that surface acting has been linked to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as well as difficulty recognizing personal achievement. They also found the same relationship between these effects and emotional dissonance, which they define as “the conflict between felt and displayed emotions, manifest or potential” (p. 323). Librarians and instructors often have to employ emotional labor in order to project a countenance that is welcoming to patrons and encouraging to students. While there is not much literature linking emotional labor and librarianship in particular, a study by Julien and Genius (2009) looked at this relationship by reviewing diary entries written by instruction librarians. In reviewing the they found that some participants in the study “revealed significant dissonance between their instructional experiences and their feelings” caused by job expectations requiring these librarians “to display emotions consistent with organizational goals” (p. 932). These findings show that librarians clearly take part in emotional labor as well as surface acting both in their instructional roles and in their professional relationships. Considering the correlation Andela, Truchot, and Borteyrou (2015) found between surface acting and all three components of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, it is clear that the emotional labor of librarianship can contribute to job burnout.

Unfortunately for librarians, societal conceptions of the profession have led many people to believe that burnout is not an issue in libraries. Burnout is often considered a hazard of “high-stress” professions such as those of doctors, lawyers, or firefighters. Librarianship, in contrast, has for various reasons been stereotyped as a “low-stress” profession. This is an old stereotype, but also one that is not showing any signs of changing. In fact, the website CareerCast has listed librarian as one the ten least stressful professions in both 2015 and 2016. These lists of most and least stressful jobs from CareerCast are often cited in articles from major news providers such as Forbes and Time Magazine, so it is unsurprising that the public is often unaware of the stress librarians experience. Interestingly enough, instruction librarians have to deal with these same perceptions even though teaching is often seen as a fairly high-stress profession.

Nancy McCormack (2013) in her article *Managing burnout in the workplace: a guide for information professionals* addresses the discrepancy between perceptions of instructors and instruction librarians and states that:

not only were librarians who teach not given the respect that is accorded to fulltime instructors, they sometimes felt resented by their own colleagues or administrators...As a result, the teaching librarian was often made to feel that she neither really part of the faculty nor really one of the staff. (p. 87).

Despite the fact that teaching is a key component of an instruction librarian's work, they are not seen as instructors on the same level as school teachers or university professors. This is often because of the inconsistent and ambiguous professional status of librarians who, depending on the institution, are sometimes considered faculty and in other cases considered staff. Another factor that contributes to this stereotype is the nature of instruction sessions at many institutions, in which librarians provide a oneshot lesson and then move onto another class. Not only does this model prevent instruction librarians from becoming more visible as instructors, but it can also cause these librarians to feel stress that contributes to burnout.

On her blog, instruction librarian Maria Accardi (2015) addresses the harm that can come from oneshot instruction sessions and points out that as an instruction librarian "you may never see a student again, let alone know the true impact of the session... it is difficult to perceive the rewards of the hard work of teaching" (Librarian Burnout). University professors see their students consistently over the course of a semester, or even longer, and so they have the opportunity to observe any progress their students make. Instruction librarians generally only see a student for one class session and will most likely not be able to see how their teaching made a difference in the education of these students. The Maslach Burnout Inventory specifically identifies a reduced sense of personal accomplishment as one of the key components contributing to professional burnout. If instruction librarians are unable to see the impact their work is making they could easily fall into the trap of believing they haven't accomplished enough in their instruction sessions.

There are other problems that can arise from the one-shot model of library instruction session as well. These classes often teach students the basics of conducting research and how to use library resources and so, even when working with students from vastly different disciplines, these introductory instruction courses often become extremely repetitive. In their publications, Sheesley (2001), Ray (2002), McCormack (2013), and Accardi (2015) all point to the harmfully repetitive nature of library instruction as a professional stressor. McCormack specifically suggests that in these situations instruction librarians experience "little intellectual stimulation", which can lead to dissatisfaction with their work (p. 87). Teaching, of course, is not the only stressful aspect of librarianship and in contrast with the stereotypes of the profession, there is plenty of research to suggest that libraries have their own unique stressors just like any other workplace.

In addition to the aforementioned stereotypes librarians face, the evolving nature of libraries as technology progresses is often cited as a source of stress as well. Harwell (2008) references a variety of technological problems including computer malfunctions and network connectivity difficulties as a source of stress for many librarians (p. 384). While some libraries have information technology specialists to troubleshoot these issues, librarians are generally the ones on the front lines and they are the ones who patrons will turn to when something goes wrong. There are also plenty of libraries who don't have IT staff on site or at least not at all branches, meaning librarians are often responsible for attempting to get technology back in working order. Even when libraries do have the benefit of onsite IT professionals, this can cause its own problems. The roles of separate departments are often confused either by patrons or by the employees themselves who are stuck trying to provide a myriad of different services. Librarians

nowadays also have to navigate the current transition to or addition of electronic materials in a system that is still straddling the line between print and digital collections.

The addition of digital resources in a library that is still maintaining a print collection as well can strain the library's budget. Even conversion from print to digital materials can be a long and costly process as well. Both the technical work and budgetary decisions involved in the evolution of modern libraries can put strain on the employees. At state funded institutions the stress of this process is frequently compounded by shrinking library budgets. Until libraries move to a completely digital system, librarians are forced to juggle the responsibilities of maintaining print and digital collection simultaneously. In addition to this, librarians have to deal with the recent inundation of speculation about the future of libraries. McCormack (2013) says:

It would be startling to come across an article predicting the end of policing, nursing, teaching or firefighting as professions. That's not true, unfortunately, for librarians. On a regular basis, those who work in the information professions see articles predicting the end libraries, librarians and books themselves. (p. 57)

While trying to gracefully maneuver the application of emerging technologies in the library field, librarians also have to address the concerns and criticisms of a public that often questions the very validity of their profession. Instruction librarians in particular often have the added responsibility of assessment. While the assessment can be used for personal improvement, it is more often required as a way of quantitatively proving the value and impact of library instruction. The obligation to constantly justify their work is certainly a contributing factor to job stress among librarians.

It is essential to identify and continue to look for aspects of librarianship that could contribute to burnout within the profession. Determining the sources of workplace stress is one of the first steps in finding ways to manage it before burnout occurs. Identifying sources of stress within librarianship can also lead to a discussion of ways to improve education and training in library fields. Job stress will always be a reality and it important that librarians know how to handle this reality, but there are certainly improvements that can be made. Nancy McCormack (2013) found that library schools do little to prepare librarians for management positions (p. 63) and suggests that even in supervisory positions librarians are stuck acting as security guards trying to enforce behavior policies with little to training in this type of work (p. 7576). For instruction librarians specifically, Sheesley (2001) suggests that preparation for teaching is inadequate and this fact, combined with the high hopes that these new librarians often have for themselves, can be a significant source of stress (448). Library science schools should certainly take these findings into consideration, but in the meantime there a myriad of different ways in which current librarians can deal with workplace stress and even feelings of burnout.

Although some librarians may have the impression of leaving school unprepared for some aspects of their positions, continuing education and workshops can help with these feelings. Organizations can help their employees by encouraging these efforts or even hosting their own workshops. An increase in options for online courses, either formal graduate courses or webinars, also presents a great opportunity for librarians to pursue further education without

having to invest as much time or money for travel as in a traditional graduate program. Sheesley (2001) also suggests that librarians can look to others in the library field for support and says:

Engaging in group projects with other teaching librarians either formally, through local, regional, and national professional organizations, or informally, by collaborating with a colleague on the writing of an article, contributes to intellectual stimulation and can lessen feelings of isolation. (p. 450).

This collaboration can help librarians discover not only provides a chance for a sort of continuing education but can also offer librarians a chance to connect on a personal level. This support can give librarians to discuss similar experiences or even just share their feelings about their work.

Having a support network, or even just a place to vent, can be a great help in coping with job stress. Particularly since emotional labor, which is generally an aspect of librarianship, can force employees to fake their emotions or hide their true emotions, having a space to discuss work-related feelings sincerely is extremely valuable. Social media and Web 2.0 tools as a whole have expanded the opportunities for librarians to connect with others. Maria Accardi's blog, *Librarian Burnout*, focuses not only researching burnout but also seeks to provide a place for librarians to share their stories. She states that:

Sharing personal narratives about burnout serves numerous useful functions... it is helpful and cathartic to commiserate through sharing stories... It can also lead to productive problem solving... But perhaps most importantly, sharing burnout narratives also has the effect of reclaiming one's sense of humanity. Dehumanization is one of the more troubling effects of burnout, but stories are what make us human. (2015).

As mentioned in the article, burnout can cause dehumanization and it is listed as one of the key components of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. This aspect of burnout is also one that very clearly affects not only the librarian experiencing burnout but also the patrons they are trying to serve. When librarians stop seeing their patrons as fellow humans and individuals, they will inevitably stop providing the best quality of service. Of course there is also the problem of patrons forgetting that librarians are also individuals and not just a means to receive the service they need. Communicating with others within the librarian profession and also outside of it can remind both librarians and library patrons of their connections to others and that we are all human.

Of course there is not one correct way to deal with stress and burnout, and while collaboration and connections with other librarians can be helpful for some, getting away from the professional sphere can also help fight burnout. Dehumanization is one aspect of burnout but a decreased sense of personal accomplishment is also a contributing factor. For some, constant comparison with others in the library profession can actually be harmful because it causes them to diminish their own accomplishments. Karen Jensen, on the Teen Librarian Toolbox website, talks about the importance of unplugging to cope with burnout and states:

Part of taking a break means unplugging from your job, but also from the library world. One thing that can contribute to burn out is the constant social comparison we are able to do, that we do without even thinking, because of the ubiquitous access we have to other librarians and their successes. (2013).

Social media, in this case, functions as a double-edged sword, allowing librarians to easily connect with their colleagues but also inundating their personal life with work-related material.

Similarly, continuing education can be a great way to become inspired, but it also fine for librarians to admit that sometimes they just don't have the motivation to completely revamp their methods or invent a great new program. Taking a break from work is often a recommendation for dealing with stress and burnout, but this isn't always an option. Jensen (2013) recommends coasting, or relying on what has already been done, as a way to cope with burnout. When inspiration does strike, it can be useful to write down new ideas and keep track of successful programs or instructional sessions. These records can be a great resource to fall back on when experiencing increased stress or burnout. In the same way, putting together a file of ideas from library colleagues can serve as a backup for librarians who need a break.

Job stress is a reality of life and although librarianship is often seen as a low-stress job, it has plenty of its own unique stressors. Instruction librarians deal with all the stress related to teaching but are often not given the same respect that is awarded to full-time teachers or professors. Many librarians, including instruction librarians, spend much of their time working with the public and like most customer service positions, this requires emotional labor that can be taxing. Librarians have also expressed that they don't always feel prepared by their library schools for the actual work they are expected to do such as teaching for working in a managerial position. On top of this lack of preparation, these librarians are working in a field where they must constantly justify their value to society as news articles predict the end of libraries. While there is no quick solution to these problems, it is important that library employees realize how the professional environment can lead to burnout and learn to manage workplace stress. Whether they do this by seeking to form connections with their colleagues or by allowing themselves time to disconnect from the library world, library professionals must find a way to cope with workplace stress to preserve their mental and emotional well-being.

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