Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Between Graduation and a Brick Wall: Burnout and Mental Illness in New Librarians

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ABSTRACT

New librarians begin work fresh out of graduate school and can often be unprepared for the emotional labor that the profession requires. Because of this, burnout has become common amongst those new to the field, causing both professional and personal difficulties. Similarly, a significant percentage of the population lives with mental illnesses which can affect any and every part of their life. This article reviews the correlation between new librarianship, burnout, and mental illness, and studies opinions and feelings from new librarians currently experiencing these difficulties.

KEYWORDS

new librarians, burnout, mental illness, emotional labor

Introduction

There has always been a feeling of sacredness surrounding libraries—quiet places filled with knowledge, books and resources to aid those who need them, and so on. Similarly, many librarians and library staff workers have described the profession as "a calling," something they were meant to do (Ettarh, 2018). These feelings are idealistic views of what librarians do, and can often be what motivates a person to join the profession. However, idealism is not always reality. On-the-job stressors are many, and dealing with the ever-changing environment only adds to the difficulties. Over the past few years, an increasing number of librarians have been experiencing and reporting occupational burnout. With symptoms similar to depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses, burnout takes a strong toll on individuals; and although it is separate from mental illnesses, they can certainly become comorbid and feed into one another (Koutsimani et al., 2019). New librarians can easily become victims of burnout, as they are still learning their profession and getting to know their environment, while often struggling to meet the preconceived notions they have about librarianship. For new librarians who live with mental illnesses, dealing with a new workplace and its stressors can worsen symptoms and make it more difficult to cope. With an increasingly growing generation of library staff who are experiencing these difficulties on all three fronts, myself included, I wanted to dive in and try to understand possible correlations between the three, see where things currently lie, and investigate strategies that may help librarians in the future to cope with these difficulties and succeed in spite of them.

Discussion

Although there are multiple perspectives on what burnout is, for this column, I'm utilizing the following definition from *Psychology Today*: "a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress" (n.d.). Common symptoms beyond the aforementioned exhaustions include (but are not limited to) a sense of dread about work, cynicism, irritability and dwindling compassion, feeling like one can no longer do their job, and physical symptoms such as headaches, heartburn, and gastrointestinal issues. Although it shares many similarities to standard stress, it is the elongation of these symptoms and difficulties that changes it from stress to burnout (*Psychology Today,* n.d.).

Similarly, I need to set down a concrete definition for mental illnesses/mental health conditions. I'll be using the following definition from NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness: "a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, behavior or mood…[they] deeply impact day-to-day living and may also affect the ability to relate to others" (n.d.). Mental illnesses are varied, and can affect individuals with multiple, diverse symptoms; their one commonality is that they specifically affect an individual's brain. Due to this, many mental illnesses share symptom similarities to burnout, especially when the mental illness also affects the person physically, and the two can easily cohabitate (Koutsimani et al., 2019).

Why discuss these two concepts in terms of librarianship, then? There are stressors at every job, and people of all walks of life can be diagnosed with mental illnesses. What's the importance of talking about this regarding new librarians and library professionals? To start, there is very little accessible research done specifically regarding the effects of mental illness on librarians. And although burnout is a common phenomenon, research tends to focus on stress as opposed to burnout—the shorter-term issues versus prolonged ones. Each article also tends to focus on only one type of librarian—academic librarians, reference librarians, children's librarians, etc. However, there is also one major part of librarianship that ties all these aspects together and makes this discussion important: emotional labor.

Emotional labor is the act of controlling and regulating emotion and emotional expression as part of one's job, often masking how one actually feels in order to complete a job, task, or interaction in the way that one's workplace wants and/or requires. It's most common in public-facing jobs, where there is a great deal of one-on-one interaction between the customer and worker (Grandey, 2022). Library staff are often expected to always "express positive emotions and suppress negative ones," no matter what they're actually feeling, to create a positive feeling in the library (Christian, 2015). Although this sounds like a given for any public-facing job, that doesn't mean it's easy or something that new librarians are always prepared to do. As many librarians are coming to the job right out of library school, their minds are fresh with what they've learned; however library schools rarely address emotional labor, so new librarians may be unprepared for this aspect of their careers (Christian, 2015).

Emotional labor often isn't the only thing that surprises new librarians. It may take time for them to learn their library's policies and practices, or to understand exactly what their role is in the library and what duties that role or position entails (Larrivee, 2014). They may want to jump into new things; however they may not know what boundaries they may be overstepping, or if they'd be doing somebody else's job. On the other hand, there may be aspects of their job that they're supposed to do that they weren't made aware of. The pressure of not knowing everything can compound with the pressure that patrons provide; especially since in many cases, the patrons are coming from a negative place—not understanding, feeling frustrated, or just having a bad day. And since the library profession is often "time-bound and interruptible," a new librarian may not get the time they need to sit down and process (Knibbe-Haanstra, 2008).

Survey and Results

Despite a good deal of research being available for each of the individual matters I was looking into (mental illness, burnout, and new librarianship), there was very little accessible that covered multiple or all of the bases. So I created and dispersed a survey to gather current information from new librarians, and see what those actively in the field are feeling. The survey was geared towards librarians and library professionals who have 5 or fewer years of experience working full-time in the field, whether or not they experienced mental illness or burnout. It was

shared on the ALA Connect forums and through the PUBLIB email listserv. After having it available for just over a month, I received 102 responses.

Just over 52% of the respondents had between 3 and 5 years of library experience, and most in public and/or academic libraries (55.9% and 52.9% respectively; respondents were able to select more than one answer in this category). Most respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 (60.8%) and were primarily female (87.3%).

56.9% of respondents stated that they had a mental illness that was clinically diagnosed, and 22.5% stated that they had a mental illness that was not. Of the 80 who stated they had some form of mental illness, 62.5% listed having anxiety and 56.25% listed having depression, the most common answers overall. The majority of respondents stated that their mental illness affected them some days at home (40%) and at work (48.7%), with most stating that their mental illness had taken more of a strain on them during their library career versus at other careers (41.3%).

The majority of respondents stated that they had experienced burnout during their library career (64.7%) and previously in other careers (67.6%). The most commonly experienced symptoms of burnout among respondents were feelings of being overwhelmed, emotional exhaustion, dreading going to work, irritability, and cynicism. Despite these high numbers of burnout, 51% of respondents said that their workplaces had not offered any assistance or solutions to deal with burnout. Of those that said their work had offered this, most said it was only somewhat helpful (43.1%) or not at all (37.3%).

Analysis

One of the most critical factors discovered in these results is the ratio of people experiencing difficulties versus people receiving useful support. 64.7% of respondents reported experiencing burnout, but only 35.4% reported that the library they worked at offered solutions or tried to help alleviate it. An additional 11.46% stated mixed opinions on if the library offered help or not, one stating that "library leadership is supportive… the college not so much," and another mentioning that "people are too busy to support one another." Within those who said the library attempted solutions, only 5.9% stated that the solutions were helpful. The majority said that they were not helpful at all (43.1%) or at minimum somewhat helpful (37.3%). So even in cases where libraries are making attempts at solutions, they appear to be half-hearted at best, harmful at worst. One respondent explained that "[professional development] helped me to realize that what I was feeling was not normal and that I should relax more. But they did not provide ways to accomplish that." Frequently these solutions appear to be closer to "two steps forward, one step back" than providing any actual assistance.

So, what has worked and what hasn't? Multiple respondents mentioned their workplace implementing an EAP (Employee Assistance Program), which is considered a "work-based

intervention program" which aims to assist the employee in personal and interpersonal matters, including substance misuse, physical and mental wellness matters, and workplace challenges, among other topics (SHRM, n.d.). However, there were mixed views on whether the EAP was of any help or not. Similarly, mental health webinars and workshops were met with mixed opinions, though were mostly negative. One respondent explained that the workshop their library held was "super uncomfortable and corporate," and another said that the webinar only made them angrier about their situation.

Multiple respondents reported that their coworkers were the biggest help. One explained that their coworkers were empathetic because they'd gone through similar situations, another stated that their coworkers encouraged them to take mental health days, and a third said they started attending therapy to work on their mental health based on coworkers' advice. A few mentioned that supervisors were also supportive and flexible, which benefited them.

Another set of common responses was regarding scheduling. One respondent reported "generous sick leave for mental health wellness days" and a flexible schedule. Three mentioned remote working days being available, and a number of others mentioned having a few mental health days available to them, although their numbers seemed to be limited to one or two in many cases. There was no general consensus if these were helpful or not, however; respondents just mentioned that they were available.

Unfortunately, a large number of responses were negative. Many responses mentioned shallow, unhelpful, or more irritating forms of "assistance," some of which only made things worse. One respondent explained, "My workplace's solution to burnout is always "just do less", which is hard because I feel like the work I'm doing is necessary and important... When I'm told to drop projects that are important to me, it feels like my professional goals aren't as valuable as those of more experienced librarians, because their projects fit with the current (sometimes outdated) system." Another stated that their workplace "did a webinar about being happy in our jobs because 'the grass isn't always greener' if you look for or go to a new job. It only succeeded in making me angrier about the situation." Finally, a third summed up many of the responses received, saying: "[The assistance offered is] the usual 'individual solution for systemic problem' nonsense packaged under 'self care'."

What Can Be Done?

As stated by one respondent, many issues that create burnout are systemic, and don't always come from a place that individual librarians can control. This can make things even more frustrating for new librarians who may be unfamiliar with the stressors that can appear on the job or what their library can do to help them, and may not know coping skills that they can use to help themselves and others and when the library system doesn't offer anything beneficial. In many cases, new librarians are not aware of what the root of the stressors are, and what points

in the library system are ultimately causing these problems, leaving even less opportunities to solve them.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to force change in the system. Some library stakeholders, especially those who have been ingrained in their ways and opinions for extended periods of time, can cause difficulty and prevent changes. Advocating for change in the system is good, however when faced with pushback, it can cause even more burnout and fatigue, so it has to be done with care and preparation in mind. One of the most important things to have on this front is a group effort. Uniting with colleagues who all want the same change and have the same goal not only spreads out the effort and work that is needed, but can showcase to the organization that this is something multiple employees are pushing for.

Having a support system and sounding board is also vital for individual librarians dealing with burnout and mental illness. Developing positive and friendly relationships with colleagues has been shown to be beneficial to new librarians, not only as a form of mentorship, but also to better integrate into the work culture (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). This can alleviate the feeling of being unsure of one's position and duties, give new librarians people they can go to with questions, and make the work day easier. They can also be there to offer help when needed, or can be people a new librarian can go to when they need help. The most important aspect of an in-work support system, however, is having a place at work where you can feel safe and open about your experiences (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). On top of this, just the knowledge that colleagues are also going through some of the same difficulties you are, whether burnout or mental health related, can make coping with them easier, or allow the sharing of coping skills. The combination of emotional backup (having someone there to understand your situation) and physical backup (having someone who can step up and assist with tasks) can be extremely beneficial.

A 2014 study of stress amongst librarians expressed that the profession will never be 100% stress-free. However, one of the most important ways to cope with this is to "create a system for helping librarians to deal with the stress in a more constructive way, or to reduce and eliminate unnecessary stressors which can effectively be addressed" (Jordan, 2014). According to the study, this should involve open and clear communication between staff, administration, and other library stakeholders (such as board members and/or the local public), having properly trained administrative and managerial staff, and analyzing stressful tasks in order to make them easier to manage, among other matters that are specific to each library's situation.

Despite the growing number of individuals living with mental illnesses, there are still major stigmas surrounding them, especially for those working in professional fields. The belief that mental illness makes one unable to work, or unable to work with the same success rate as someone without a mental illness, has been around for decades, and still pervades work culture. Library administration should work towards removing that stigma by increasing awareness and

advocacy for library staff and members of the public dealing with mental illnesses. Some research has stated that having administrators and managerial staff attend mental health training or workshops has helped reduce institutional stigma and given those in charge better resources and ideas of how to help their staff (Burns & Green, 2019). This can aid in creating a better work environment for librarians with mental illnesses, and can in turn assist patrons in similar situations. The most important thing in this situation is to ensure that the administrative and managerial staff are doing this training. Although it can be helpful for staff in some situations, if those in charge aren't receiving the training, it will be increasingly difficult to make the change that is actually needed.

Conclusion

There is far from one easy solution to aid librarians with burnout and mental illnesses. Each situation is different—from the library the individual works at to the degree of difficulty they have. Because of this, each person has different opinions on what might work and what might not from the next; while one person may be able to cope significantly better just by having colleagues to rely on, another might not be able to until administrative staff are able to get a better understanding of their situation and offer accommodations. The routes to possible solutions that I mentioned are generalized and flexible, allowing for personal preference and necessity to be added onto any of them. They are also by no means the only solutions; there are almost certainly solutions that work for certain people that were not brought up through the survey or research performed. However, they are a start.

Both burnout and mental illness exist with a number of stigmas surrounding them, and are commonly misunderstood, just the same as individuals who live with them. In a field where emotional labor is half the battle, these conditions can be exacerbated and worsened. As librarians know all too well, education is the base of progress, and education on burnout and mental illness can be what starts to reduce the stigmas. As stigmas start to fade and research continues to be done, people will become more aware of ways to help and ways to heal.

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