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Library Burnout: It's Common and Okay to Admit!

As I sit to write this article, the circumstances are far from what I imagined when I first thought of the topic: Illinois is responding to a stay-at-home executive order from our governor, and most of our libraries are in some sense closed. If librarians are working, they are working from home, and that work is not necessarily looking like their typical work. Is this even the time to talk about burnout, when so many of us are feeling uncertain, scared, and stressed? Ultimately, it is okay to acknowledge job uncertainty and fear, and even job (dis)satisfaction, even under these present conditions, especially if we want to ever address job satisfaction when we get back to whatever "normal" looks like when we finally get back to our libraries. Burnout is common and normal. Openly discussing such concepts will help us to be better professionals, better managers and colleagues, and better able to serve our users.

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WHAT IS BURNOUT?

First, what is burnout, and why is it a problem?

On the December 7, 2018 episode of the podcast "Stuff Mom Never Told You," host Anney Reese and guest co-host Alison Green (of popular management/work-life advice column "Ask a Manager") discussed burnout and how to work to prevent it. Green defined burnout as being a very particular type of stress that causes the sufferer to feel physically and emotionally drained and unable to perform at work at the same rate that they had been able to in the past. Burnout results from a long and sustained time of stress and pressure and high workload. However, it is important to note that even though burnout is usually related to the workplace, it can also occur as a result of other stressful life activities, such as caring for children or aging parents, especially if one has such responsibilities on top of a full-time job. Burnout is literally feeling stretched thin.

Factors related to burnout include having unreasonable expectations, having an overwhelming and unsustainable workload, having trauma somehow associated with work, being disengaged from the work, passive-aggressive workplaces, and poor work-life culture. Additional factors can be poor communication, ineffective management, or unassertive workers (who may not be communicating their own ideas or needs). Additional factors to consider may be feeling overqualified for a position, or perhaps simply being in the same position for a very long time (a "dead end" for example). In the article "Workplace Engagement of Librarians and Library Staff," Jason Martin discusses engagement (which might be understood to be the opposite of burnout) within libraries. He states, "Levels of engagement and years of experience are negatively correlated, meaning the longer someone has worked at an organization the less engaged they will be" (25).

BURNOUT CONSEQUENCES

Burnout has very real consequences. Individuals experiencing burnout may feel cynical and pessimistic about their work and feel that their efforts are ineffective. They may lack motivation in the workplace and feel frustrated, which can lead to mistakes. Those mistakes are, of course, bad for the workplace: When someone is feeling burnout, the workplace suffers. Burned-out workers are less engaged, and they are more likely to be looking to leave. But burned-out workers don't just make the workplace "sick," they themselves can display physical ailments. People with burnout have reported feeling stressed, catching more colds, having heart issues, headaches, and GI problems. Burnout affects the individual, the workplace, and ripples out to the economy. When people feel burned out, their friends and family will start to feel the effects. Burnout is a problem for the individual, the workplace, and society.

BURNOUT PREVENTION

Burnout is clearly not good for anyone, then, and if it can be prevented, then it should be. However, preventing burnout comes from the individual as well as the workplace. On a personal level, individuals need to be able to recognize that they are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or overly self-critical and then find a way to take a step back, to examine those feelings and try to figure out the causes and ways to cope. Burnout is a trap of one's own making: When someone is suffering from burnout, they need to figure out appropriate boundaries to draw and then stick to them. Examples of boundaries include working only scheduled hours (not working on evenings, weekends, or vacations) and giving oneself time for breaks. Other coping mechanisms can include having a social support network, getting exercise, and getting enough sleep. The important takeaway is that when suffering from burnout, people should not try to then work even harder: Don't lean into burnout.

When we notice burnout in our coworkers or in our family and friends, it is important to acknowledge it. Burnout is common, and it is okay to talk about those feelings with others. When one recognizes burnout in oneself, one possible action is to look for new employment. Each individual needs to decide this for themselves, of course, but might want to especially consider it when all other options (setting boundaries, communicating needs and problems) have failed, or when some circumstance in the workplace is simply untenable (harassment that goes unaddressed by management, for example, or incompetent management).

TIPS FOR MANAGEMENT

In the workplace, managers need to invest in their staff in order to help prevent burnout. That investment includes paying attention to workload for staff as well as clear and open communication. That communication is a key element, as staff need to feel that they can bring their work issues to management before it becomes that much worse—good management cares about how staff are coping with work and work/life balance and good management wants workers to feel satisfied with their work.

In their excellent book, The Dysfunctional Library, authors Jo Henry, Joe Eshleman, and Richard Moniz state that, based on a study that they conducted, the greatest stressor for librarians seems to be overall workload (12). When we know how harmful burnout can be for the whole workplace, this is a clear indication that management needs to be attuned to staff needs. The Dysfunctional Library states, "one author suggests having candid discussions about workload to address interruptions, which many librarians face. Scheduling staff to allow them to be more centrally focused on a single task or cluster of tasks would go a long way to alleviating burnout."

In "How to Spot Burn-Out on Your Team—Before It's Too Late," the aforementioned Alison Green discusses ways to recognize burnout among workers: work decreasing in quality, signs of exhaustion, drop in enthusiasm and being generally more emotional. Green states that the ways to support burned-out employees include helping them to reprioritize work and encouraging them to take time off. But Green also encourages managers to look to themselves when they notice burnout among staff: Is the manager's behavior the cause of the burnout? Green encourages managers to be "brutally honest" with themselves about their management style and whether it causes tension and stress or is insensitive to the needs of staff.

BURNOUT AMONG LIBRARIANS?

Burnout is not a shameful topic, but it often feels like a secret to hide. And perhaps library workers especially feel as if their burnout needs to be concealed: We tend to think of our professional as a noble, helping profession and, at the same time, the more stressful elements (problem patrons or coworkers, for example) are not well represented or understood in the larger society, making us feel as if we somehow haven't earned the right to feel burnout.

Nevertheless, many librarians and library workers do suffer from burnout. Acknowledging and discussing our burnout issues can help us better contend with these feelings and therefore serve our patrons better. Tim Ribaric, a librarian at Brock University in Ontario, Canada, runs the lis_grievances Twitter account, which is a bot account where posters can anonymously post their com-

plaints about working in their libraries. These complaints are posted verbatim, and Ribaric states that he thinks that library workers see posting to the account as a way of "screaming into the void"—a kind of catharsis. Lis_grievances gives posters an outlet for complaining in a way that it cannot be traced back to their own accounts. This indicates that as a profession we do tend to sublimate our feelings of discontent. But Ribaric also points out that those who post to this account are complaining specifically because they care so much—pretending that there are no problems in libraries ever doesn't actually help solve problems.

In order to illustrate what burnout might look or feel like in Illinois libraries, I put out a call on the IACRL listserv, through the HSLI discussion list, and other places in order to inquire if anyone would be willing to discuss their own burnout experiences with me under conditions of complete anonymity. I asked respondents the following questions:

1) What do you understand burnout to mean?

2) How did you recognize that you were feeling burnout?

3) What do you think "made" you feel burnout? What do you attribute your burnout to?

4) How did you feel after you recognized that you had burnout?

5) What actions have you taken to combat your feelings of burnout?

6) What advice would you give colleagues across the state regarding burnout?

The information supplied by respondents is completely anecdotal: the information gathered from them was not systematic enough or in high enough numbers (the input of 5 people is included here) or varied enough in types of libraries that extrapolation to the larger profession is possible. But discussing the general replies to these questions is nonetheless useful, if only to get a better understanding of what burnout looks like for some librarians.

Respondents all spoke of burnout being a feeling of frustration and negativity in the workplace. Words such as "apathy," "depression," "overwhelmed," and "tiredness" were used. Respondents talked about realizing that they had burnout when they began feeling unmotivated in the workplace: coming in later, getting distracted, feeling resistant to coming in or to getting work done. A respondent discussed feeling impatient with tasks and people, including patrons. Respondents spoke of feeling tired and having no energy, both at work and in their home lives.

When respondents contemplated the causes of their burnout, it is varied: Respondents talked about toxic work environments, bullying in the workplace, abusive or incompetent management, overly emotionally involved workplaces, and a lack of opportunities for growth. Several respondents referred to the current pandemic, as that is certainly adding to all of our stress levels.

Respondents were able to recognize their burnout based on feelings on their general feelings of depression and anxiety. Once they recognized their feelings of burnout, respondents described feeling relief at being able to recognize what was wrong, since identifying the problem helped them to identify potential solutions. Unfortunately, relief was not a universal feeling—some respondents reported feelings of guilt and feelings of weakness for not being able to handle their stress. However, respondents also reported channeling these feelings of guilt into motivation to take actions to change their circumstances by finding new work.

In order to combat their burnout, respondents described a variety of self-care activities: spending time with pets, making time for hobbies, exercising, and talking about work issues with others, including therapy. Respondents also talked about the need to set boundaries at work and several touched on the importance of knowing when to find a new job.

Finally, respondents advise others who may be suffering from burnout to recognize it for what it is and think about what you can and cannot control; consider finding a new job if that is possible. Give yourself time for self-care and for rest and fun. A respondent advises for others to not feel ashamed and to openly communicate in the workplace as much as possible—if you are feeling burnout, so might others in your library.

Conclusion

The experiences of librarians who have reported feeling burnout align with the way burnout is described by professionals. Burnout is common: many librarians in Illinois as well as other states experience it, as well as members of other professions, everywhere. Especially during COVID-19, we all need to take stock of our emotions and feelings and make time to check in with ourselves and give ourselves time to decompress. It is also important to check in with one another. Burnout mirrors much of what we are all feeling right now, anyway. But for this reason, librarians and library workers need to be comfortable talking about and addressing burnout. Desiring job satisfaction is not selfish, nor is wanting a healthy workplace. When we are happier and more fulfilled with our jobs, we ourselves are happier and healthier, and we are better able to give back to the workplace and to our patrons: it's a winning solution all around.

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