

Reducing Library-related Stress Holistically

by

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I find it surprising how much of our lives we spend holding our breath. Something as fundamentally and biologically necessary as breathing becomes interrupted when faced with a constant deluge of meetings, scheduling, difficult reference questions, more meetings, and, of course, e-mail. Yet in the midst of this daily torrent of information, I sense an immediate relaxation when I do something as simple and normal as breathing. Deep breathing is a holistic act in that it positively affects the whole body, mind and soul. I will share other practical, holistic strategies that I use to help manage stress in my daily role as an academic reference librarian.

Dealing with Technostress

As early adopters, librarians are especially susceptible to what's known as "technostress" — increases in stress caused by trying to keep up with rapidly changing technologies. On his expansive and informative website regarding job-related stress for librarians, John Kupersmith discusses some of the factors that contribute to technostress. The fact that librarians, perhaps by nature, constantly seek to create order out of chaos can also lead to feeling of being overwhelmed by a geyser of information that is simply too difficult to keep up with. Sometimes this can lead to frustration and, ultimately, anger.

Rather than approaching new technologies with trepidation, it may help to adopt a more playful attitude when dealing with new "toys." Wikipedia, for example, even refers to their practice area as a "sandbox." This sense of play seems to be weaned from us before we enter the workplace; yet those workers who rate themselves as happiest consistently describe their work as enjoyable, something they look forward to rather than avoid.

Awareness: Recognizing "The Spark before the Flame"

The Buddhist tradition has recognized and applied the power of meditation for thousands of years. Indeed, more recently, neuroscientists have empirically demonstrated the stress-reducing benefits that coincide with a regular meditation practice.

According to Devin Zimmerman's excellent article, librarians who take a few moments to meditate, breathe, and focus on the reference transaction at hand will emerge from their workday less stressed and feeling more empowered. Library patrons will also appreciate the increased attention to their reference questions. An unfortunate byproduct of this approach could be longer lines at the reference desk. As patrons become more accustomed to finding information online instantaneously, the strange feeling of

having to wait to have their query answered may cause some consternation. Still, the end result of gaining the complete focus and attention of a reference librarian could be a welcome reward for their patience.

Many Buddhists who practice meditation maintain that it helps them recognize stressors before they become frustrated or angry. In Buddhist parlance, those who regularly meditate tend to recognize “the spark before the flame” and can therefore consciously prevent unhealthy emotional stress.

Move

Being chained to a desk is a surefire way to increase your stress levels and adversely affect your overall health. It is important to integrate movement into your job in a holistic way, rather than solely in a regimented, scheduled manner. While it is commendable to have that 5:30 pm treadmill session three days a week, it is also important to train yourself to get up away from your desk whenever possible. A simple strategy is helping patrons find books. Instead of simply pointing to a map, I make an attempt to move away from the reference desk whenever possible and walk to the location. Of course, this depends on staffing and whether a line has formed at the reference desk. But when it is possible, I find this small act of movement is beneficial for the mind and the body (not to mention the fact that patrons often appreciate the extra effort, which can further offset negative stressors).

Towards Harmony and Balance

Just as our profession has a set of core professional values, it may be helpful for librarians to adopt a personal set of core values to deal with the slings and arrows we face. Librarianship is a uniquely stressful avocation, particularly in this digital age, and I have found it helpful to evaluate my actions within a philosophical structure. For some, this involves a relationship with a religious group. For others, it may be a combination of personal service philosophy and meeting with a group of like-minded colleagues (such as a reading group). Indeed, there are limitless ways to inculcate core values. When work seems to be spiraling into chaos, these values can often be helpful in regaining a sense of balance.

It is rare to achieve a noticeable reduction in stress overnight. But it is possible to make progress with a steady degree of effort. Simple holistic steps like deep breathing, remembering to move, and adopting a sense of mindfulness at the reference desk can go a long way toward improving your work life. You’ll feel better and those positive vibes will translate into better service for your patrons and healthier relations with your co-workers.

Suggested Reading:

Gorman, Michael. *The Enduring Library: Technology, Tradition and the Quest for Balance*. American Library Association: Chicago, 2003.

Kupersmith, John. "Technostress in Libraries." 2007.

Zimmerman, Devin. "Mindfulness for Librarians." LIScareer.com, March 2005.

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