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Stressors and librarians
How mindfulness can help

Mindfulness has many definitions, depending on context, but most of these focus on maintaining awareness in the present moment and treating ourselves and others with patience and kindness. Librarians seem to be naturally acquisitive and persistent (especially when seeking information) and demonstrate a desire to help others. In fact, one recent review of the literature exploring why individuals pursue an MLIS determined, "The most influential factors were love of books and reading, nature of library work, interesting job, and *desire to help people* [emphasis added]."[1] It was this emphasis on helping others that influenced us to write *The Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship*.[2] Throughout the text we drew upon what we felt were numerous natural connections between the practice of mindfulness and the everyday work of librarians.

As our book was being published in January 2016, we grew increasingly curious about how aware librarians were about mindful practice and what were the greatest stressors within the profession. Most of what we had done to this point had been gathering research about mindfulness and targeting prescriptive applications to various facets of library work (i.e., the organization of our text centers around the various roles that librarians play in providing reference, teaching, leading, etc.). We now felt that we needed to know more about how our colleagues perceived mindfulness and stress, something that was beyond the scope of our original text. As such, we

launched a survey to determine how many librarians in general had been exposed to the concept of mindfulness or had participated in mindful practice, whether various libraries were engaging in specific practices related to mindfulness (relative to both patrons and staff), and, since many proponents of mindfulness emphasize its ability to help manage stress, what were some of the major stressors affecting librarians in 2016.

Our brief survey, which investigated librarian awareness of mindful practice but especially targeted library stressors, was circulated among a wide variety of library listservs.

The survey was not limited to academic librarians, as one item we wanted to explore was possible differences that academic librarians might experience as stressors in comparison to other librarians. In total, 629 librarians completed at least part of the survey. Of those who specified the type of library, 38% (218) came from small academic libraries, 28% (163) came from large academic libraries, 17% (98) came from public libraries, and 17% (99) came

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from school libraries. Representation came from 44 different states, as well as Washington D.C., Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, Puerto Rico, and Dubai.

When asked if they have ever engaged in mindful practice, 78% (436) of those who responded indicated that they had. Perhaps more surprisingly, 26% (119) of those who indicated that they engaged in mindful practice did so for *two hours or more per week*. In a related measure, the survey explored institutional sponsorship of mindfulness-related activity related to place of employment (i.e., by the library or broader institution). Of those who responded to this question, 28% (148) indicated that their institution provided some support or access to mindfulness activities or resources for staff. Likewise, 21% (113) indicated that the library does so for patrons. One of the more common findings was that many libraries are now providing a space that can be used for meditation or even sponsoring mindfulness activities.

Embedded below are some simple recommendations for becoming more mindful based on what factors were determined to be the most stressful aspects of library work. Of those who responded to what their highest stressor was, 38% indicated overall workload. For example, some elaborated with comments such as "added demands for time with less help," "too many expectations for time," "not enough time, not enough staff," and "too much work for too few people." Interestingly, third on the overall stressor list was instructional overload, with 9% of respondents indicating this as their major stressor.

It was decided to separate these data points from overall workload issues due to the nature of the comments. For example, common statements included "teaching load in information literacy classes," "our teaching load increases, and we don't have enough competent instructional librarians," and "conducting library instruction classes." Both of these categories seem to indicate that academic libraries could benefit greatly from professional development that focuses on issues such as time management. It would also seem that LIS education and continuing education could do well to focus more on improving the instruction skills of librarians, since they are doing so much of it.

Coming in second on our list of high stressors was each other. Fourteen percent of those who responded to the question about stressors indicated that they experience the greatest amount of stress *interacting with other library staff*. Common comments included items such as "working with difficult personalities," "dealing with co-workers," "interacting with co-workers, "hostile co-workers," "other staff members," and "working in groups." Surely all workplaces have conflict and issues in this regard, but the fact that so many librarians listed it as a top stressor seems to indicate more could be done towards building a healthier workplace through activities such as mindfulness or emotional intelligence. Staff workshops could be structured to work with individuals and their specific needs and also on team building within the group.

Patrons were yet another high ranking stressor for some librarians. We weren't especially surprised by this finding. While many come to the profession because of a desire to help others, working with patrons in any library can be challenging. Eight percent of the respondents who listed a high stressor chose patrons. It was clear from the responses, however, that it wasn't just any patron that caused stress. Some indicative responses were "finding empathy for patrons who immediately disrespect the library and its workers," "dealing with irate patrons," "dealing with problem patrons," and "mean, rude patrons." Another layer related to a combination of helping patrons while handling a heavy workload. One response indicative of other similar statements was "difficult patron interactions and juggling too many tasks." Again, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and the ability to remain calm in these situations are all items that could be the focus of staff development.

While we did not see many differences between libraries on stressors, it should be noted that ten academic librarians (nine coming from large academic libraries) noted the

need to publish as their major stress (none of the other librarian groups listed this as a concern). One last notable concern that found its way into comments made by librarian of all types, however, was budgets. Again, this is probably not a big surprise to those of us in the profession that libraries are having to do more with less.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of the survey have proven to bear out interesting points as we look forward to more studies and conversations about librarians, librarian stressors, and mindfulness. As noted above, most librarians have at least some minimal connection to mindfulness, and a significant minority appear to be regular practitioners. Our book explores very specific ways that the work that librarians do can relate to mindfulness. For example, RUSA's "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers"[3] can be very readily connected to "mindful behavior," such as being in the moment with patrons. There are many simple and easy things, however, that we can all do right away. Taken from our text they are as follows:

• "Just breathe." This is the simplest and easiest thing we can do to get back in the present. It seems obvious, but we often do not take the time to just catch our breath.

• "Consider mindfully doing chores." It may seem silly, but instead of just blasting through things that "need to get done" there is value in paying closer attention and just accepting that we are doing them.

• "Pay attention to your senses." So often we ignore interesting or pleasant surroundings because we are wrapped in other thoughts.

• "Don't over commit your time." Easier said than done, right? Still, many times we do often say yes to a project or assignment when we know that we are already overwhelmed.

• "Spend time in nature." This goes along with paying attention to our surroundings, but we feel it should get its own bullet point.

• "Be thankful." Being thankful is a great practice for developing a more mindful state of being.

• "Be aware of your thoughts." With mindfulness it becomes especially important to be aware of negative thoughts and not beat ourselves up about the past or obsessively worry about the future.

• "Choose to start your day." Try to set aside a few moments to wake up and not rush into your daily routine. We know this is often easier said than done but do believe it can be helpful.[4]

• "Commit to listening to those around you." Steven Covey framed this expertly by explaining that we should first seek to understand and only then to be understood.[5]

Remember, the important thing is to be kind and patient with yourself. If you can't do that then it can be hard to be present and caring with the other people you interact with and serve.

Notes

1. Valentini Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, Evgenia Vassilakaki, and Anna Tsatsaroni, "Choice of Library and Information Science in a Rapidly Changing Information Landscape: A Systematic Literature Review," *Library Management* 36, no.8/9 (2015): 602.

2. Richard Moniz, Joe Eshleman, Jo Henry, Lisa Moniz, and Howard Slutzky, T*he Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship, (*Waltham, MA: Chandos, 2016).

3. Reference and User Services Association, "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," accessed August 18, 2016, www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral

4. Adapted from Janice Marturano, "5 Tips for Practicing Mindfulness at the Office," *Mindful Magazine* (online), www.mindful.org/5-tips-for-practicing-mindfulness-at-the-office

5. Stephen Covey as cited in Richard Moniz, Joe Eshleman, Jo Henry, Lisa Moniz, and Howard Slutzky, *The Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship (*Waltham, MA: Chandos, 2016), 22–23. ✍