

Insights and Practical Tips on Practicing Mindful Librarianship to Manage Stress

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Abstract

Mindfulness practice has tremendous potential to help librarians manage work-related stress and improve the quality of our library services. Librarians are trained to effectively manage a fast changing information and technology environment, and to enable others to succeed and thrive in a 21st century knowledge society. However, such rapid technological change, combined with economic uncertainty, changing user habits and ever-evolving models of library service, can exact a human toll. Ever-increasing demands, having to “do more with less” and constant multitasking can make us feel time-starved, spending our energy worrying about the past and projecting into the future. Chronic stress and burnout can result. Mindfulness practice has much to offer to allay this state of “mindlessness” and bring us back to a balanced, healthy state. It trains us to: 1) be present, nonjudgmentally, in the moment; 2) focus on simplicity in all things; 3) adopt and maintain a “beginner’s mind”; and 4) practice lovingkindness and compassion on a daily basis. Such mindfulness techniques as breathing, meditation, and the practice of yoga and Tai Chi are powerful ways that we as librarians can begin to incorporate mindfulness in our daily lives, enabling us to provide library services with a spirit of engagement, joy, and fulfillment.

What is mindfulness?

“The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it.” -
Thich Nhat Hanh (1992, p 21).

Mindfulness is a state of being aware, focused and present in the moment. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts, explains that “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” He notes that attending in this way “nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality” (1994, p. 4). Mindfulness enhances our capacity to limit reactivity to challenging experiences: to notice, observe, and experience bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings in all their variety; to act and engage with awareness and attention; and to focus on experience, not on the labels or judgments applied to them.

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Mindfulness has been called the heart of Buddhist meditation and can be traced back some 2,500 years. An ever-growing body of research on mindfulness indicates that bringing one's attention to the present moment can be a tool to manage and decrease stress, improve mood, and even promote healing. Techniques for achieving mindfulness have been explored widely (Hanh, 1991; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Kornfield, 2008; ; Salzberg, 2010). Centers for Mindfulness training and practice can be found across the U.S., including the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society; the University of California-Los Angeles' Mindful Awareness Research Center; and the Shamantha Project based at the University of California-Davis.

In the last ten years, mindfulness has been the focus of an explosion of literature, both scholarly and popular. Mindfulness as a concept and practice is frequently found in the medical and psychology scholarly literature, and is also being researched and analyzed in management, education, counseling and the fine arts. The benefits of mindfulness practice have not been lost to the library world, either; librarian Devin Zimmerman, in his influential article "Mindfulness for Librarians," makes a compelling case for incorporating the practice into librarianship. He (2005, np) writes that in the absence of mindfulness "...we fail to give ourselves over completely to the moment—the reference interview, the question being asked, the catalog record, etc. ” Louisa Toot (2002), in her article "Zen and the Art of Dealing with the Difficult Patron," explores Zen Buddhist principles and approaches as strategies for dealing with difficult patrons. In her article, she addresses the four basic Zen tenets, openness, mindfulness, compassion, and beginner's mind, and how they can be incorporated into one's work in positive, productive ways that can enhance library services. We will build and elaborate on the work of these writers and others to further build a case for the benefits of mindfulness and to plant the seed for an everyday practice for librarians.

Managing Work Stress through mindfulness techniques

"Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths)." (Hillesum, Smelik, & Pomerans, 2002, p. 305).

Librarians are currently faced with formidable stressors in their day to day professional lives. These include ever-declining budgets and the requisite need to do more with less; rapid technological change; information overload; and continually redefined professional roles and models of librarianship. As librarianship is a service profession, it is important that we grapple and deal productively with stressors to avoid burnout and disengagement from our constituencies and our profession. Mindfulness practice can be a powerful tool for librarians in managing and reducing stress. Key components of mindfulness practice include: 1) being present, nonjudgmentally, in the moment; 2) focusing on simplicity in all things; 3) adopting a "beginner's mind"; and 4) practicing lovingkindness (or *metta*) and compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1995). Through a purposeful and habitual mindfulness practice, librarians can continually refresh and renew ourselves. Further, we can serve students, faculty and other library constituencies with full focus and engagement, an open and accepting mind, and with energy and intention focused on a positive outcome.

A variety of mindfulness techniques can help library staff work through stress and anxiety, whether they are providing “front line” services at the reference desk or providing “back room” technical services. Simply paying attention to the breath and the act of breathing is a technique that can be practiced anytime, anywhere. Structured breathing techniques, (such as *pranayama* in the yogic tradition) can also be employed. These not only focus our awareness on the present, but are a powerful relaxation technique. Mindful breathing allows us to refocus our attention. One may try to time this exercise with the conclusion of a phone call, or at the top of the hour. There is no need to alter one’s breathing pattern, just focus on the in-breath, pause, and out-breath. Be aware of sensations that occur and acknowledge them. Alternatively, one might want to focus on diaphragmatic breathing, and the rise and fall of the abdomen, making use of full lung capacity.

A regular meditation practice (i.e., the traditional sitting meditation, walking meditation), and mindful movement practices such as yoga, Tai Chi, and Qi Gong are powerful ways to incorporate mindfulness into daily life. Walking meditation, for example, is easily incorporated into our work day. At the library we typically walk with a purpose, to go to a meeting, a service point, or a co-worker’s office. During a walking meditation, one does not focus on the destination but rather the process. One might notice the surroundings, or the sensation of the muscles in one’s feet and legs that make strides possible. Through these simple exercises we can learn to let go of our many thoughts and feelings, and bring our awareness into the moment.

Better librarianship through being present

“If we are not fully ourselves, truly in the present moment, we miss everything.”
“When walking, walk. When eating, eat.” Thich Nhat Hanh (1992, p. 43)

Mindfulness can be a powerful tool to improve the quality of library service. Librarians especially feel the pull of the multitasking demons throughout the day. Multitasking may work when one is puttering around the house, flitting from one activity to the other, where the stakes are low and there is no harm in skimming the surface of thoughts, of functioning on autopilot. However, when we are assisting a student with a research assignment that is critical to his success in a course, when we are teaching a library instruction session, and when we are selecting resources that students need, we want and need to be fully engaged and present. According to Appelbaum, Marchionni, and Fernandez (2008), the prevalence of multitasking is in part through the easy access to information and technologies. They note that multitasking “decreases task performance by increasing task completion times” (p. 1321). While productivity may have increased in recent decades, but at what cost? Stress, frequency of error, lack of concentration and creativity have been associated with multitasking (p. 1321).

Devin Zimmerman (2005, np) notes that mindfulness is “simply playing attention to what you’re doing. Not thinking about what you did yesterday or what you have to do later. Just what you’re doing right now.” Being in the present moment, free of judgment, can help us become better librarians and co-workers. When we observe and are aware of our feelings, emotions and actions, we can be fully present. Every moment deserves our full attention; when we are mindful in our interactions with others, we can fully take in and process all the contextual information related to that interaction. In the medical literature, mindfulness has been viewed as an antidote to physician burnout and depersonalization of patients: “this quality of being present for the physicians included an understanding of their patients as not merely objects of care but as unique

and fellow humans and an awareness of the patients' (and their own) emotions, often brought out during challenging clinical encounters" (Krasner, Epstein, Beckman, Suchman, Chapman, Mooney, & Quill 2009, p. 1285). Libraries frequently conduct patron use studies, many of which include listening intently to our users through focus groups, surveys, and ethnographic observations. When librarians mindfully focus and listen to their users' responses, revisioning, new services, and processes can be developed to aid not only the user experience, but also workflow (Foster & Gibbons, 2007; Hunter & Ward, 2011, McNeil & Giesecke, 2002).

Librarians are by nature multitaskers; at the reference desk, we often will split our time and energy between helping students with their research questions (whether in-person, via text message, or by phone), prepping for an upcoming library instruction session, handling collection development work, catching up on professional reading, and checking e-mail. Technical services librarians also multitask between cataloging or acquisitions work, supervising staff, contacting vendors, and working with liaison librarians and academic departments. During a reference transaction, a librarian's mind might wander, pondering the best resources for the patron even before the reference interview is completed. Doing this draws the attention away from the present moment. Zimmerman (2005) talks about focusing one's mind on a current task by "weeding" one's thoughts. When one's mind begins to wander from the task at hand, jumps from idea to idea, or coasts on autopilot, that is an opportunity to focus on the breath and on the task at hand. We have all experienced the "monkey mind" syndrome—thoughts flitting in and out of our minds, various narratives that reflect what we have experienced or might experience in the future, and conversations we have had or hope to have. Mindfulness, specifically mindfulness meditation, trains one to still that monkey mind, or at least to slow it down. The practice of controlled breathing is one powerful way to achieve this, along with a meditation practice. When we study meditation with a teacher or guide, we are constantly reminded to let thoughts come into our minds, to acknowledge and accept them, but ultimately to let them go. We may go through many cycles of thoughts coming and then leaving us; experienced meditators are able to achieve a more predictable state where the mind remains open and still. In a reference interaction, strengthening one's ability to focus the mind and opening perceptions allows one to better understand the reference query, make better decisions based on accurate intake of information, and communicate information and guidance with intention and compassion.

Change is one of life's universal truths. In an age of reorganizations, reassignments, and technological evolution, one can easily be overwhelmed. The May 2012 issue of *Shambhala Sun* is dedicated to the topic of change. Lordo Rinzler (2012) discusses intentional change, and the difficulties it poses. For example, only eight percent of Americans keep their New Year's Resolutions. One must make a conscious intention for personal change to happen. However, when change is thrust upon a person, that is a different matter. We can only control our actions to a situation. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your job, try making a list of everything you cannot or are unable to control at work. A list of what one can control should also be compiled. Looking at your lists, reflect on how you interact with other staff and organizations to provide service to your community. If you are still feeling overly critical, try librarian Char Booth's three question reflection exercise (2011, p. 19): ask what worked, what did not work, and whether your goals were achieved. This allows one to document observations immediately

after a task, and provides documentation for reflection. Focus on those strengths and on the present moment.

Being in the present moment allows one to completely focus on a single task at a time. However, one sometimes needs a little help to get everything done during the day that is demanded of us. At times, we can feel overwhelmed with tasks swimming around in our minds. Productivity methods such as the Pomodoro Technique and Getting Things Done can help one to focus and manage one's workload. The Pomodoro Technique is reminiscent of mindfulness in the idea of breaking things down into smaller segments that can be accomplished (Cirillo, 2009). Just as a beginner would not start meditating with a daylong silent retreat, one should approach the work day with smaller tasks. The system is simple: one sets a timer for twenty-five minutes and focuses on a specific task. When the timer goes off, one takes a five minute break, and then repeats the process for four iterations, gradually increasing the break time to recharge. The five minute break can be used to focus on one's breath or a short walking meditation. By the end, one should have a good portion of a large project completed. Getting Things Done (GTD), developed by David Allen, focuses on triaging tasks and thoughts into an organized system. Each item is then given a priority and assigned an approximate time to accomplish. The idea is that shorter projects should be done first, and larger ones will be broken down into smaller pieces. Through single-minded tasks, the feeling of being overwhelmed will diminish and increase one's capacity to process and act upon new information. It also helps redirect the mind to do one thing well, rather than being pulled in numerous directions. When you are executing a single task and allow productivity tools and methods to carry the weight of reminders and the management of projects, you are practicing the art of being present, and working with the wandering mind.

Starting at the Beginning

“. . . in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few” -
Shunryu Suzuki (2010, p. 2).

It is easy to adopt the Zen concept of beginner's mind when as a new librarian, diving into one's first job. It is a different matter when one has held the same position for ten or more years. The seasoned professional might find it more challenging to walk in the shoes of students who are learning research skills or to use the library for the first time. The benefit of a beginner's mind, if one can cultivate and achieve it, is that one will then look at the world with fresh eyes, and can rediscover the joy of learning something new, of finding just the right article or book, the deep satisfaction of having a question or curiosity answered, a curiosity sated--experiences which excited one and first drew him into the profession. In beginner's mind, we understand what it is like to be in new situation, to feel uncertain, to feel vulnerable. In the beginner's mind, one realizes how important it is to demonstrate patience and understanding with ourselves and others. Zimmerman (2005, np.) aptly described beginner's mind as “returning to the enthusiastic, open-minded state of the beginner by focusing only on the moment, not living in the thoughts of the expert all of the time or the thoughts of your past experience.”

Compassionate Librarianship and the Practice of Lovingkindness

“. . . practice sharing the fullness of your being, your best self, your enthusiasm, your vitality, your spirit, your trust, your openness, above all, your presence. Share it will yourself, with your family, with the world” -Jon Kabat-Zinn (1995, p. 62).

The cultivation of lovingkindness, or metta, is a popular concept and focus of meditation in Buddhism. Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and the Insight Meditation Society, illuminates the concept in her book written with Kabat-Zinn (2004), *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. She explains that lovingkindness, as opposed to other kinds of love, is unconditional, given freely with nothing expected in return; it is directed to both oneself and to all living beings. She suggests meditating on or silently directing the following phrases to others as a means to promote the spirit of metta, or lovingkindness (Salzberg& Kabat-Zinn, 2004, p. 76):

“May you be free from danger.”

“May you have mental happiness.”

“May you have physical happiness.”

“May you have ease of well-being.”

Thich Nhat Hanh (1992) suggests setting aside one day a week as a Day of Mindfulness, and on that day maintaining a half smile. One might consider maintaining a half-smile during the work week as well. Psychotherapists Fulton (2005) and Wallace (2001) have observed that mindfulness practice enhances our ability to relate to others (and oneself) with kindness, acceptance, and compassion. The implications for library service are obvious: if we provide our services to students, faculty or other patrons with lovingkindness and compassion, all parties benefit. A patron who is treated with kindness by library staff will most certainly return to the library. A patron who is treated with indifference, or worse, rudeness (i.e., with a distinct lack of lovingkindness), will think twice before asking for help or even stepping foot in the library. A freshman who is treated at the reference desk with kindness and respect--who hears the message “I want you to succeed”--will respond accordingly.

Conclusion

Mindfulness practice has tremendous potential to help librarians manage work stress and improve the quality of library services. There are many ways to incorporate mindfulness into one’s daily work life, as well as to maintain a practice outside of work. From a simple focus on the breath to a more structured practice, mindful meditation has been described by Salzberg as “the ultimate mobile device; you can use it anywhere, anytime, unobtrusively” (2011, p. 21). Increasingly, universities and organizations of all types offer wellness and fitness programs that include moving meditation activities such as yoga, Tai Chi, and Qi Gong, as well as traditional guided meditation. In addition to the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program first developed at the University of Massachusetts, there are many programs and courses available across the country, internationally, and online (please see the References and Resources list below). The many personal stories of lives transformed by a mindfulness practice are proof of its potential for all of us and can motivate us to improve our own lives. Mindful librarianship—practiced with awareness, intention, an open mind, and a spirit of compassion—could make the difference in the success of our students, our profession, and ourselves.

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