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# Stress in the Library Workplace

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## ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE PROVIDES INFORMATION on organizational approaches to managing stress in the library workplace; defines stress as a person's psychological and physiological response to the perception of a demand or challenge; develops the concepts of stressors and coping strategies; and emphasizes the importance of library personnel officers, administrators, and managers knowing the dynamics of stress in the lives of individual workers and having awareness of the important sources of stress in the library workplace. The discussion also treats strategies for reducing stressors, assisting staff members in developing good stress management, and helping the employee who is at risk of burnout.

## INTRODUCTION

Stress in the workplace is currently a topic of great interest. For example, there is increasing awareness that excessive stress can be hazardous to employees' health, and stress, as a cause for disability, can obligate employers and their insurers to worker compensation. Ineffective management of stress can lower the productivity of individual employees and, as a result, of an entire organization.

This article will discuss some aspects of stress in the library workplace. It will not attempt a thorough review of the literature, either of stress in the workplace in general or of stress in the library workplace. Rather it will provide overview information, along with library examples that the author has come to believe is important to library managers and personnel officers. The article includes both concepts and information that are widely accepted from the literature of stress management

and insights drawn from discussions with a great many working librarians and library managers. After providing some basic definitions and concepts regarding the phenomenon of stress, the article will then discuss sources of stress in the library workplace. Finally, organizational strategies for dealing with such stress will be discussed.

## BASIC CONCEPTS

The term or concept of *stress* is defined in widely varying ways in the popular press and among researchers and clinicians who have studied the phenomenon (Bailey, 1985; Cherniss, 1980; Farber, 1983; Freudenberger et al., 1980; Maslach, 1982). Some treat it as an intrinsically painful or negative phenomenon and one to be avoided, while others consider it to be potentially either positive or negative depending on the situation. The definition on which this article is based considers stress to be a person's psychological and physiological response to the perception of a demand or challenge. The nature and intensity of this response depends on the meaning one gives to the demand or challenge and on one's assessment of the resources that are available for meeting it.

This conception of stress has a number of important elements. First, stress is not something "out there" or inherent in "stressful" things or situations. Rather, stress is within the person—i.e., a response. The source of the demand or challenge is referred to as a "stressor." A stressor with negative meaning (the source of undesirable stress) for one person may cause a completely different response in another.

Another element in this definition of stress is the importance of the person's *perception* or way of thinking about the situation. Surely, few normal persons would wish to be without demands or challenges; these can be part of the joy and verve of life. However, some demands will be perceived as potentially harmful or uncomfortable, and the response to these demands will be an attempt at avoidance or reduction. Likewise, one will sometimes feel that one has adequate skills and other resources to deal with a demand, and the response may be one of pleasurable anticipation. On the other hand, a feeling of not having adequate resources to meet a demand can be an occasion of worry or other painful response. Such a painful or negative response is often called "strain" or "distress."

From this definition it follows that managing the amount and nature of stress in one's life consists of attempting to achieve a balance between the challenges and demands of one's life and the resources available to meet these challenges. When we feel that there are too many demands or too few resources to deal with them, we will experience excessive or painful stress (i.e., strain or distress).

Another important concept associated with stress is *coping*. In the context of this discussion coping can be defined as an individual's attempt to reduce or master the pain or discomfort associated with stress.

Broadly speaking, coping strategies include getting away from or reducing the number of stressors, obtaining more resources to meet demands, and changing one's perceptions of the situation. For most people, most of the time, the coping strategies used are effective, and stress is kept at a level that allows happy, productive functioning. However, sometimes the coping strategies used are not effective. In fact, they can contribute to the problem in a vicious circle way. For example, some responses to a perception of having too much work to do and too little time and resources in which to do it actually reduce productivity and thereby increase the frustration and pain for the worker.

To the extent that a person's coping strategies are generally ineffective and the "vicious circle" strategies are out of control, the person can be said to be "burned out." Stress, distress or strain, and burnout can be viewed as a continuum. This continuum runs from: (1) a condition wherein, on the whole, challenges are sources of happiness and productive responses, to (2) a condition wherein perceived imbalances between demands and resources are painful, but where coping strategies restore the balance and reduce the pain, to (3) a condition where inappropriate coping strategies are out of control (i.e., are contributing to the problem) and the person's physical and mental resources are depleted.

### SOURCES OF STRESS IN THE LIBRARY WORKPLACE

From this conception of stress and burnout, one can see that stress may be either functional or dysfunctional in the workplace. Logic would predict, and there is some research to show (e.g., McGrath, 1976), that performance and productivity will improve with increasing stress to a certain level, after which increased stress will cause lowered performance. The interactions among individuals, organizations, and jobs that produce stress and distress in the workplace are very complex. Each employee is unique with regard to the meanings one attaches to stressors, perceptions of available resources, and the coping strategies and skills one can and will use. Each organization is, likewise, unique with regard to the stressors it contains or produces and its approaches to helping employees manage and cope with stress.

There is a large body of literature on sources of stress in the workplace which includes public service organizations (Beech *et al.*, 1982; Brief *et al.*, 1981). Reports to this author from some 850 library staff members from all types of libraries and library positions confirm that the library workplace has much in common with jobs in other organizations (Bunge, 1987). The following discussion will cite sources of stress in the library workplace.

Certainly one of the chief causes of stress is work overload of a quantitative or qualitative nature. In many libraries budget cutbacks and staff shortages have caused staff members to feel that there is always more work to do than there is time to do it (quantitative overload). For example, public services staff members express this in terms of too many

requests for service to allow thorough or adequately tailored responses to any of them. Technical services staff members feel the pressure of never seeing the "in" basket or the shelf of materials to be processed diminish or of always having to accomplish special projects without reductions in "regular" work expectations.

In addition to the sheer quantity of work, library staff members may feel a qualitative overload. For example, they often feel that their job requires knowledge and skills that they do not have, that the job contains elements that are inappropriate, or that the job is frustratingly fragmented or complex. Reference librarians report feelings of inadequacy regarding their knowledge of information sources and technology, impatience with "nonreference" duties such as dealing with "problem" patrons and maintaining photocopy machines, and conflicts between on-desk and off-desk duties. Technical services and support staff feel qualitative overload in terms of lack of knowledge and skill (in computer use, for example) to do their jobs, or of always having to balance a variety of disparate tasks, some of which they may feel are inappropriate to their positions.

What might be called work underload can also be a source of stress for library staff members. Some library jobs, especially for support staff, can be repetitive, unchallenging, and lacking in meaningful stimulation. Reference librarians frequently report being disappointed that so many reference questions they receive are routine or even trivial. Technical services librarians often feel that their jobs allow too few opportunities for them to use their creativity and the skills they have acquired through training.

Another broad category of stressors in the library workplace is interpersonal relationships. Relationships with library patrons are an obvious source of stress for public services staff members. On the one hand, there can be great intensity in relationships between librarians and the people they try to help, sometimes leading to feelings of inadequacy and frustration when the help cannot be fully responsive to the patron's needs. On the other hand, patrons can sometimes be rude or ill-behaved, can seem to expect miracles, can steal or mutilate materials, or can otherwise cause stress for the public services librarian.

Library staff members are also distressed at a lack of respect and recognition in their interpersonal relationships. Public services librarians and administrators usually report this as a lack of recognition of the library's role and value by people outside the library. Technical services librarians and support staff more frequently report feelings of lack of appreciation and respect from others within the library.

Beyond the lack of recognition and respect, interpersonal relationships among library staff members in general are an important source of stress. Examples reported to the author include interdepartmental conflicts, tensions between professionals and nonprofessionals, competition for status and resources, irritable and negative co-workers, and gossip.

Consistently high on the list of reported stressors in libraries is the lack of effective positive feedback from supervisors, co-workers and patrons. Evaluation from supervisors is often seen as infrequent, not timely, based on inadequate data, and ineffectively communicated. Co-workers (especially from other departments or levels of staff) are perceived as more likely to make complaints than to give compliments. Patrons often seem to take public services librarians for granted and fail to let them know when the information provided is helpful.

Related to evaluative feedback and recognition is the matter of expectations from others felt by library staff members. Often library workers feel that the expectations for their jobs are vague and poorly defined. Perhaps even worse, there seems sometimes to be conflicting expectations. For example, reference librarians often feel that the library administration and the taxpayers expect them to be all things to all people, while the allocation of time and other resources (and perhaps even performance evaluation criteria) demand setting priorities and limiting services—often in the absence of clear policy guidelines. Examples of such role ambiguity and role conflict are not limited to reference librarians, and they can be very stressful to all types and levels of library staff members.

Another set of perceptions that usually appears on a list of stressors for library staff members is that of inadequacies in supervision and management. Inadequacy in evaluative feedback has already been mentioned; other examples include supervisors who are absent or inaccessible when information or support is needed, feeling left out of decisions where one has important knowledge or expertise, managers who will not risk advocating strongly for their staffs, inconsistent or double standard supervisory behavior, and managers who allow (or force) their staffs to gain important information from the grapevine.

Of course one would expect that working conditions would be a major source of stress in the workplace, and that is true for the library workplace. Inadequate office space is a frequently mentioned stressor of this type, especially crowding and lack of privacy in shared offices (e.g., what is called the “reference office” in many libraries might better be called the “reference bullpen”). Libraries usually reserve the most attractive spaces (e.g., those with windows) for patron-use areas, leaving less attractive space for staff. Library work areas are prone to having a cluttered appearance and can be noisy, both of which can be stressful.

A final category of sources of stress in libraries to be mentioned might be called career stage or career concerns. Entry, midcareer, and approaching retirement are career stages that have particular stressors and potential burnout associated with them. For example, in the public services professions, including librarianship, the early months and years in one’s career can be filled with the stress caused by the gap between the realities of the job and the expectations that were built up during training.

Middle managers are particularly prone to painful stress and burnout. They are especially likely to feel role ambiguity and role conflict. Often the demands of their positions have risen faster than have their competence and skills. They frequently report feeling caught between demands (from both above and below) and the lack of resources to respond to them.

A very important example of this category of stressors in libraries is the vulnerability of working women to distress and burnout. The useful article by Brief, Schuler, and Van Sell (1981) on working women and stress might have been written about library staff members, according to reports to the author from women workshop participants (pp. 173-201). Reported stressors range from discrimination against women in hiring, pay, and promotion to sex-typing of certain jobs within libraries, to child care and housekeeping issues and pressures.

### ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO STRESS

How can libraries as organizations, including their policymakers, managers, and personnel officers, deal with stress and burnout in the workplace? Organizational strategies can be grouped into several categories including: (1) reducing the number and intensity of stressors, (2) strengthening the employees' ability to cope with stress effectively, and (3) recognizing and assisting those who are not coping effectively and who are at risk of burnout. The goal of such strategies is not the complete elimination of stress or strain but rather the maintenance of stress at a level with which individuals can cope effectively and productively.

#### *Reducing Stressors*

The earlier discussion of sources of stress in the library workplace suggests many areas for reducing stressors. Remedies for reducing stress in organizations have been discussed by several professionals such as Cherniss (1980); Jackson et al. (1983); and Sethi and Schuler (1986). Stressors associated with quantitative and qualitative work overload can be reduced through job redesign—the topic of another article in this issue. Managers, working with staff, should try to arrange the employee's day so that intense or taxing activities alternate with other activities for variety and relief. Duties that are inappropriate to the employee's role or training (e.g., equipment servicing by reference librarians) should be kept at a minimum. The number of hours worked at intense or exhausting tasks should be carefully limited, and jobs should be structured so as to allow workers to take "time outs" when necessary. Opportunities for learning, for using creativity, and for innovation should be built into jobs to the greatest extent possible. Staff members should be encouraged to take vacations, and the accrual of unused vacation time should not be treated as an object of pride or status. Stress resulting from competition can be reduced by developing

work strategies that are collaborative rather than competitive—for example cross-departmental team efforts.

Many of the stressors that are related to interpersonal relationships, role ambiguity, and role conflict, can be addressed through good organizational communication. Library administrators should assess the degree to which all staff members receive clear, timely, and full information relevant to their jobs and their contributions to the organizational mission. Identified gaps and deficiencies should be remedied. Policies, goals, rules, and expectations should be made as clear and explicit as possible for each staff member. Timely evaluative feedback, especially of a positive and supportive nature, should be provided to each employee.

Feelings of helplessness and lack of control or power are serious stressors in the workplace. Library managers should provide staff members with the maximum feasible autonomy and control over their work including participation in collective decision-making.

Clearly managers and supervisors play a very important role in reducing and controlling stress in the library workplace. Libraries need to create management and supervisory training and development programs that include stress management knowledge and skills. Among areas to be addressed would be problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, effective evaluation techniques and skill in communicating evaluative feedback, group leadership skills, motivation toward risk taking and advocacy, decision-making and follow-through abilities, and knowledge of how stress affects individuals and of effective coping strategies.

Library managers, personnel officers, and others in authority should continually monitor the physical work environments of staff members for sources of stress and strain. Many librarians have reported to the author that a great deal can be done to enhance the feeling of privacy and comfort rather inexpensively through furniture rearrangement, the use of movable screens, and the personalization of workspaces. Attention to reduction of clutter and noise (from both people and machines) can reduce stress significantly. Attractive paint and decoration can partially compensate for lack of windows. Proper lighting and physical arrangements of equipment and work stations are very important, especially where computer terminals are involved. The area of physical surroundings is an especially good example of one where staff members can be provided with a sense of control and power over their work lives. Helping workers themselves approach these stressors in a problem-solving way and helping them turn their decisions into actions and changes will not only reduce the stressors but will make the staff members feel better about themselves and their work and more able to cope with irreducible stress.

Many of the stressors in the library workplace come from what was referred to earlier as career concerns or career stages. This category of

stressors can be reduced by improving the fit between characteristics and competencies of individuals and the demands of the jobs they hold, as well as the fit between the expectations of individuals and the possibilities and realities of their positions. This begins with effective screening in the hiring process, for example, separating appropriate dedication and commitment from unrealistic idealism and overcommitment.

Orientation programs for new entrants into librarianship are especially important. Personnel officers need to be aware that the new professional's initial experiences play an important role in later development, and libraries should develop and implement orientation programs that will make the "reality shock" of initial experiences as constructive as possible. Such orientation programs should help staff members match their expectations to their positions and reduce anxiety about lacking skills and knowledge.

Midcareer employers, middle managers (especially women managers, and those approaching retirement) also need special assistance in reducing stress and strain. Personnel officers and top administrators should be knowledgeable about developmental stages in careers and the special stressors that are associated with the various stages. Here, again, one strategy is seeking fit between individuals and the jobs they are expected to perform. Libraries should explore the development of dual career tracks and associated reward systems so that those who lack administrative interests and aptitudes can have satisfying and high status careers in the technical or service areas of librarianship.

It is very important that library managers are as well trained as possible for carrying out their complex responsibilities, so that job demands do not rise faster than competence, thereby contributing to strain. Training in dealing with pressure, conflicts, crises, and change should be included. Managers (especially women managers) who must deal with perceptions of discrimination, isolation, and conflicts between professional and personal concerns, should be encouraged and assisted in developing support networks through peer counseling, mentoring, and other means.

### HELPING WORKERS MANAGE STRESS

While every library staff member should feel that sources of stress are kept at a minimum in the library, even in libraries where this is successful, there will still be considerable stress in the workplace. Effective individual stress management and coping strategies are as important, if not more so, as organizational reduction of stressors. Libraries as organizations can play an important role here, too. In overall terms, this is a matter of helping employees gain knowledge, self-awareness, and skills. Works that contain useful information on helping workers manage stress include Paine (1982), Pines (1981), and Tanner (1983).

The first step to effective stress management is gaining knowledge of how stress operates in one's life and the role that various types of

stressors and coping strategies can play in painful stress or strain. Libraries should help their staff members gain such knowledge through workshops and other means.

Using this knowledge, staff members can assess the sources and level of stress or strain in their own lives. Personnel officers and managers can be helpful in this regard by making available stress and burnout "checkup" or assessment instruments that have proven useful. Especially important is assistance to employees in assessing how realistic are the goals they have imposed on themselves and encouraging them to adopt more realistic goals and expectations of themselves.

The development of an effective social support system is especially important for individual stress management and coping. Such a support network can provide self-esteem, feedback and appraisal of the situation, information and advice, and assistance in making changes in the situation. Managers should be alert for opportunities to encourage and assist in the development of such support systems for staff members. Enhancing consultative approaches, group problem-solving, and team efforts can be helpful in this regard. With appropriate leadership and role modeling, staff meetings can contribute to social support and networking by providing opportunities for staff members to express themselves, to discuss stress and barriers to effectiveness, and to develop problem-solving skills.

Staff members who become aware of sources of stress in their work and lives will identify skills that they need to cope with this stress happily and productively. The library's staff development program should include opportunities for developing such skills. One such important set of skills has already been mentioned—i.e., self-awareness and reflection skills. Another very important set is interpersonal communication skills, including skill at expressing one's feelings honestly and directly, listening and empathy skills, skills at providing positive feedback, and assertiveness skills. Other skill areas that are frequently identified as important in coping with job stress are time management, relaxation, and problem-solving.

### *Helping Those Who are Burning Out*

Even with the best programs for reducing stress in the library workplace and assisting staff members in developing stress management skills, there will be staff members who seem not to be coping well and to be burning out. Glicken (1983) and Niehouse and Mihovich (1984) focus on helping workers who are burning out. What can or should personnel officers and managers do in such situations? The first step, of course, is recognizing that there is a problem. Managers and personnel officers should be knowledgeable concerning signs and symptoms of excessive stress and ineffective coping. These include rigidity and resistance to change, boredom and apathy, procrastination and indecisiveness, constant fatigue and exhaustion, irritability and a

"short fuse," chronic minor physical ailments, and overall lowered productivity. Supervisors should be alert for changes in the behaviors and attitudes of staff members. Significant changes in the frequency or intensity of behaviors such as those just mentioned and a seeming inability to "bounce back" can signal poor coping with strain.

Having identified a situation where intervention and assistance seems appropriate, the manager or other caring staff member will need to exercise confrontation skills in a supportive way. The focus should be on work expectations, inadequate productivity, and behaviors of concern rather than on personal problems, ascribed motivations, and side issues. The tendency of persons suffering from excessive stress to deny that there is anything wrong and to be somewhat paranoid or supersensitive makes this confrontation process all the more difficult and demanding of sensitivity and skill.

The knowledgeable manager or personnel specialist can assist the burning out employee in assessing the situation, including identifying sources of stress, the individual's coping strengths and weaknesses, and alternatives for developing an action-oriented plan for revitalization. While some organizations have successfully instituted counseling programs to assist employees in coping with stress (and larger libraries might want to consider this approach), individual managers should not enter into a psychotherapy or personal counseling stance, since a working or supervisory relationship is not compatible with a therapeutic relationship. Nor should the manager or confronter *prescribe* burnout workshops or therapy. Such action would further undermine the individual's feeling of autonomy and control, and participation in such activities will be more effective if it is voluntary and self-motivated. Rather, the stance of the manager should be one of providing concern, heightened awareness, information, and alternatives.

There are some specific actions that the manager might suggest or undertake. One might be to make changes in the potential burnout victim's job and responsibilities in order to reduce stress and increase prospects for the individual's revitalization. Extending deadlines and suggesting a vacation might be useful strategies. Many more possibilities are implied in the earlier section on reducing stressors in the workplace. Any such actions, however, must be undertaken in a way that will not be viewed as punitive, and the staff member should be allowed a choice in the particular strategies chosen and their implementation.

This article has attempted to provide useful information on organizational approaches to managing stress in the library workplace. It emphasized the importance of library personnel officers, administrators, and managers knowing the dynamics of stress in the lives of workers, awareness of the important sources of stress in the library workplace, strategies for reducing such stressors, assisting staff members in developing good stress management, and sensitively helping the employee who is at risk of burnout. In all of this, it is important

that everyone in the organization recognize that stress can be the fire that provides energy for the joy of accomplishment and productivity. However, if the employee lacks sufficient resources to manage and control this fire he/she can eventually suffer from burnout. But even then, as Herbert J. Freudenberger (1980) says in one of the best books on stress, in every fire, even a burned out one, there are glowing embers (p. xxii). Our job sometimes, as caring people, is to help those we care for rekindle the spark and to stay afire without burning out.

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