



FOSTERING WELLNESS

— IN THE —

WORKPLACE

A HANDBOOK
for LIBRARIES

BOBBI L. NEWMAN

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Preface

In early March 2020, Twanna Hodge, author of chapter 4, and I finally signed the contract with ALA Publishing for this title. It was an idea I had shopped around and worked on for about a year. We were headed into what we thought would be a quiet summer. Twanna and I set an ambitious but doable August 2020 deadline for our final copies to ensure the book would be in ALA Editions's winter catalog. The events that began almost immediately after we signed and continued to unfold over the next few months changed everything for us and everyone else.

Outbreaks of a new coronavirus around the world and in the US resulted in border closures, then library closures. Experts were unsure how the new virus spread, and the amount of people infected exceeded the capacity of hospitals in the United States and around the world. Hospitals and healthcare workers lacked adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and the equipment necessary to treat patients infected with COVID-19, and elective surgeries were canceled. People took to the streets to protest the murders of Ahmaud Abernathy, Breanna Taylor, George Floyd, and others. From March to August 2020, I sewed and donated about a thousand masks for local hospitals, senior centers, and other places that were begging for donations of fabric masks because their supplies of personal protective equipment were sold out. The book did not get written.

The events of the world made it feel incredibly important yet at the same time pointless to write about health and wellness in libraries. Many libraries chose to remain open and expose library staff and communities to infection. Some managers decided to micromanage their employees who were working from home, contributing to the stress and anxiety that we all felt and still feel because of COVID-19. An often repeated and just as often ignored phrase—"You're not working from home. You're at home trying to work during a crisis"—made the rounds. Women left the workforce in droves to stay home and take care of children who could not be in daycare or school, setting back equal pay by decades. The book did not get written.

February is always a difficult month for me, and February 2021 was no different. Though the days get longer, it feels like the darkest, coldest, and iciest winter month here in Iowa, and seasonal depression has a strong grip. One bright aspect of February 2021 was that I was in the midst of planning a three-day national symposium focused on the health and wellness of library workers from March 24 to 26, 2021. In early January, the advisory committee named the symposium BLOSSOM, or Building Life-Long Opportunities for Strength, Self-Care, Outlook, Morale, and Mindfulness. We hoped it would be more than just an acronym. Vaccines were being rolled out, days were getting longer, and things were changing in the world around us. More than six thousand people registered for BLOSSOM, and almost three thousand attended live. The sessions and format were cathartic for many attendees. It also clearly highlighted the need for an increased focus on creating healthy working environments for library staff. We had a chance to set a new normal in libraries and care for library staffs' health and wellness properly.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that almost a million people in the United States and over 6 million worldwide have died from COVID-19.



Introduction

Fostering a Health and Wellness Culture at Your Library

Congratulations on picking up this book! Maybe it means that you are interested in working toward having a healthy working environment at your library. Perhaps you are curious as to precisely what is involved in wellness in the library workplace. Reading this book may be the first step on your journey, or you may already be taking measures to ensure the health and wellness of the staff at your library and want to do more. You may be in a management role and want to improve morale and wellness for staff—and yourself—in your library. You may be a library worker who wants a healthy work environment for yourself and others at your library. This book has information you can use, whatever your level of interest, expertise, and authority!

Libraries are dedicated to improving the lives of their patrons and their communities. Whether it is through traditional services such as providing access to books and providing reference and readers advisory services, or through more modern programming, libraries contribute to the overall well-being of patrons. In many libraries, this includes services, programs, and outreach dedicated to the health and wellness of their communities. From providing access to information, to movement-based programs focused on health, to programs designed to improve mental health and reduce stress, to helping provide services and support for community members who

are unhoused, to assisting with addressing substance misuse disorder in their communities, libraries help to enrich their community members' mental and physical health in a wide variety of ways.

However, libraries often fail to look inward and take steps to improve the health and wellness of their staff. This book takes a holistic approach to examining why and how libraries should focus on improving the health and wellness of all those they employ. We will explore the aspects of a healthy workplace, including physical, mental, and emotional components. We will also look at evidence reported on the benefits of creating a healthy working environment and why that matters to individual employees, to the library as an organization, and to your community. We will also discuss changes that the administration could and should make at the team and organizational levels to improve workplace health and wellness for everyone. For individuals working in libraries that have not started focusing on staff health and wellness, we will provide recommendations for changes you can make at a personal level. Whether you are an administrator looking to improve the health and wellness of your library staff or a staff member looking to start a health and wellness movement for everyone employed in your library, this book is for you! Fostering a health and wellness culture at your library benefits everyone!

Roadblocks to—and Benefits of—a Healthy Workplace

In the fall of 2017, I spent over two months on the road attending state library conferences as part of my work as a Community Engagement and Outreach Specialist for the Network of the National Library of Medicine (NNLM)* Greater Midwest Region at Hardin Library for the Health Sciences at the University of Iowa. Part of my role was to

*Then the National Network of the Library of Medicine. The network was rebranded in 2020.

connect with library workers in the ten-state region served by my office and across the United States. At state conferences that fall, I encountered a theme I had also heard at national conferences and online through social media: Library staff was not doing well physically or mentally. There were many presentations on burnout, compassion fatigue, low morale, inadequate self-care measures, and similar topics. Some of these presentations discussed how individual staff members could treat the symptoms of unhealthy workplaces by trying to prevent burnout, compassion fatigue, low morale, and so on. The root causes of these are at the cultural, organizational, and even professional levels. Yet, few if any presentations mentioned changing the working environment in the library, including the physical space, policies, or work culture to improve staff well-being.

Throughout the last decade or so, we have seen an increase in recommendations for a range of self-care tactics. Resilience narratives have a long history in libraries both from management and professional organizations, such as the American Library Association (ALA), encouraging library workers to be resilient in the face of poor working conditions (Aspe 2019; Gutsche 2021; Figueroa 2014; Aldrich and Center for the Future of Libraries 2018). Both resilience narratives and self-care promotion place the burden on the library worker. If a library worker is unhappy or unwell, it is because they are not resilient enough or do not practice enough self-care. Changes at an institutional level have a more significant effect on morale, burnout, and staff wellness than individual efforts.

In more recent years, we have seen efforts to push back against the burden on library staff to make the best of bad situations (Berg, Galvan, and Tewell 2018; Blechinger 2020). Too often, library staff is asked to be resilient when working in understaffed and underfunded libraries in an effort to maintain high levels of customer service. Research by Kaetrena Davis Kendrick has highlighted conditions that result in low morale in libraries (Kendrick 2017; 2020; Kendrick

and Damasco 2019). This research has shed light on emotional abuse, verbal abuse, system abuse, negligence from administration or management, and even physical abuse of library staff (Kendrick 2020). In 2018, Fobazi Ettrah published her groundbreaking article on vocational awe in libraries in which she writes:

“Vocational awe” refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that results in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.

Ettrah’s vocational awe theory provides us with a framework to push back on many of the beliefs about libraries long held by the library workers themselves.

As we continue to critically examine beliefs and values that can make the workplace unhealthy, it has become clear that we need better guidelines around what ideas and practices can actively make a workplace healthy. Some of the policies and procedures we will examine in this book are commonplace in countries other than the United States and have been so for a long time. The good news is that there is a growing body of research on a number of topics we have long ignored such as air quality, access to natural light, nature, noise, flexible policies around work schedules, and more. This research proves that these policies not only benefit library workers but also the library and community as a whole.

The practices and ideas in this book will help improve the health and wellness of library staff. Benefits will go far beyond individual staff members. Many of the ideas and practices we share will help reduce absenteeism and presentism and improve productivity, performance, and overall job satisfaction, which lead to improved customer service and community relations. Improving the health and wellness of staff

provides benefits far beyond the library. Creating a healthy workplace in your library also benefits the community you serve.

A Note on the Perspective of This Book

This book is written from the perspective of libraries and library workers in the United States. Approaches to overall health and wellness differ in many countries and cultures. Many countries already have healthier policies related to work-life balance, workspace, and whole-person health. Similarly, some cultures and countries have long taken a more holistic approach to mental and physical health. Some of the ideas, practices, and research highlighted in this book will not be new to some readers. Because beliefs, practices, and research focusing on whole-person health are relatively new to library staff here in the United States, we may examine them as if they are new practices.

Throughout the book, we will touch on research, best practices, and recommendations in that vein. We have attempted to keep citations to a minimum to improve readability. This book is intended as an introduction to many of the ideas and research highlighted. We hope what you read about and learn in this book starts you on the journey to creating a healthier workspace in your library. We know many of the recommendations cannot be implemented overnight. You may need to convince others of the benefits of the changes.

The Book's Structure

In chapter 1, “What Is Health and Wellness in the Workplace?,” we define health and wellness as they are addressed in the book. This chapter lays a foundation for the rest of the book by providing an overview of the topics to be covered. It also addresses other related subjects, including some of the more recent and popular health/

wellness trends, that are not recommended in this book. We take a holistic approach to health in these chapters as there is a growing body of evidence that physical work environment, policies, procedures, and culture at work profoundly affect our overall mental and physical health. This makes sense as most of us spend at least forty hours at work a week, or about a third of our time during our adult life. What happens at work affects our well-being long after we have left for the day or even years after taking a new position in a different institution (Hickok 2021; McMenamin 2021; Gillian B. White 2015).

In chapter 2, “Physical Space in the Library,” we address physical workspace. Many libraries still use old metal desks, fluorescent lighting, old carpeting, and shared working spaces. We will address the ergonomics of both standing and “sit desks” and the benefits of providing library staff with adjustable-height work stations and walking desks. We will also look at research on the effects of air quality and smell on worker health and productivity and how both are improved through proper ventilation and the circulation of clean air matter. There is a growing body of research on the benefits of access to natural light and nature to our physical and mental health. We will explore how and why libraries should incorporate these into their design for new buildings and what adjustments should be made in older buildings. The chapter will also address noise issues in the workplace. Finally, we will explore the challenges created by open floor plans in staff areas. Many libraries have an open office space, whether from repurposing space that was not originally intended to house staff or from following the unfortunate trend in Silicon Valley to opt for open work environments. Not only do open floor plans reduce productivity, but they can also damage the mental and physical well-being of library staff.

In chapter 3, “Workplace Practices and Policies,” we examine the policies around wages, working schedules, and work expectations. For example, a healthy workplace provides the essential service of

offering the worker a living wage for the area. This wage is one of the social determinants of health as mentioned in the Healthy People 2020 initiative. A living wage means workers do not have to choose between filling a prescription or putting gas in their car or between healthy produce at the grocery store or rent. We will also look at pay discrepancies based on gender and race. These differences in libraries are very similar to the larger workforce—a particularly important factor to consider as the COVID-19 pandemic caused more women than men to leave the workforce to care for children, especially women of color (Russell 2020). The effects of this exodus from the workplace have set back years of advancement in workplace pay equity and diversity (Vesoulis 2020).

The chapter will address the benefits of telecommuting, remote work, and flexible work schedules. Prior to the pandemic, a growing body of research was already exploring the benefits of remote work and flexible work schedules. Because many library employees worked from home with modified schedules to accommodate the care of their children and other family members during the pandemic, a number of us had the opportunity to see firsthand in 2020 and 2021 that these adjustments were not just possible but beneficial (Vasel 2021). Finally, we will touch briefly on providing assistance and accommodations for children, elder care, and other life events. As the population continues to age, many of us will likely care for an aging parent or loved one in the future. As former First Lady Rosalynn Carter said, “There are only four kinds of people in the world—those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers” (Brody 2008).

This chapter will address unofficial policies, practices, and culture in the workplace as well as issues involved in employee wellness that can be difficult to create specific guidelines for such as emotional and invisible labor. It will explore workplace practices and cultures that contribute to compassion fatigue and burnout. Many of those

in librarianship feel drawn to the profession, and vocational awe can make us feel as if taking our complete lunch break away from our desks is selfish and may be perceived as selfish by others. Setting boundaries not only creates a healthy working environment for everyone but can also improve productivity. It is essential that we make healthy choices for ourselves and encourage healthy choices in our coworkers and staff.

Chapter 4, “How Cultural Humility, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are Essential to Workplace Wellness,” by Twanna Hodge, will address how cultural humility, diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential to workplace wellness. Hodge introduces several concepts critical to wellness including trauma-informed approaches, diversity, equity, inclusion, racial battle fatigue, cultural taxation, cultural humility, and more. As we will see throughout the book, creating a healthy workplace has many facets and takes commitment and self-reflection.

Chapter 5, “How Library Administration Can Create a Healthy Work Environment,” will focus on steps libraries can take to improve workplace wellness. Most libraries may only be able to start with one or two small actions. This chapter will recommend concrete actions and plans, based on the evidence listed in previous chapters, that can be taken by management and administrators to improve health and wellness in libraries. We will include checklists for different aspects of staff health and wellness. It is important to remember that fostering wellness in the workplace is a journey. Few libraries and management will have the resources and buy-in to implement all the necessary changes at first or even over time, yet taking the first step down the path is as important as continuing the path. You can work within your current circumstances while always aiming for the best.

The Conclusion will revisit each topic discussed throughout the book while still stressing that the most critical next step is to change

one thing. It will encourage readers to pick one aspect they can change personally and one that can advocate changes library-wide. Because the book will touch briefly on many issues, readers may wish to delve deeper into specific areas by exploring additional resources.

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