Defusing the Angry Patron:

A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians®

Second Edition

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Preface

Violent crime at a library always grabs the headlines, but fortunately most libraries never deal with shootings, assault and battery, or sex crimes. The most frequent security issue is theft of library materials. And the most common problem situation in libraries involves an angry patron.

The term *problem patron* is usually an inaccurate descriptor. Except in rare, extreme circumstances, the patron alone is not the problem. Instead, the interchange between patron and staff is (or becomes) a problem. The overwhelming majority of these difficult exchanges involve anger, rather than other issues such as violence.

As the Fairfax County (VA) Public Library states in its *Problem Behavior Manual*:

> It's important for staff to understand that customers will be angry, rude or careless from time to time. . . . We must understand that these are not true problem behaviors, and that customers do have a right to be angry and to express unhappiness with our facility and our services. . . . Every customer is entitled to their own style of using the public library, as long as it doesn't interfere with others.

A decade ago the number one cause of stress and anger in patrons—and library staff—was other library users who refused to vacate computer workstations when their allotted time was up. That era was before time-out software was invented; such software took the burden of timekeeping away from library staff since it controls the length of each user's session. The number two cause of anger was patrons waiting in line for a computer. Now most libraries use reservations software for people to prearrange their computer time (on at least some of the computers), so there are fewer lines.

As I write this, the world is in dire financial straits and we have the highest unemployment rate in America in over 50 years. Library use is at an all-time high. And people are fighting over computers again (or maybe still). Libraries report that issues around using the computer are still the number one problem causing patrons (and staff) stress and anger. The stress points include availability of computers, technical problems with them, and privacy concerns.

According to my informal survey of public and academic libraries in ten states, three issues share the number two ranking of most commonly

reported stress points. These are circulation policies (including fines and claimed returns), handling people with mental health problems and/or homeless people (especially in urban libraries), and dissatisfaction with services (everywhere). The latter includes patrons who turn belligerent when they are told that the library cannot fill a request (for materials or services).

The fact that angry patrons present serious dilemmas for library staff has not changed either. Anger is contagious, so talking with (and listening to) an angry person can cause staff to feel angry, frustrated, victimized, and/or helpless. This secondhand anger is not new either.

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is for all library staff members who are:

- sick and tired of being yelled at by patrons;
- unsure what to do when someone looks angry;
- ready to get on with their jobs;
- frightened by the unexpected high emotion over a simple library transaction;
- angry themselves because they feel dumped on by the public; and
- frustrated by their own behavior under pressure.

We do not need to feel powerless in the face of anger. We can take control of the situation and feel better about ourselves while, at the same time, calming the patron, solving the presenting problem, and moving on to assist the next patron.

This book is not primarily about behavior that threatens public safety or interferes with others' use of the library's services, although some of these situations are addressed. In most cases, such behavior is illegal and must be settled with the assistance of the police. This book *is* about the everyday occurrence we all dread: the patron who is upset about a library policy or procedure and vents his or her considerable anger on staff.

Direct and practical, *Defusing the Angry Patron* is a workbook, not a textbook. It seeks to:

- put anger into context;
- use real library situations;
- offer various techniques, so you can find the one that's comfortable for you;
- present scripts as examples from which you can create your own;
- give exercises so you can practice your new skills;
- suggest methods to release your own stress and anger; and
- provide tools to use on the job.

How Is This Book Organized?

Chapter 1, "A Primer on Anger," summarizes anger research that points to methods for dealing with this difficult emotion. The chapter includes an exercise designed to help you consider your own actions when you are angry and your reactions when confronted with an angry person. To make the most of what you read, take the time to do this exercise and the others that appear throughout the book.

Chapter 2, "Preventive Measures," suggests actions which can minimize the number of angry patrons you see. Some of these are things you as an individual can do, such as welcoming patrons as they arrive; others are for the library as an institution to do, such as signage. Included is a discussion of the expectations and attitudes of patrons and of staff.

The heart of the manual is Chapter 3, "How to Do It." This chapter presents 25 basic strategies for defusing anger in a patron or any other human being. Exercises are given so you can practice these strategies to see which ones fit you best. Some will feel more natural and will work better for you than others. Try them out!

Perhaps the most important technique for calming an upset person is to listen carefully. Thus, Chapter 4 is "Effective Listening Skills." As in the rest of the book, I encourage you to create your own responses rather than to memorize these.

Chapter 5, "Beyond the Basics," addresses difficult situations which are different from, yet similar to, dealing with anger. Complaints, accusations, and unacceptable behaviors are discussed. Completely new in this edition, Chapter 6, "The Digital Landscape," addresses the unique issues of handling anger on library webpages, blogs, and more.

The final two chapters focus on you rather than the patron. Chapter 7, "Coping with Your Own Anger," suggests ways of letting go of the stress and emotion we so often pick up from people who are angry. Chapter 8, "Help Is at Hand," offers practical tools for you to use when coping with angry patrons.

At the end of each chapter is a "Quick Review." You can use this to review what you have read or to share major points with a coworker or friend. In Chapter 8, the Quick Reference Guides section provides "cheat sheets" (see Figure 8.1) which summarize the key techniques in the book; use these as cards to keep with you or post them on your desk or computer. A bibliography and index complete the book.

Where Did This Book Originate?

I first started working with angry patrons as a jail librarian in the 1970s. My angry patrons included both inmates and correctional officers who were quick to anger and difficult to reason with. Public libraries in the area asked me to help their staffs learn techniques for coping with animosity, and so began 37 years of interest in this topic.

Besides my own experiences, *Defusing the Angry Patron* reflects the comments and experiences of 10,000 public and college librarians and paraprofessionals who have attended my workshops on the topic, as well as dozens of reference librarians, circulation staff, and other public and academic library workers in ten states who responded to a short, informal survey I conducted in 2009.

What's New in This Edition?

What has changed in the 11-year gap between the first edition of this book and this second edition?

Incidents with angry patrons have increased significantly, according to anecdotal evidence; firm statistics are difficult to find. For example, on May 31, 2010, *Library Hotline* reported that the director of the Kansas City (MO) Public Library "acknowledged to the local press . . . jumps in reported incidents of more than 50% from 2008 to 2009 . . . ." In June 2010, the director of the Central Library and the deputy executive director for Branch and Outreach Services explained to me in a telephone conversation that the newspaper reporter quoted by *Library Hotline* had not understood the difference between "behaviors" and "incidents" so her report was not accurate. They clarified that any one reported incident can be categorized in more than one way, and the staff members' perceptions of any one incident may vary, so the rise in reported behaviors may not reflect such a large actual increase in incidents. Yet e-mails I exchanged and phone interviews I conducted with librarians across the country that same month confirmed that the rate of encounters with angry patrons has greatly accelerated recently, although it has not been documented. The bad economy, the growing presence of homeless people at the library, and the unusually large demand for library services were usually cited as the reasons.

Customer service workers in the for-profit sector have also seen an increase in the number of angry customers, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. They "face more frequent personal attacks than people in most other occupations, with little or no opportunity to respond . . . as a group, customer service people are more prone to illness, absenteeism, stress-related disability claims, and family leave requests . . ." (Shellanberger, 2004).

Meanwhile, patrons' expectations have risen dramatically during the past decade. Options have proliferated in terms of formats and media, as well as expedited delivery methods. Self-service and 24/7 services via websites were new expectations—which most libraries did not meet— ten years ago. Now those advances are commonplace, and users have developed even higher expectations, especially in terms of speed. After all, young adults shun e-mail and phone calls for instant messaging and texting, and e-book readers can download entire books in under a minute. Unrealistic expectations yield frustrated users.

In 2000, there was much talk about the narcissistic "Me Generation," characterized by selfish, discontented, and entitled attitudes. In 2009, one spin doctor opined,

> During the past five years, a new attitude and a segment of American society has emerged—the *"Fed-Ups"*—along with a brand-new lexicon. In the past, the discontented constituted merely a slice of the population. Today, the Fed-Ups are nearing a majority of the population. In the past, the unifying emotion was anxiety [a mixture of fear and hope]. Today, it is frustration. . . .

And frustration is entry-level anger.

Libraries have changed in the past decade, too. In relation to angry patrons, I note five key changes.

1. **Behavior Policies and Procedures**. Most libraries are crafting their behavior policies more carefully, taking into account various lawsuits on the topic. For example, courts have ruled that a library is a limited designated public forum, with the right to enforce reasonable rules of conduct in keeping with its mission, as long as it also protects the rights of the public to use it. Other court decisions have forced libraries to write policies focused narrowly on specific behaviors without violating patrons' First Amendment, due process, and other rights. A related recent development is that more libraries are creating procedures to enforce those behavior policies.

2. **Penalties**. Many libraries are taking a tougher stance with people whose anger blows out of control ("like lit fuses") to keep staff (and other patrons) from being intimidated. It used to be that libraries did not ask patrons to leave unless their behavior was blatantly illegal or dangerous. Now many libraries are being proactive and enforcing stiffer penalties more readily. Patrons who are behaving in ways proscribed in the policies (e.g., disrupting the everyday operations of the library) are asked to stop, with the warning that if they do not comply they will be asked to leave. This tougher position may be a reaction to the current overcrowding in many libraries; or it may be the result of the success of the "broken window" theory of intervention. Criminologist James Q. Wilson coined the term when research found that a broken window which is not fixed immediately is a predictor of a neighborhood's decline. It seems that one broken window leads to more broken windows, so if each broken window (or misbehavior) is taken care of immediately, a community will feel that social order prevails.

3. **Security Staff**. Many more public libraries, as well as academic and special libraries, employ private security guards, usually through contracting with a security firm to provide and supervise the personnel. A 2008 study of Ohio's public libraries found that 25 percent have security officers, either in house or contractual, which is a higher percentage than in the past. Meanwhile, a few innovative libraries have agreements with the local police departments or social service agencies to work in the library, assisting both library patrons and staff with difficult situations.

These people are paid by the library but are hired and supervised by their respective departments.

4. **Virtual Reference Service (VRS) and other remote services**. In addition to traditional face-to-face (FtF) reference, most libraries now commonly offer virtual reference service via e-mail, instant message (IM), text, or chat. Some practitioners feel that the anonymous and faceless nature of VRS frees patrons of social constraints so that they express anger more easily, but research has found that only 4 percent of remote users were angry or rude during VRS. The basic interpersonal skills which librarians use in FtF or telephone reference serve them well in VRS too.

5. **Web 2.0 and Social Media**. The new interactive web allows easy, instant interactions between users and libraries as well as among users. Many libraries have jumped into the digital age by creating their own blogs and by creating a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and other social network sites. They are harnessing the power of social media to publicize library programs and services. Word-of-mouth publicity becomes viral marketing because comments (and responses) spread so quickly on the web. The downside is that complaints, angry comments, and misinformation also spread quickly. One dissatisfied user can broadcast his or her complaints to millions of people worldwide with a few clicks on a computer keyboard. Libraries are just beginning to comprehend the many and huge impacts of Web 2.0 and social media.

The strategies and exercises in the pages that follow are designed to give all library workers the tools they need to prevent angry confrontations and to quickly defuse those that do arise. My hope is they will make libraries a safer and better environment for both users and workers.