

STAYING WELL IN TURBULENT TIMES

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It's difficult to be a library worker today. Libraries of all types are subject to controversy and in the news almost daily; Florida libraries in particular. Why is this? Is it because the person in a representative role for the library profession made statements about being a lesbian or a Marxist? Or is there something deeper going on in our society as a whole? Many years from now sociologists may be able to explain this turbulent period, but, in the meantime, the situation remains a challenging one for library workers.

Alejandro Marquez from the University of Denver, Auraria Library, recently presented a webinar, "[Moral Injury in Libraries: Strategies for Healing and Growth](#)".¹ He describes moral injury as "a betrayal of an individual's personal or professional values or beliefs by authority figures, coworkers, users, and workplaces." Marquez references three types of moral injury: doing something that goes against your own beliefs, failing to get involved (not doing "enough"), and witnessing others treat individuals poorly. Due to the current cultural climate and the associated criticisms of the library profession, library workers suffer moral injury. Marquez explores the potential conflict between a library worker's personal and professional values and the values of community by examining the American Library Association's Core Values, Code of Ethics, and Freedom to Read Statement. Marquez goes on to share research regarding library worker attitudes about their work, revealing that many library workers feel tired, stressed, overworked, and that their work does not matter in the current climate. They are dealing with dwindling resources: time, money, and energy. Not only do library workers have these feelings, but many of the people the libraries serve have similar feelings and sometimes more extreme challenges, as in the case of those experiencing homelessness.

1. Marquez, "Addressing Moral Injury in Libraries"

2. Ettarh, "Vocational Awe"

3. Marquez, "Addressing Moral Injury in Libraries"



Library workers tend to see their work as important and more than just a paycheck; their work offers them a sense of purpose, growth, and community connection. Having the perspective that their work is more than just a paycheck poses additional challenges for library workers. Fobazi Ettarh, in the article "[Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves](#),"² states:

Vocational awe describes the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique. I argue that the concept of vocational awe directly correlates to problems within librarianship like burnout and low salary.

Library workers may see library work as a vocation, rather than a job or career, which connotes a religious "calling." A religious "calling" implies that library workers are saviors whose primary job is to "educate and save." If library workers are "called" to such service, then their libraries must be sacred places. Fobazi Ettarh argues that if library workers, by virtue of working in a library, are responsible for "good work," an expectation is set that any failures of libraries are largely the fault of library workers who failed to live up to the ideals of the profession. He asks the question: if the library's purpose is to serve, is it so holy that it fails to serve those who work in them?

Library workers become overwhelmed when dealing with cultural criticisms, moral injury, and vocational awe. So, how to cope? Alejandro Marquez suggests that one way to cope is to have hope. He defines hope as a will and a way. Being realistic and having a game plan is crucial, as a belief without a game plan is toxic positivity.³ Change will eventually happen; however, this change may take a while. In the meantime, library workers need to prioritize their physical, emotional, and financial health.

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In the book “Fostering Wellness in the Workplace: A Handbook for Librarians,” Bobbie Newman provides a number of recommendations for improving physical, emotional, and financial health. She addresses the library’s physical space. Libraries are often housed in older buildings, many of which were not even designed to be a library. Even newer workspaces can be problematic due to a lack of windows and a reliance on open floor plans, which result in a lack of privacy for library workers. Ergonomics need to be addressed as poorly designed work areas can result in neck, back, and wrist pain. Building temperature, noise levels, and air quality also affect one’s health. Library workers are entitled to well-organized, freshly painted spaces with updated furniture, all of which help improve both mood and productivity.⁴

Newman also considers library policies and practices such as salaries, paid leave, flexible work schedules, and the promotion of work-life balance, sharing research on how these policies affect worker wellness. Newman references emotional labor, which like moral injury and vocational awe, takes a toll on library workers. Emotional labor decreases job satisfaction and increases emotional exhaustion and burnout. Time away from the service desk and private spaces where staff can process the aftereffects of emotional labor are essential to a healthy workplace.⁵

Organizational culture, cultural humility, and an atmosphere of inclusion are also explored in “Fostering Wellness in the Workplace.” Library administrators play a key role in facilitating a healthy and productive workplace by advocating for library workers at their institutions. Library administrators and managers should also offer:

- robust new employee orientation programs
- clear, measurable, and reasonable goals and expectations
- practices that ensure continual learning
- opportunities for staff involvement in decision-making
- rotations of the most stressful job duties among staff and provide downtime to recover from these duties⁶

It’s important to acknowledge that administrators and managers are often stuck in the middle between frontline workers and their institutions. When they are able to do so, they should push back on unreasonable demands from higher-level administrators.

Library workers can support each other by encouraging self-care and reminding co-workers to take time for:

- Relaxing activities such as mindful meditation,⁷ body scanning,⁸ and journaling,⁹
- Practicing gratitude daily, taking a moment to acknowledge the good things in life, and finding joy in the small things.
- Setting boundaries and saying “no” when overworked and overwhelmed
- Staying connected and having a strong support system¹⁰

An important aspect of wellness is the belief that each one of us can make a difference. Alejandro Marquez proposes that library workers should find allies and partner with other organizations and individuals that share the same priorities as library workers. These could include:

- Labor unions and others who support collective bargaining
- Not-for-profit organizations such as the Everyday Activism Network¹¹ and EveryLibrary.¹²
- Professional organizations such as the Florida Library Association and the American Library Association. (Note: Despite the “banning” of memberships in these organizations by some library institutions, individuals are guaranteed the right of association in the United States Constitution.)¹³



4-6. Newman, *Fostering Wellness in the Workplace*

7. “Getting Started in Mindfulness”

8. Headspace, “Body Scan Meditation to Reduce Stress”

9. University of Rochester Medical Center, “Stress Management”

10. Rocky Vista Health Center, “Importance of Self-Care”

11. Everyday Activism Network

12. EveryLibrary

13. Findlaw, “Freedom of Association”

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In summary, these are challenging times for library workers. Some people in our communities have chosen to blame libraries and library workers for the changes they don't want to see in society. Library workers experience moral injury when they do things against their own beliefs, don't feel like they are doing enough, and witness others being treated poorly. They suffer from vocational awe by viewing the library as a sacred place and themselves as saviors resulting in burnout. Prioritizing physical, mental, and financial health is essential for library workers. Library workers can navigate these challenging times by learning about and taking advantage of workplace resources such as employee assistance programs, wellness programs, and paid leave; advocating for a healthy work environment, from ergonomic workspaces to private spaces to decompress after providing emotional labor; and seeking out allies who will support the work of libraries and library workers.

In the words of Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Library workers should begin by prioritizing their own physical, emotional, and financial health.



Resources

1. Alejandro Marquez, "Addressing Moral Injury in Libraries: Strategies for Healing and Growth," February 2024. Colorado Library Consortium, 39:54, video, <https://vimeo.com/910944002/759fc5f193>.
2. "Body Scan Meditation to Reduce Stress," Headspace, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/body-scan>
3. "Everyday Activism Network," accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.everydayactivismnetwork.org/>
4. "EveryLibrary," accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.everylibrary.org/>
5. Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe: An Understudied Aspect of Librarianship," In the Library with the Lead Pipe, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>
6. "Freedom of Association," Findlaw, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://constitution.findlaw.com/amendment1/first-amendment-freedom-of-association.html#:~:text=The%20Supreme%20Court%20has%20long,%2C%20religious%2C%20or%20cultural%20beliefs>
7. "Getting Started with Mindfulness," Mindful: Healthy Mind, Healthy Life, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>
8. Newman, Bobbie L. *Fostering Wellness in the Workplace: A Handbook for Libraries*. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2022.
9. Rocky Vista Health Center, "Importance of Self-Care," accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.rockyvistahc.com/importance-of-self-care>
10. "Stress Management," University of Rochester Medical Center, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.a.spx?>