

OLAQ

OLA Quarterly

Volume 12
Number 3
Burnout (Fall 2006)

July 2014

Librarian Crisp

Faye Chadwell
University of Oregon

Recommended Citation

Chadwell, F. (2014). Librarian Crisp. *OLA Quarterly*, 12(3), 10-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1123>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Librarian Crisp

by **Faye Chadwell**
Head of Collection Development and Acquisitions
University of Oregon

This essay could have been titled “Reflections on a Librarian’s Burn-out,” but my light went out a while ago. Without light there can’t be any reflection.

How exactly does a librarian become crisp? Most victims begin as highly motivated and successful people. They are passionate and committed to their work. [Imagine a slender elegant taper burning slowly but steadily—even brightly.] Their enthusiasm drives them to undertake project after project and commit to one assignment and then another and then another. [Envision a candle left burning all night or better still a candle burning at both ends.] Eventually these industrious souls over commit themselves. [Now picture the candle’s flame being extinguished along with the motivation and the passion.] At least this is the way I experienced burnout.

Who is to blame? Critics and even colleagues would say, “She has no one to blame but herself.” I say, “There’s no need to go there because I have already been there.” No one knows better than I that arm-twisting wasn’t required to get me to say yes to opportunities. I could have made a stronger case for not taking

on some assignments. If I had, unavoidable stress factors that eventually happen to all of us, such as the death of a parent or another loved one, serious health issues for self and family members, changes in important relationships through divorce or empty nests, would not have compounded the stress of work.

Is there anyone else to point the finger at? Maybe. How many of us find ourselves in an organization whose culture thrives on individuals who take work home with them, who launch late night e-mails, or who waken in the wee morning hours to crank out the latest greatest Web site?

What about a state that has such woefully inadequate funding so as to force us to repeatedly do more with less? Aside from doing more with less is also the stress or pressure of making up for the less. Shepherding ballot measures takes a lot of energy and the blow of a failed ballot measure must be crushing.

In her article, “The (D)evolution of a Director,” Julia Blake discusses why she opted to leave a director’s position for something with less responsibility. Blake’s article is one of two I read about library directors who had left their director positions because of burnout. Describing her condition, Blake says, “...rather than doing things well, I could do them only well enough.” This statement really rang true for me! Blake goes on to add, “I wouldn’t have called myself a perfectionist, but for most of my life I’d focused on finishing first and doing it right the first time. As I took on more committee assignments, assumed responsibilities for open positions in my department, and just dealt with the craziness that is our profession these days, I increasingly felt that a half-assed approach to completing most projects had become *de rigueur*.”

Let’s be clear. Stress in and of itself is not a bad thing. In fact, stress can be a good thing. As a runner who has a couple of marathons under her belt, I know that to finish a marathon you have to train. Training means submitting your body/your



Faye Chadwell



legs to a certain amount of stress so as to condition them to run faster and run farther. But in order to take on that stress you have to be in general good health, eat right, drink enough water, and get adequate sleep. If you don't, eventually your body is either going to break down or else you simply can't finish the race when you need to do so.

When discussing burnout among academic teaching librarians, Deborah Sheesley pointed out that it is useful to position stress, distress and burnout on a continuum. "At one end is a feeling of well being, and next to it a perceived sense of imbalance that is righted through the use of effective coping strategies. Further on is a stage in which the use of inappropriate coping strategies results in a loss of physical and mental resources; things are out of control. Last is burnout in which one feels "done in" by the stressful situation."

Is there something singular about working in libraries that triggers burnout among library workers more quickly or with greater regularity than in other helping professions? Probably not. Most of the research I read confirms that librarian burnout results from the same factors that toast other professionals.

What are the common causes of burnout? Below are seven that most of us have probably read about at some time or another in a magazine like *Ladies Home Journal* while waiting at the dentist's office. As you might imagine, there are also thousands of sites on the Internet offering similar information about what lies at the core of burnout:

- Lack of clarity about job requirements or work roles
- Inhuman work demands—both overload and underload



The San José State University MLIS

Conveniently located everywhere.

- Quality education
- Flexible programs
- Face-to-face, hybrid, and/or online courses
- Affordable tuition
- Opportunities to gain professional experience



School of Library & Information Science
<http://slisweb.sjsu.edu>

- Times of high stress with no down times
- Huge consequences in the event of failure
- Lack of personal control
- Lack of recognition and positive feedback
- Poor leadership

From my perspective, if the first six factors are a problem at your workplace, then it is a no-brainer that you have a case of poor leadership.

Herbert White reiterates the sources of burnout particular to our profession. White writes, "Burnout does not come from simply working hard, when that work is toward achievable ends that carry successful conclusion, credit, reward, and celebration. Hard workers do not get burnout, and they sleep well at night. Burnout comes from frustration; from insoluble dilemmas; from the recognition that the backlogs cannot be eradicated no matter how hard we try; that we can never succeed and never get credit; that irascible users will never understand and never be satisfied; and that certain managers will neither understand nor care while they blithely cut budgets in the confident expectation that nothing bad for them will result."

Work overload is a perennial problem for librarians. So few of us work outside the public sector; so many of us fall victim to the tribulations of being public employees. In Oregon, that means we have endured years of budget reductions or budget stagnation that translate into our doing two peoples' jobs while trying to be all things (or at least a lot of things) to a lot of people. Year after year we are expected to do more with less.

When you couple work overload with the technological tidal wave of the last decade, it is a wonder that more librar-

ies haven't simply gone up in smoke. Will Manley made an interesting point about how technological innovations have impinged upon our daily communications and so contribute to burnout. Manley said, "It seems to me that we are so busy transmitting and receiving information that we don't have time to communicate with people we really care about. Oh sure, with our car phones, voice mail, and e-mail we're in instant touch with each other; but because our pagers, beepers, and cell phones are always buzzing, beeping, and ringing we're too distracted to talk about anything more substantial than what company makes the best battery-powered lap top computer." Basically, we are working harder but not necessarily smarter; we communicate more, but not necessarily better or more clearly. Personally, I miss the daily coffee breaks similar to those I enjoyed with former South Carolina colleagues where we just discussed baseball, beer, or the latest book I had read. These breaks offered moments to get a decent perspective on working to live rather than living to work.

In a recent *American Libraries* article, long-term librarians recounted the ways they keep their work fresh. At least two of the responses referred to the importance of discovering something new daily. Yes, newness is refreshing but it is also a double-edged sword. Newness can keep work from being boring but newness can also press upon you like a mound of stones. What does your favorite blog say about this issue in libraryland? What company has merged with this company? Have you heard about the latest software to help you manage life in the third dimension? Remember that classic *I Love Lucy* episode when she and Ethel took jobs wrapping candy in the candy factory? The unwrapped candy came to them on the manufacturing belt faster and faster. To keep up, they began shoveling the pieces into their mouths and pockets until the factory had to shut the line down. New dis-



coveries often feel like that and I often feel like I can't take another bite of newness.

Ruminations on librarian burnout wouldn't be complete if they didn't include something about identity issues. Identity issues have been with us since our professional girlhood. While contemplating my own burnout, I read Peter Nicholson's piece, "The Changing Nature of Intellectual Authority. It made me believe our identity issues have now evolved. President of the new Council of Canadian Academies, Nicholson argues that "intellectual authority in contemporary societies—who and what to believe—is changing fundamentally." He asserts that as the information explosion goes nuclear in our society, at the same time "the agents we have relied upon traditionally to filter and manage information, and to broker formal knowledge—agents like research universities and their libraries, the serious media, and highly trained experts of all kinds—are less trusted as intermediaries than they once were." Why pay the overhead costs to produce resources like *Britannica* when a source like Wikipedia is freely available and it affords a user the chance to participate in the social Web, not just a social web?

Oddly enough, I have also felt the pangs of a loss of deference from within our own ranks—from younger colleagues who IM, spill metadata spiel with ease, blog just as soon as breathe, and are almost young enough to have never known a world without personal computers. Sure, I may be able to recite 10 reference sources that every library should own to provide biographical information on woman scientists. But my value to my own library appears dubious when I can't use Dreamweaver effectively and don't use RSS feeds to ingest even more information.

The disquiet I feel about changes to our professional roles got me to thinking about that dependable but lonely guy, the Maytag repairman. So I Googled the guy and discovered that Maytag, with the assistance of their ad company Leo Burnett,

had actually undertaken a review of the viability of this TV character. To my amazement, I discovered that Maytag and Burnett didn't decide to immediately retire the older character. Rather they partnered him with a younger version who was supposed to exude innovation, not just dependability. Laugh if you want, but our users and perhaps our bosses are probably dreaming about the implications of such a change on our behalf. More change is just what a burnout victim needs, right?

We probably all have suffered burnout at some level during our careers. Perhaps we just burned out implementing a tough project. If you suspect that you are burning out, there are tons of free tests and assessments to cruise on the Internet. If you are truly burned out, this might offer one way to escape the crush of work you now hate while appearing to work.


The Stress Doc, aka Mark Gorkin, talks about practicing "safe stress" on his Web site (<http://www.stressdoc.com>). Gorkin emphasizes his four Rs for rejuvenating and rehabilitating yourself in order to safeguard your sanity: reading, ruminating, writing (okay that doesn't really begin with an R), and reframing. I wish I had protected myself better and avoided burnout. Since I didn't, I found it a scary prospect when in the context of talking about recovering from burnout, Gorkin quotes Pablo Picasso: "Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction." Does this mean my 20-year old career in libraries is kaput?

Well, that is one option but it is not my only option and not the option I would choose. I still love being a librarian. The most important thing is to get help, and the very organizations that might have fueled the fires that consume us can try these simple strategies to reduce and prevent burnout among library workers:

- Identify stress factors
- Reduce the amount and intensity of stress factors



- Strengthen workers' ability to cope with stress more effectively
- Recognize and help those workers who aren't coping well with stress and who risk burnout

In his essay on creative burnout, Scott Berkun asks, "What would you do if you ran out of water? Would you become one with your couch, pizza in hand, watching movies all day long, leaving it to the fates to decide if you'll ever drink water again?" He thinks not and I think not. "You'd go out to the store, or perhaps to a neighbor's house and ask to borrow some of theirs. Burnout is entirely survivable." 

References

Berkun, S. #33 - How to survive creative burnout. Retrieved July 24, 2006 from <http://www.scottberkun.com/essays/essay33.htm>.

Blake, J. (2002, October). The (D)evolution of a Director. *American Libraries*, 33, no. 9, 62–63.

Bunge, C. A. (1989). Stress in the Library Workplace. *Library Trends*, 38, 92–102.

Manley, W. (2000, February). The Quotable Will Manley: 7 Years of Will's World. *American Libraries*, 31, no. 2, 38–41.

Nicholson, P. (2006). The Changing Nature of Intellectual Authority. Published as part of the Proceedings of the 148th Membership Meeting of the Association of Research Libraries, May 17–19, 2006. Retrieved June 15 from www.arl.org/url/proceedings/148/Nicholson.html.

Pergander, M. (2006, August). Working Knowledge. *American Libraries*, 37, no. 7, 79.

Sheesley, D. F. (2001, November). Burnout and the Academic Teaching Librarian: An Examination of the Problem and Suggested Solutions. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 27, no. 6.

White, H. S. (1990, March 15). Librarian Burnout. *Library Journal*, 115, no. 5, 64–65.

Ten Tips to Avoid Burnout

by Joanne V. Halgren
University of Oregon's Knight Library

- 1) Meet with your colleagues on a regular basis and discuss improvements and changes in your workplace
- 2) Make technology work for you. Remember WE created IT.
- 3) Visit similar work sites to see how others are doing the same job in different ways.
- 4) Ask others in your organization to cross-train and kill two birds with one stone. Enliven your own work day and if the time comes when either position is in need of temporary help, you will be prepared.
- 5) Keep yourself involved in activities outside of work that are fun and interesting.
- 6) Take vacations that stretch your limits or fulfill your dreams.
- 7) Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Many times this is when you learn the most.
- 8) Take stock on a yearly basis and measure how far you have come since your last review. You will be amazed at how much you have accomplished.
- 9) Eat a balanced diet and get enough sleep.
- 10) Celebrate successes, birthdays, anniversaries... anything that encourages you and your co-workers to keep on truckin'...

