

Librarians Under Crisis Call: Supporting Mental Health Challenges Through Policy, Social Media and Resource

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Abstract:

This paper explores a former public librarian's experience in serving people with mental difficulties and challenges. The paper will share several real life examples and describe how the librarian dealt with each case: from patrons with suicidal tendencies to stalking behaviors. Through new library policies, social media networks and resource promotions, the paper presents how librarians can better serve their communities with similar challenges.

Keywords: social medial, public librarianship, health, public services, and virtual reference

Introduction

Supporting library patrons with various mental difficulties can be a challenge for any library staff. Unlike physical disabilities and handicaps, mental illnesses can be difficult to detect. They also vary from different conditions and stages of each illness. School, academic and public libraries need to find ways to support patrons with mental difficulties as part of their library services. Fortunately, with today's technologies including social media, there are ways to promote awareness and collaborate with organizations to assist these patrons.

This paper explores several case examples of a public librarian who has supported patrons with a variety of mental difficulties. The paper discusses three main points: the need for a suicide prevention policy in the library, interacting with patrons who are mentally challenged or violent towards frontline staff and how to utilize social media tools and other resources to promote awareness of mental health challenges in society.

Internal Policies in the Library

The New York Public Library (NYPL) is one of the most important public libraries in the United States. Started in 1898, NYPL currently has 87 branches and 4 research libraries throughout New York City. In NYPL, there is a reference department called “ASK NYPL” which is made up of librarians who field questions from patrons every day. These patrons can call, email, text or chat with an ASK NYPL librarian from Monday to Friday. The librarians are trained to answer questions for research and branch libraries as well. The questions can be about library accounts, archives, databases or fact-checking inquiries. Some patrons have also contacted ASK NYPL during difficult moments with patrons undergoing suicidal tendencies as well.

In the summer of 2010, Mr. Matthew J. Boylan, a librarian in ASK NYPL answered a question from the New York City Police Department regarding a 16-year old girl who was threatening to commit suicide by throwing herself off a bridge in New York. The police officer notified Matthew that they could identify the girl’s NYPL library card. Fortunately, Boylan utilized the library card’s bar code and acted fast in giving the identity of the girl through the library account online: he found the patron’s home address and contact information for her parents. As a result, the child survived from this incident due to help of Boylan. Later, he was asked to research and draft a suicide response policy for NYPL employees.

Boylan published an article for *American Libraries* (2005) covering this incident and the actual policy that developed. Based on Boylan’s recommendation, librarians should call the police if the patron is in imminent danger of committing suicide. Boylan also recommends that if the threat is not imminent, the staff member should still call the police but also refer the patron to a resource centre for help such as a suicide prevention hotline. Most importantly, the staff member on duty should document and record the date, time, contact and any other relevant information for the police as well.

Throughout the article, Boylan highlights important policies and general information about suicide: all calls of attempt or threat should be taken seriously and need to be reported to the police for ethical purposes and to avoid legal liability from the library. If your community does not have a local hotline for suicide response, then it may be wise to investigate any national or local hotlines that may exist. Boylan recommends contacting those agencies to confirm their active statuses. He also stresses that these agencies should have access to the police if needed.

Overall, Boylan’s experience sheds important suggestions for all libraries to consider: Do your libraries have a suicide response policy? If so, does it need to be updated? If not, it may be useful to craft one for emergency cases if your library heavily provides telephone and virtual references, which will be explained in the next section. It is also important for the library to have a response to support patrons with mental difficulties who may express suicidal tendencies. This is often a complex and case-by-case situation but it is now understood that libraries can play an increasingly significant role in our community and society to support all kinds of patrons and ensure their safety.

Virtual Reference and Health and Wellness Services

For academic libraries, it is critical to provide the best quality of service for users online or in-person. Today, more and more academic libraries are providing virtual reference services, which means that librarians can “chat” with their patrons or receive texts or messages from them electronically and remotely. Typically in the evenings when students tend to study in the library after the library’s hours of service, they may use the virtual reference to get help from a librarian. They ask librarians to help them locate a book or find a scholarly article for their projects.

It is important that the library creates a policy and establishes a relationship with campus affairs that can support students during stressful periods such as midterms or finals weeks. Through these virtual services, students may explain how they might harm themselves due to the stress of academic life. Librarians that are providing these virtual services will need to act fast and contact emergency for help if the conversation becomes very serious. On the other hand, if the librarian suspects that the student may be overwhelmed and need support, the librarian can refer the student to the health or wellness centres on campus. Librarians can refer students to a campus hotline where a counsellor can speak to the students on the phone if needed. If the centres are not operating in a 24/7 schedule, it may be important to refer students to other local agencies that can speak to the students with care or call the local police if it is clearly an emergency.

Academic libraries must be prepared to have guidelines or policies to handle these situations. It is critical to have preventative measures by having written protocols for all librarians who are providing virtual services to know and to follow consistently. One of the most important changes of the academic librarian in the 21st century is providing virtual services while also supporting and referring students who may express suicidal thoughts to appropriate agencies.

Stalking In and Out of the Library

Any frontline library staff would know that dealing with difficult patrons is often common and frequent regardless of location. Librarians in academic, school, public and special libraries all have their experiences in interacting with patrons that are demanding. In my experience, as a former public librarian in New York, I have experienced working with many kinds of patrons. My service philosophy is to offer the best customer service that I can provide but sometimes patrons can misinterpret those activities completely differently.

Several years ago, I was working in the public library where I encountered a patron almost every day in the reading room. I provided help for the patron by finding relevant books for her research needs. We also had small conversations in between these activities. This particular patron was not aggressive or showed any clear signs of mental health illnesses such as hallucination or schizophrenia and I was not suspecting any of those at that time either. The patron was generally warm, genuine and fine. However, after my third day of interacting with this patron, I realized something was not quite right. I was in charge of closing up the library and ready to go home. This patron was waiting for me outside of the library and wanted to talk to me about what I like to do outside of the library. We took the subway home together and the patron was starting to follow me home. It did not occur to me until we got off at the same subway station after 45 minutes of commuting together. I had assumed that she was also heading the same location. But that was not the right assumption.

This patron followed me from the library to another location close to where I live. When I asked what the patron was going to do next after I felt that we needed to part ways, she didn't say anything. I had to tell her that I was going home and that I would see her in the library next time. She didn't follow me after what I said but stood there and watched me walk away from her. It was a strange encounter. I did not feel my life was endangered in any way but it reminded me that this person might need help. The next day, I did not see the patron at all. I did not encounter the patron until weeks later but she pretended nothing had happened. I asked if she also needed help but she said she was fine. However, she had attempted to follow me again but I had to tell her before we entered the subway together that I did not feel comfortable with her following me home. She gave a surprised look and then immediately walked away. I never saw the patron again but I suspect that she did not expect me to tell her that I did not want her to follow me at all. I had prepared a list of resources to give her but I never had the chance since she never showed up again.

This was a brief anecdote of one of my encounters with a patron that could have had some mental difficulties. I cannot diagnose exactly what her challenges were but this "stalking" incident is not unheard of or uncommon for library staff in the U.S. According to Anne Turner (2004), author of *It Comes With The Territory: Handling Problem Situations in Libraries*, the library should have a procedure in handling stalking or staring matters. Turner explains that it is important to listen to the complaints if the patron-victim is telling you what is going on. Most importantly, Turner (2004) asserts that it is important to document everything including date, location, time circumstances and the people involved. If the situation heightens, frontline staff may need to alert suspects about library policies or warn them that the police may be called. However, the police cannot act alone and will need the library's help which includes the documentation and action depending on the situation. In my case, I did not alert anyone because I did not find the patron to be threatening. However, I was also not aware of what was going on at the time.

This was not my only encounter with a stalking patron. In another case, a few years later, I had a patron stalking me inside the library. The patron was a demanding one. I was willing to help the patron at all times until the patron threatened the library including me. This incident happened when the patron needed a specific magazine – unfortunately we did not carry the magazine and I had to tell the patron about it. The patron was very upset and occasionally created outbursts in the reading room. I was about to call security as well but the patron walked away and said that she will "shoot everyone" in the library. It was a threat that was well received. I had informed security after the incident and they were able to look at the camera for the patron to put her on a watch-list. I had already told the security that the patron had been stalking me inside the library and always searching for me prior to the threat. It became clear that the patron could re-appear again and be aggressive with library staff including me. Months later the patron re-appeared but did not show any signs of aggression. However, for frontline staff, we were nervous and watched closely to ensure that she did not display any signs of aggression. We wanted to provide support for this patron but the patron never asked for it in the first place so it was not appropriate for us to intervene.

These anecdotes highlight that any kind of frontline staff may need to deal with patrons with mental difficulties. It is important for frontline staff to follow procedures and notify security or the police for preventative measures. According to a statistics from *Stalking Victimization in the U.S* (2006), a research conducted by the United States Department of Justice, 14 in every 1000 people were victims of stalking – about 3.4 million people in 2006. Another

alarming statistic is that 3 out of 4 people already knew their stalkers – they were a friend, acquaintance, or ex-spouse/partner. Stalking in and out of the library is a serious manner. Patrons with mental difficulties may act or behave like a stalker, however, it is important to find ways to support them and keep library staff and other patrons from harm. Preventative measures and documentations are needed. However, to prevent marginalizing patrons with mental difficulties, there are ways to demonstrate awareness and share knowledge and resources to support this community.

Social Media and Resource Promotions

To bring more awareness of mental health in our society, libraries can engage and promote awareness through social medial tools. From Facebook to Twitter to Tumblr, there are a variety of tools that can assist libraries in promoting resources that can support the mental health communities.

In NYPL, the library’s catalog system called “Blbiocommons,” contain features similar to a social media tool. Patrons can find books, DVDs, and other library resources but they can also review books like Amazon, create reading lists from the library’s resources, or message and connect with other account users. This type of system allows patrons to learn and share resources from the library and through other patrons online.

One advantage of having such an open resource as a catalog is the reading list features. In NYPL, librarians and patrons have created and shared lists of books and websites pertaining to general mental health challenges to specific diseases. This list can be shared to anyone and can promote awareness of the available resources from the library. When patrons attend a workshop organized by the library regarding mental health, they can access this list and find other resources to further enhance their understanding. This is an opportunity to strengthen communities that are focused on supporting marginalized groups by forming book discussions or inviting author talks or bringing health professionals to answer questions or concerns relating to mental health challenges. During events such as “World Mental Health Day” in October, the library can promote these reading lists online as well.

Numerous libraries across the world promote “World Mental Health Day” through their social media pages such as Facebook and Twitter. These strategies can encourage others to create and share resources and learn about ways to support people with mental disabilities. Most importantly, these activities may also bring awareness of stigmatization or myths of mental health challenges. By supporting marginalized groups of people through these engagements, this demonstrates the library’s commitment to supporting diversity in society. The social media tools also brand the library’s presence online and role in supporting people with specific challenges through resources, workshops and other programs.

Conclusion

Supporting patrons with mental difficulties can be challenging in all levels but as librarians, it is important to provide consistent service to all patrons regardless of their conditions. There are many opportunities to continue promoting resources and help for patrons with different mental challenges. Public libraries play an important role in society to reach out to those who are marginalized in society. By building resources such as e-books, guides, pamphlets and hosting workshops from mental health specialists in different languages and promoting these

activities and resources online, they may bring awareness of the mental illnesses faced by millions of people every day.

As described in this essay, it is important to develop an internal policy or guideline to deal with and support patrons under crisis mode. Having these protocols in place can save a patron's or a staff member's life. Libraries can find these opportunities to build these support services to support a marginalized community. The library values diversity and this ensures that people with any kind of disability are welcomed to the library.

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