

A WHOLEHEARTED
APPROACH TO
SERVICE...AND
BURNOUT
OR
SOFT SKILLS ARE
HEART SKILLS
BY MICHAEL STEPHENS



Over the years I have written about the soft skills required to do information work, such as taking initiative, communicating face-to-face and across multiple platforms, sensitivity, and professional responsibility. These are hard things to teach in LIS programs but giving students experience in these areas sets them up to be successful as librarians. I have also explored compassion, empathy, creativity, curiosity, and finding balance as equally important soft skills that add to our impact as professionals. These ***soft skills are heart skills***. I would argue that soft skills like this are the key to dealing with burnout in the profession.

We should always consider our users through a lens of compassion and empathy. What would make their lives easier? It's about taking care of user needs. We do a lot of "taking care" in our field such as offering a safe space for every person who comes through our doors to learn and grow, designing welcoming spaces for folks to come together to collaborate and exchange ideas, creating thriving digital communities, and providing participatory services to promote learning and well-being. What we've done in the past can also be seen through this lens. Think of all the programs and services over the years that might fall under the "taking care" banner. Even my own mantra of "the library should encourage the heart" is all about tending to the needs of our people.





But we must also take care of ourselves. I first heard of “compassion fatigue” at ALA New Orleans during a session I lead for PLA on professional learning experiences in public libraries. It can be exhausting - so exhausting - to give so much at service desks in our facilities. Please explore these ideas for using the heart skills of compassion, empathy, creativity, curiosity and balance to offset burnout in your organization.

 Creativity

 Empathy

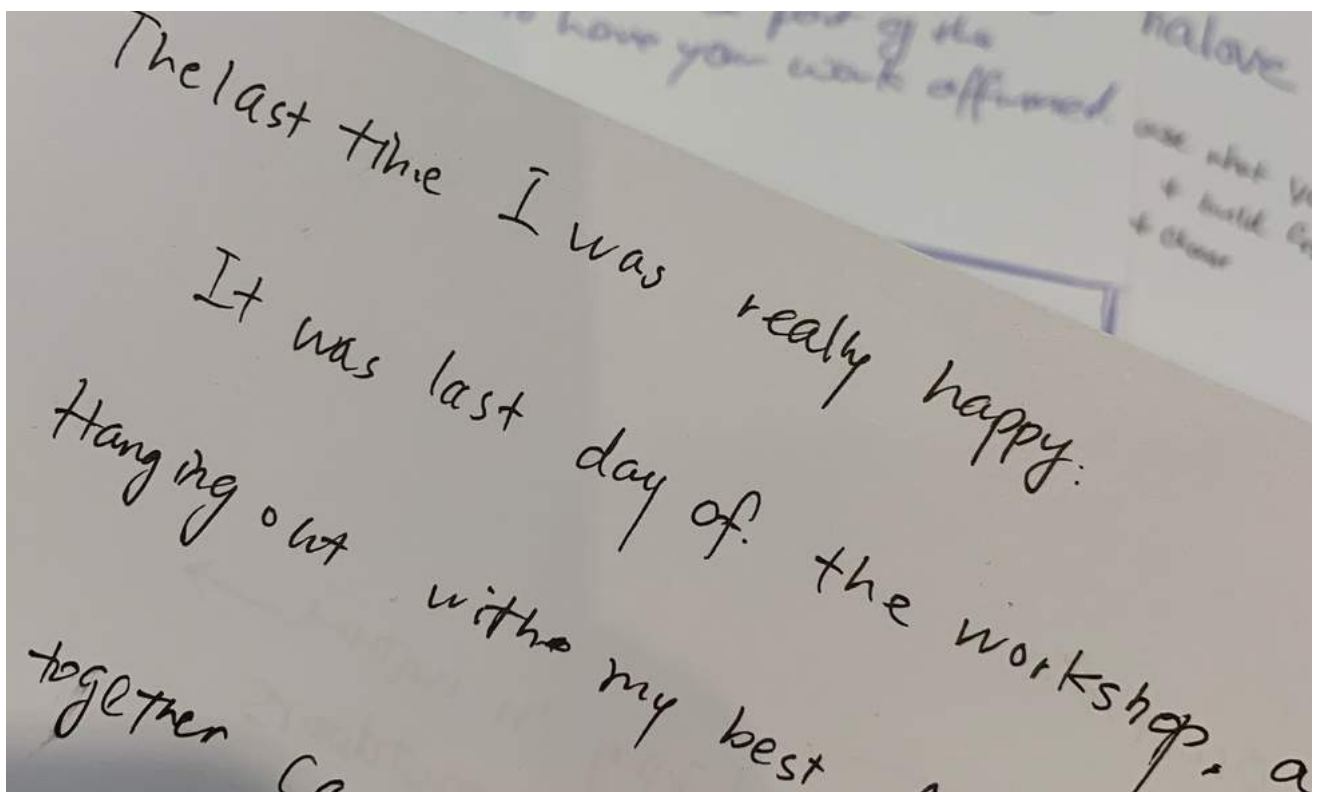
 Confidence

 Curiosity

 Compassion

 Character

I would suggest focusing on these heart skills in future department meetings or staff development days as a means to energize your staff. Perhaps build some discussion around what it means to have compassion or empathy for others. For example, try this question in a group: Describe a time you learned a valuable lesson about other people. This is about being human. Listen closely to the answers shared. Do you hear empathy? Understanding? This question emphasizes recognizing and valuing the differences among humans. Compassion seems to be most lacking in people who don't understand these differences.





Then, look for ways to offer a creative outlet for everyone. This could happen in a department or in the whole library itself. I so enjoy seeing the monthly pictures on Facebook of the St. Joseph County Public Library's Smart Box interactive space every month. A recent installation for South Bend Pride was a colorful way to engage in meaningful ways with the public and it shows through. For the staff involved, they are flexing those right brain muscles that sometimes get a little flabby when dealing with the day to day and the routine. We must keep staff interested in what they do, in love with the mission of their organization. This means attainable goals -- unattainable goals are such a terrible downer. And it means playing a role in the direction of the library.

Encouraging curiosity may also temper the trap of burnout. Hearing about libraries that offer every staff member 30 minutes of self-directed learning time per week to focus on whatever interests them is a step in the right direction. Perhaps new ideas for services and programming will be sparked in unlikely time spent with TED videos or learning all about the exploding community of web sleuths solving cold case online. Cultivating our personal learning networks (PLNs) and participating in conversations about our practice may also lead to honing the skills required to be a wholehearted librarian.



Administrators: all of these ideas will not work if staff are not supported by offering time, space and encouragement to learn and recharge. The library really must support librarians in order to have them do their best work. My research in professional learning experiences of public librarians reflects this.





Of course, we must find balance in all things. On a personal level, please know you do not have to live and breathe libraries every moment of the day. Many of us do - I surely did early in my career when blogging everyday and participating in the librarian online world seemed like the most important thing ever. As the years have passed, I value time away from my immersion in teaching about libraries as a means to recharge and reflect. For me, a long walk in the woods can do wonders for mindset and clarity. Forest bathing FTW!

I would also argue for open discussion about all of these heart skills and the stressors that may come with the work we do. One thing I've recently discovered is the power of talking about things like anxiety or depression openly. Discussion leads to understanding. With understanding comes empathy.





**We are learners.
We make connections.
We open doors.**

We can be the heart of our communities, and that only works because the people who run libraries are dedicated and approach information work in all of its forms with an open heart. We do this knowing that there will be hard days and disappointments, budget fights, and individuals whom they may not be able to reach. The best librarians make that emotional investment because they believe in the communities they serve.

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