

Librarians and Mental Health: An Annotated Bibliography

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Abstract

This annotated bibliography focuses on the literature dealing with the mental health of academic and public librarians. While there has been a longstanding focus on the issue of library patrons and their mental health, the mental health of librarians has long been ignored, making this annotated bibliography necessary. Aside from two articles written in 2007 and 2015, the remaining articles included in this bibliography were written between 2019 and 2025. This annotated bibliography comprises 10 sources: a book, six empirical studies, an essay, and two first-person narratives. The literature is primarily concerned with documenting the prevalence of mental health problems among librarians and the obstacles they face while also mentioning ways these obstacles may be addressed in certain instances. A common theme dealt with in the literature is the question of disclosure, with librarians describing both positive and negative experiences disclosing their mental illness in the workplace. The intended audience for this bibliography are librarians and library administrators in academic and public libraries. The purpose of this bibliography is to raise awareness among library administrators of the existence of librarians with mental health problems so that they may receive the accommodations they deserve if necessary. The purpose is also to show librarians with mental health problems that they are not alone in their struggles.

Keywords: librarian, mental illness, employment, disclosure, anxiety, depression

Trigger warning: This article discusses issues relating to mental health problems in a general manner.

Introduction

There has been a longstanding focus on the issue of library patrons and mental health. For example, many librarians undergo Mental Health First Aid training so they can assist a patron experiencing a mental health crisis, and social workers have been working in public libraries since 2009 (Peet, 2019, June 11). Indeed, as early as 2007, the Association for Specialized and Cooperative Library Associations, then a subdivision of the American Library Association, issued guidelines on how librarians should serve patrons with mental health problems (Pressly, 2017, p. 64).

On the other hand, the mental health of librarians and library workers has long been ignored. Librarians are often placed on a pedestal due to what is known as “vocational awe,” where librarians are seen as the “sane helpers” who, unlike their patrons, cannot have mental health problems (Rondinelli, 2024). Attention to librarians' mental health actually began in earnest in 2019. Prior to that, there were no comprehensive studies of the mental health of librarians. While Davis (2007) focused on the narrow topic of teaching anxiety among librarians and Becker and McCrillis (2015) looked at secondary traumatic stress among health science librarians, it was Burns and Green (2019), who were the first to give us a comprehensive study of mental health problems among, in their case, academic librarians. In fact, aside from Davis (2007) and Becker and McCrillis's (2015) articles, all other articles in the bibliography are from 2019 and onward. With almost 60 million Americans, or close to a quarter of the population in

the United States living with a mental health problem (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024, September), it behooves us to understand its prevalence among librarians, its impact, and how it can be best addressed.

The intended audience for this bibliography are librarians and library administrators who work in the various types of libraries that exist from academic to public and the literature addresses both types of librarians. The author hopes that this bibliography will make librarians and library administrators aware that librarians with mental health problems exist, serve with accomplishment, and are entitled to reasonable accommodations when necessary. It is also the hope that librarians with mental health problems reading this bibliography will draw strength from being reminded that they are not alone and come away inspired by reading how others with mental health problems have nevertheless excelled professionally.

This annotated bibliography comprises 10 sources: One book, six empirical studies, two first-person narratives, and one essay, all published in peer-reviewed journals from 2007 through 2025. Three sources focus on academic librarians, three studies focus on public librarians, and four sources focus on a combination of the two. One source focuses on the mental health of health science librarians.

The literature was found by searching academic databases such as OneSearch, Google Scholar, EBSCO Library & Information Science Source, and general Google searches using keywords relevant to librarianship and mental health such as “librarian AND mental illness,” “librarian AND mental health,” “librarian AND anxiety,” “librarian AND depression,” and “librarian AND autism.” Results were limited to those discussing

librarianship within the United States.

The literature can be divided into two groups: librarians experiencing psychiatric distress because of their library work, and the experience of people with independently standing mental health problems working as librarians. For example, Davis (2007) discussed librarians who did not necessarily experience the signs of mental health problems under normal circumstances but reported feeling anxious before and during teaching in the library. Rondinelli (2024), on the other hand, described what it is like working as a librarian experiencing anxiety and obsessive-compulsive-disorder (OCD).

A common theme dealt with in the literature is the question of disclosure. For example, Burns and Green (2019) found many librarians with mental health problems were hesitant to disclose their mental health problems in the workplace. In the first-hand accounts, we find different experiences described regarding disclosure. On one hand, Hickner (2023) and Rondinelli (2024), as well as certain authors in Dube and Wade (2021), describe positive experiences disclosing their mental health problems at work, while others describe having negative experiences.

Perhaps because the literature is in its beginning stage, it is primarily concerned with documenting the prevalence of mental health problems among librarians and the obstacles they face, such as not being provided with reasonable accommodations or dealing with the ways that working in a library can serve as a stressor exacerbating their mental health problems. Ways these obstacles can be overcome are often mentioned as an afterthought rather than as the primary purpose of the article. Perhaps with time and a greater awareness of the challenges faced by librarians with mental health problems,

more articles will be devoted to finding solutions and describing efforts that can be undertaken.

Finally, different terminology can be used when discussing mental health problems. Hansen (2021) argues that the term “mental illness” implies a “medical problem” and “deviance.” Instead, she prefers the term “mental health problem,” which she deems more respectful, although she does acknowledge that not all consider the term demeaning (pp. 106-107). While half of the literature surveyed contains the term mental illness in its title and clearly do not consider the term demeaning, I have decided to follow Hansen’s lead and use the term “mental health problems.” I have also used first-person language, such as “people with mental health problems,” instead of “people who are mentally ill,” throughout the paper to acknowledge that a person’s mental health does not define who they are.

The literature surveyed describes the resilience displayed by librarians with mental health problems who continue to work as librarians day after day. It is dedicated to all those who can identify with their experience and the allies who support them.

Annotated Bibliography

Becker, K. L., Loomis, K. B., & Hernandez, X. S. (2025). Anxiety, Depression, and Stress Amongst U.S. Public Library Employees. *Public Library Quarterly*, 1–26.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2025.2496594>

Becker, Loomis, and Hernandez (2025) explore the extent to which public librarians and library workers experience anxiety, depression, and stress. A majority of at least 227 respondents reported experiencing some level of anxiety, depression, and stress, which is

higher than those working in other industries. The authors employed a psychosocial approach, examining the “social elements” as they relate to people’s emotional states (p. 1). Respondents attributed their increased level of anxiety, depression, and stress to the impact of COVID-19, work stressors such as high library employee turnover, personal issues, and political issues such as politically motivated censorship of library materials, or the general stressor of living in a highly charged political society. The authors end by calling on library managers to take the needed steps to decrease anxiety, depression, and stress among their workers such by giving library employees a means to express their concerns, offer working arrangements than can reduce job related stress, offer supportive mental health resources and work to eliminate mental health stigma so library employees can talk openly about mental health issues that may arise.

Becker, R. W., & McCrillis, A. (2015). Health sciences librarians, patient contact, and secondary traumatic stress. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 103(2), 87–90. <https://doi.org/10.3163/1536-5050.103.2.006>

Writing from the perspective of health science librarians, the author’s goal is to study the prevalence of secondary traumatic stress (STS) among health science librarians who had interacted with traumatized patients or their family members. The study found that respondents experienced “mild to moderate symptoms” not unlike STS symptoms experienced in other professions (p. 90). The study also found that respondents were aware of their ability to turn to colleagues, relatives, friends, or workplace support such as Employee Assistance Programs. However, many did not avail themselves of these opportunities. Becker and McCrillis (2015) conclude by calling on future researchers to

develop strategies to combat STS among health science librarians and note that the study's small sample size of 45 respondents, all but one of whom were female, is a significant limitation.

Burns, E., & Green, K. (2019). Academic librarians' experiences and perceptions on mental illness stigma and the workplace. *College & Research Libraries*, 80(5), 638. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.5.638>

This study was conducted by Burns and Green, two Reference and Instruction Librarians within the Penn State college system. While previous studies looked at specific aspects of mental health and librarianship, Burns and Green (2019) were the first to conduct a comprehensive study of academic librarians with mental health problems. As they explain, their study is an outgrowth of prior research on librarians with disabilities. The purpose of their study was to analyze the way librarians with mental health problems are impacted by mental health problems stigma in the workplace. In particular, the study focused on whether stigma leads librarians to experience discrimination, the impact of stigma on librarians' decisions about workplace disclosure, and its effect on librarians' self-esteem. They studied 549 academic librarians representing the full range of mental health problems, including tenure-track and non-tenured librarians working in community and technical colleges and in liberal arts and research universities. Unsurprisingly, they found that librarians with mental health problems were afraid of how others might react if their mental health problems became known and often refrained from engaging in disclosure due to the stigma it might bring. At the same time, respondents believed that mental health training, such as Mental Health First Aid, could reduce this stigma.

D'Angelos, S. (2023). Between graduation and a brick wall: Burnout and mental illness in new librarians. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 8, 104-111.

<https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/13/11>

Drawing on personal experience as a new public librarian with mental health problems, the author argues that working as a new librarian can be uniquely stressful due to the need to interact with the public and constantly appear happy, a stressor that is always present in librarianship, especially while still adjusting to a new profession. In light of this, the author sought to study the correlation between mental health problems and burnout among new librarians. One hundred two public and academic librarians with five years or less of experience in the field responded to the survey, answering questions about mental health problems and burnout they may have experienced as new librarians. The majority of respondents identified as having a mental health problem of either anxiety or depression, with almost half of those with mental health problems saying that their mental health problems had taken a greater toll on their performance as librarians compared to when they worked in other professions. A majority of respondents also reported experiencing burnout, which was often unsuccessfully addressed, if addressed at all, by the public or academic library where they worked. The author concludes by discussing the need for new librarians to establish a support network among colleagues and the importance of fighting mental health stigma within the library as steps to reduce the stress that those with mental health problems may experience as new librarians.

Davis, K. D. (2007). The academic librarian as instructor: A study of teacher anxiety. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 14(2), 77-101.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J106v14n02_06

Davis (2007) examines librarians' teaching anxiety and whether it is influenced by how librarians perceive themselves or how other faculty members perceive them. After studying the responses of 382 academic librarians working in either public services or technical services, Davis (2007) found that the majority of respondents experienced teaching anxiety accompanied by either physical or emotional symptoms. Respondents reported using an array of techniques to address physical and emotional symptoms, including exercise and lesson preparation. Interestingly, respondents indicated that anxiety occurred before teaching a lesson, and diminished during the lesson. That, coupled with the fact that Davis (2007) makes no mention of respondents reporting taking prescribed antianxiety medication (2% reported taking over-the-counter medication), raises the question as to whether respondents only experienced situational anxiety or qualified for a full-fledged anxiety diagnosis.

Dube, M., & Wade, C. (Eds.). (2021). *LIS interrupted: Intersections of mental illness and library work*. Library Juice Press.

This excellent book consists of three sections that examine the intersection of mental health problems among librarians with individual chapters written by different librarians. The first section, told in first-person narrative, focuses on the experiences of those new to librarianship as they launch and solidify their careers in the field while experiencing mental health problems. The second section is more theoretical, focusing on the relationship between the “norms and practices of librarianship” and how they may support mental health stigma, posing obstacles for librarians with mental health

problems. The third section reverts to first person narratives, this time told by more established librarians with mental health problems (Dube & Wade, 2023, pp. 1-3). The book provides perspectives from both public, academic, and corporate librarians. While most literature on librarianship and mental health focuses on reference and instruction, this book also offers perspectives from those who have done archival work, cataloging or worked as a children's librarian. The book is also very comprehensive in that it goes beyond discussing anxiety and depression to dealing with addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. This book provides an excellent window into the experiences of librarians dealing with mental health issues.

Hickner, A. (2023). Learning to thrive-not just survive-as a librarian with mental illness.

In B. K. West & E. Galoozis (Eds.), *Thriving as a mid-career librarian: Identity, advocacy & pathways* (pp. 133-147). ACRL Press.

In this inspiring biographical essay, Hickner (2023), a librarian diagnosed with anxiety and depression, describes the challenges he faced working as a student worker in a health sciences library with a diagnosis of anxiety and depression and the factors that allowed him to subsequently thrive as he moved into various positions as an academic librarian. He begins his essay by describing how, as a gay person, he grew up experiencing what he terms "minority stress," or the stress experienced by "stigmatized minority groups" that can lead to mental health problems (Meyer, 2003, cited in Hickner, 2023, p. 135), to which he attributes his mental health problems later in life. On the other hand, Hickner (2023) acknowledged that his status as a cisgender white male provided

him with a position of privilege that aided in his eventual recovery.

Hickner (2023) proceeds to describe how he coped with his mental health problems by adopting an optimistic outlook, creating a life of connection to others, establishing a work-life balance, and journaling. Within the library, he found an empathetic manager with whom he could be transparent, as well as colleagues with whom he could confide. It may be due to these positive experiences that Hickner (2023) encourages workplace disclosure. Hickner (2023) also describes how he forced himself to face his fear of delivering library instruction, likening it to "aversion therapy" (p. 142). Hickner concludes by stating that librarians need to become more aware of their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the accommodations available to them in the workplace. Readers are likely to come away from this narrative with a sense of hope and practical coping ideas for librarians facing mental health problems.

Lublin, J. (2023). Uncovering challenges faced by autistic librarians. *Public Libraries*, 62(4), 48–54.

In this essay, the author, Jessica Lubin, a public librarian with autism describes the challenges people with autism encounter while working as librarians. These include the need to learn how to read social cues from supervisors and colleagues, and the often "unwritten rules" that govern library interactions (p. 49). She also discusses how ableism enables librarians who are "allistic," a term used for people who identify as neurotypical (p. 49) to dictate to librarians with autism how to behave such as to insist that those with autism refrain from engaging in stimming, a repetitive motion that many people with autism find soothing. Lubin argues that it is important to have librarians with autism in

the library so that patrons with autism will feel understood and inspired when they visit, and calls for library programming geared to the needs of those with autism. She also argues that many aspects of librarianship tends to be structured and a good fit for people with autism who tend to thrive with structure. The article ends with a call for “allistic” librarians to serve as allies and provides a reading list of books to help them better understand what it is like to live with autism.

Lundstrom, K., Fagerheim, B., & Van Geem, S. (2021). Library teaching anxiety:

Understanding and supporting a persistent issue in librarianship. *College &*

***Research Libraries*, 82(3), 389. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.3.389>**

The purpose of the study was to determine academic librarians' attitudes towards teaching and experiences of anxiety, especially teaching anxiety. The author surveyed 931 academic librarians with library teaching experience. A majority of the respondents reported having an anxiety disorder, either with an official diagnosis or self-diagnosed. They also reported experiencing teaching anxiety, often accompanied by physical and psychological symptoms, which often impacted their personal lives. As expected, librarians experiencing teaching anxiety tended to have a negative attitude toward teaching and hoped to decrease the amount they taught or discontinue teaching altogether. Paradoxically, some saw their anxiety as making them more reflective or empathic teachers who were spurred on to greater preparedness. Librarians indicated that they coped with teaching anxiety through extra preparation and by turning to colleagues and friends for support. Interestingly, the authors did not find that librarian instruction anxiety necessarily decreased with library experience. The authors conclude

their study by recommending that libraries consider hiring more librarians who are interested in teaching and prepared to teach, limit the daily and weekly librarian instruction loads, and provide emotional support to those experiencing teaching anxiety. A limitation of the study was that the respondents were mostly white females, limiting the generalizability of the results to male librarians and librarians of color.

Rondinelli, M. (2024). What's missing in conversations about libraries and mental illness. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*.

In his essay, Morgan Rondinelli (2024) poignantly describes his experience working as a public librarian with mental health problems and the insight it has provided him. He begins his essay by discussing the need for librarians to recognize the bias they may have toward those with mental health problems and the impact it can have on colleagues or patrons who actually have mental health problems. An example Rondinelli (2024) provides is how a librarian's unnecessary fear of patrons with mental health problems can interfere with their providing such patrons with the services they may need. Rondinelli (2024) also describes how he has observed colleagues describe patrons with mental health problems as "crazy" and how this has made him feel invalidated and unable to discuss his mental health problems in the workplace. At the same time, Rondinelli (2024) reports actually working in a supportive environment that allows him to take mental health days and have a healthy work-life balance. Rondinelli (2024) concludes his essay by discussing how he has disclosed his mental health problems to colleagues who have responded positively. He goes on to say that while disclosure is a personal choice, it should be available to all who seek it.

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