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New and Noteworthy

Just Breathe – Mindfulness and Libraries

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Why is mindfulness popping up in the media so much lately? Long associated with Buddhist practices, suddenly articles about mindfulness are mainstream: “How to Create Mindful Leadership,” “Bringing Buddha to the Newsroom: Media with Mindfulness,” and “How Meditation Helps You Handle Stress Better,” to name only a very few. There is even a bimonthly magazine devoted to the topic, *Mindful* (“Taking Time for What Matters”), which covers a wide range of topics including meditation techniques in the workplace, dealing with teenagers, compassion fatigue, change management, toxic relationships, and more.¹

But what is mindfulness, and how does it affect our work as librarians? Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Buddhist practitioner, and the creator of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality.”² With constant demands on our attention and ever-increasing workloads, librarians are finding that the benefits of paying attention through mindfulness meditation and other techniques can help us decrease our stress levels and enhance our personal and professional lives.

Ellyn Ruhlmann, writing in the June 2017 issue of *American Libraries*, offers a useful introduction to mindful librarianship.³ Although not always obvious to non-librarians, working in libraries can be a very high-stress job, made worse by insufficient staffing, chronic overload,

difficult patrons, and “behind-the-scenes drama.” (p. 45). Stress in the library workplace is well documented in the literature, and some librarians are turning to mindfulness techniques for themselves and their patrons to help cope. Ruhlmann discusses several useful studies, books, apps, and online resources on the topic, and includes a quick “Mindfulness Meditation 101” exercise for beginners.

Another good introduction to mindfulness in librarianship comes from Kristin Mastel and Genevieve Innes, writing in the March 2013 issue of *LibRes*.⁴ “Insights and Practical Tips on Practicing Mindful Librarianship to Manage Stress” approaches mindfulness from its roots in historical Buddhism and emphasizes its many benefits to today’s librarians. As the authors state, “Mindfulness practice has tremendous potential to help librarians manage work stress and improve the quality of library services. There are many ways to incorporate mindfulness into one’s daily work life, as well as to maintain a practice outside of work” (p. 6).

Geared toward academic librarians, *The Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship*, is a thorough, well-researched source on the background and theory of mindfulness research, an overview of mindfulness in K-12 and higher education, and practical advice on applying mindfulness to academic work.⁵ The authors devote discrete chapters to key aspects of academic library work: undergraduate research, information literacy (with particular emphasis on the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy*), reference service, faculty relationships, and leadership. One particularly interesting chapter, “The Mindfulness Movement in Education,” discusses an aspect of higher education not often covered in the library literature, that of student motivation. As chapter authors Richard Moniz and Howard Slutzky state:

“How often do we see students the struggle at all levels of education because they face problems that are not fundamentally academic? Issues as basic as time management or where to start with a research project are challenges that librarians and teachers see students face every day. On a more basic level, we

know, both in what we see in the classroom and from our own personal experiences, the powerful role that self-regulation (or lack of), distraction, self-efficacy, and other concerns can pull us and our students away from being in the moment and learning as effectively as possible. The mindful or contemplative movement in education provides us with an alternative way to view education.” (p. 27)

Chapter 8, “The Solo Librarian,” expands the mindfulness discussion to school and special librarians, demographics with unique needs and workplace pressures. Also, a key strength of the book is its lists of recommended resources and bibliographies, which are well-constructed and serve as good next steps for further research.

Busy schedules and workplace pressures often make the idea of mindful reflection as a regular practice an impossibility. Michelle Reale, an associate professor at Arcadia University, argues in her book *Becoming a Reflective Librarian and Teacher* that regular reflection is a necessity in our personal and professional lives, and can make us better librarians and educators.⁶ Using journaling as a framework for reflection, librarians are encouraged to make time for reflection, practice problem solving, and question the status quo. Chapter Six, “Using the Journal in Reflection,” suggests several techniques of using journals, including stream of consciousness writing, dialogue, lists, drawing, poetry, metaphor, and narrative. Strategies at the end of each chapter offer useful suggestions for putting theory into practice.

Reale’s approach is quite personal in that she frequently uses her own career trajectory, experiences, and vocational philosophy in this book. Chapter 10 in particular, “Professional Autobiographical Reflection,” is an in-depth discussion of her examination of her own work ethics, work-life balance, and professional identity. Although some readers may find this approach too autobiographical, it serves to illustrate the theories discussed elsewhere in the book in a conversational way and offers a specific example of how others might approach their own self-reflection practice.

Mindfulness is also a useful professional tool as we work with our patrons. Jill E. Luedke, *Reference & Instruction Librarian at Temple University*, writes about a mindful meditation technique she uses in her information literacy sessions in a 2013 ACRLog blog post.⁷

“As a teacher of lifelong research skills, it’s part of my responsibility to give students tools to help them handle their frustrations and preconceptions about research. How could I expect students to process what I was saying if their brains weren’t ready to receive the information? I began the experiment of devoting a few minutes of my sessions to guided [mindful meditation](#). My intention by having students meditate at the beginning of class was not to turn them all into Buddhists. It was to help clear their mind-clutter and reduce their research stress. This practice in mindfulness was about preparing them to be receptive learners.”

She offers reflections on her rationale for using this technique, and includes some suggestions for further reading. See also Luedke’s “Guided Mindfulness Exercise in the Classroom” on YouTube for examples of her technique at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM0zF-GxFI4>. Turning to school libraries, Humboldt Junior Senior High School librarian Megan Shulman offers interesting and fun mindfulness exercises for younger library patrons in “Mindfulness in the Library.”⁸ “The Spiderman Breath” and “Body Find” help media center librarians focus their students’ attention on the task at hand.

As librarians and information specialists, we are bombarded 24/7 with constant demands on our attention and time. By practicing mindfulness techniques such as guided meditation, focusing on one task at a time, and cutting down on time spent checking e-mail and social media, it may be possible to refocus our work on the most significant tasks and priorities, and help us rethink the way we look at other aspects of our busy lives as well.

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¹ See Faizer, Melanie, "Bringing Buddha to the Newsroom: Media with Mindfulness," *Columbia Journalism Review* (June 29, 2017), available at <https://www.cjr.org/innovations/mindfulness-media-buddha.php>; Oaklander, Mandy, "How Meditation Helps You Handle Stress Better," *Time* (Jan. 24, 2017), available at <http://time.com/4645363/mindfulness-meditation-stress-anxiety-resilience/>; and Thakrar, Monica, "How to Create Mindful Leadership," *Forbes* (June 28, 2017), available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/06/28/how-to-create-mindful-leadership/#1c894027342a>. The magazine *Mindful* offers limited content and special features at <https://www.mindful.org>. Also, for an interesting overview of the recent upsurge in the popularity of mindfulness, see Kate Pickert's 2014 *Time* article, "The Mindful Revolution," available at <http://time.com/1556/the-mindful-revolution/>.

² Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. (New York: Hyperion, 1994), p. 4. Other popular titles by Kabat-Zinn include *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. (New York: Dell Pub., 1991) and *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment - and Your Life* (Boulder, Colo.: Sounds True, 2016).

³ Ruhlmann, Elyn. "Mindful Librarianship: Awareness of Each Moment Helps Librarians Stay Serene Under Stress." *American Libraries* 48, no. 6 (2017): 44-47. Available at <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2017/06/01/mindful-librarianship/>.

⁴ Mastel, Kristin and Genevieve Innes. "Insights and Practical Tips on Practicing Mindful Librarianship to Manage Stress." *Libres: Library and Information Science Research E-journal* 23, no. 1 (March 2013). Available at <http://www.libres-ejournal.info/372/>.

⁵ Moniz, Richard, Joe Eshleemann, Jo Henry, Howard Slutzky, and Lisa Moniz. *The Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship*. (Amsterdam: Chandos Information Professional Series, 2016). Also see the authors' related article "Stressors and Librarians: How Mindfulness Can Help" (*College & Research Libraries News* 77, no. 11 (2016): 534). Another good resource is the "Mindfulness for Librarians" Facebook Group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mindfulnessforlibrarians/>, which is administered by book co-authors Richard Moniz, Jo Henry, and Lisa Moniz, and by Madeleine Charney.

⁶ Reale, Michelle. *Becoming a Reflective Librarian and Teacher: Strategies for Mindful Academic Practice* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2017).

⁷ Luedke, Jill E. "Focusing the Mind, Practicing Attention in the One-Shot Library Session." *ACRLog* (Nov. 18, 2013). Available at <http://acrlog.org/2013/11/18/focusing-the-mind-practicing-attention-in-the-one-shot-library-session/>.

⁸ Shulman, Megan. "Mindfulness in the Library." *Knowledge Quest: Journal of the American Association of School Librarians* (Sept. 24, 2015). Available at <http://knowledgequest.aasl.org/mindfulness-in-the-library/>.