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Our Librarian Bodies. Our Librarian Selves.

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- In the Library with the Lead Pipe - <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org> -**Our Librarian Bodies. Our Librarian Selves.**

Emily Ford

December 3, 2008 @ 6:30 am



[1]

Thanks to Inju on Flickr for this image. (Exercising in National Library Singapore)

Librarians are great at taking care of their patrons. We will conduct searches for our patrons and provide them with the resources they need, we contribute to the public good and offer ongoing educational opportunities, and we provide community space in the name of discourse and community building. We also testify in and lobby Congress in support of legislation that affects our work—all in the name of taking care of our patrons. But to what extent do we take care of ourselves?

I'm talking about workplace wellness. This is an issue that seems largely ignored in library land, an issue that may cause eye-rolling and cause some of our Lead Pipe readers to stop right here and move along to the next post in their feed reader. But workplace wellness is an issue that seems to be largely ignored by libraries, librarians, and library organizations. Literature searches in library and information science databases return very few relevant articles on the subject. Why?

Before I attempt to answer this question I'd like to propose a working definition of workplace wellness. Wellness in the workplace refers to an employee's mental and physical health. Many businesses and organizations have implemented workplace wellness. Examples include the facilitation of lunchtime walking groups, providing on site massage appointments, and offering classes and lectures regarding wellness. Also included would be programs supporting employee health; providing free flu shots and health screenings, providing ergonomic work stations, having healthy snacks available, or even allowing workers flexible schedules to take care of their physical and emotional health as needed. According to this loose working definition it's likely that every library has some sort of wellness program, but it seems to me individual and organizational buy-in aren't that widespread in the library community.

I assume that the reason workplace wellness hasn't caught on in libraries is a combination of the following reasons. First, wellness programs that do exist usually happen within a broader institutional context. Since most libraries are part of an academic institution, county or city government, or some other larger bureaucratic model, wellness initiatives seem to occur at a higher institutional level, and, as such they haven't become top priorities for many libraries. Second, librarians are hard working dedicated people, who may not feel they have the time or even the desire to participate in a wellness initiative. Third, wellness programs haven't been heavily marketed to libraries and librarians, either by their institutions or by profession-wide initiatives. Fourth, wellness programs cost, and most libraries are already run on tight budgets. Finally, wellness may not be part of a library's organizational culture, or it might not even be an organizational value. It is this fifth factor that is perhaps the most prohibitive to the overall wellness of library employees.

A healthy and well library staff will provide better services to its patrons. Providing for and assisting employees in this regard will mean that they can work more efficiently and effectively. Of concern to many administrators should be the fact that wellness initiatives will save the institution money in health care costs when workers have fewer physical and mental health problems. One of the best examples that support this is ergonomics.

Wellness in the workplace constitutes a web of factors that can determine the status quo level of health and wellness experienced by employees at your library. Many of these factors may seem irrelevant when considered on their own; however, when placed in conjunction with others, they work collectively to either create or hinder employees' well being.

The first two factors affecting workplace wellness are simple—your library's physical space and physical location. How the inside of your workplace is designed affects how much you move at work. (E.g. is there an elevator, how far do you have to walk to place something in the recycling?) The library's physical location can also affect workplace wellness. (Is there a tempting restaurant nearby or are you close to a park with walking trails?)

The third factor isn't as cut and dry—[organizational culture](#) ^[2] and values. These can greatly impact wellness at work. For example, many librarians work hard and long hours, which can lead to skipping breaks, even skipping lunch or eating at our desks in front of a project. These habits do not contribute to having a healthy workplace. For one, it reinforces the sedentary nature of library work, and second, it doesn't allow an individual the mental break that one needs to best achieve work efficiently.

Food is also a large part of culture at many libraries. At one library where I used to work, there was a "chocolate drawer" behind the reference desk. Whenever we had a particularly trying interaction with a patron we would medicate ourselves with chocolate. Other libraries might have a tradition of pastries at department meetings, or social events, which usually include food.

However, changing an organization's culture is not an easy thing. And if there's anything that organizations are not quick to do, changing the culture and our values are it. So how are we to tackle this issue? How do we even frame an argument for starting wellness initiatives within our workplaces? First, we have to work to create wellness as a value within the workplace. At institutions where a wellness program already exists, but is not culturally adopted by the library, how do you get the library to do so?

I'd like to offer some suggestions as to how we can begin to tackle the organizational culture and values regarding wellness issue in the places of our employ.

- Conduct an informal evaluation of your workplace to find supporting factors and hindrances to a healthy work place.
- Ask for institutional support based upon your informal evaluation or observations. Paired with the [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#) ^[3], this might be a convincing argument that your supervisor can send up the management chain.
- Start a wellness committee and task yourself with developing a wellness plan for your library.

But what if your place of work/administration is not understanding of your plight?

- Be aware of your habits at work. Wear a pedometer; take a walk during your lunch break (and invite your colleagues to join you), consider ergonomics, etc.
- Investigate whether your larger organization (city, county, institution) has a wellness

program and participate in that as an individual. Then try to market it to your fellow staff.

- If you create community programs in your library or conduct outreach work, try to plan and implement programming about health and wellness.

There are some resources and initiatives that do exist regarding wellness in libraries. Most notably, ALA Past President Loriene Roy created the [Circle of Wellness](#) ^[4] as one of her presidential initiatives. This web site offers resources for individuals to use to assess wellness attitudes in their library, as well as track their personal wellness goals. These resources offer a good starting place for you if you are interested in investigating wellness at your library.

The healthiest work places already have an organizational culture of wellness and value health as an institution. If this is not the case in your library, establishing a culture of wellness will happen very slowly. It takes quite a bit of energy and work to change and shape organizational values and change begins with the action of one or two motivated and dedicated individuals. It's time we take care of ourselves and take the steps to create healthier work places. In the long run, our health and wellness serves our well-being and also our ability to provide the best services to our patrons.

See the following articles on organizational culture:

Shepstone, C. & Currie, L. (2008). Transforming the academic library: Creating an organizational culture that fosters staff success. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(4), 358-368.
Sannwald, W. (2000). Understanding organizational culture. *Library Administration & Management*, 14(1), 8-14.

Many thanks to Phil Eskew (one of the best instructors I had in library school), and Miriam Rigby for offering feedback on this post. Thanks also go to fellow Lead Piper Derik for reading this prior to posting.

You might also be interested in:

- [How Do You Say No?](#) ^[5]
- [Tryin' to Get My Mojo Workin'](#) ^[6]
- [It's the Collections that are Special](#) ^[7]
- [My \(Our\) Abusive Relationship with Google and What We Can Do About It](#) ^[8]
- [Collaborating with Faculty Part 2: What Our Partnerships Look Like](#) ^[9]

19 Comments To "Our Librarian Bodies. Our Librarian Selves."

19 Comments ([Open](#) | [Close](#))

#1 Comment By [Laura Z](#) On December 3, 2008 @ 10:31 am

I think you hit the proverbial nail on the head when you said "It is this fifth factor (organizational culture) that is perhaps the most prohibitive to the overall wellness of library employees." As you identified, this is the hardest to change, but often at the root of why otherwise valiant healthy workplace efforts do not take off.

I would include in this an organization's need to look at its collective mental and emotional as well as physical health. People work themselves to the bone if they are feeling competitive with others or if they perceive the organization will let them go at a moment's notice or if someone doesn't have their back and is waiting for them to mess up in any way. I know we can't force people to go to therapy, but doing this might also go a long way in promoting overall healthy workplace culture.

#2 Comment By [Janet](#) On December 3, 2008 @ 10:43 am

Good post. For me, physical and emotional health are inextricably linked. Having an emotionally healthy workplace in which people are treated well and the workload and expectations are reasonable allows me to sleep better and feel comfortable leaving my desk for lunch or a break. But not everyone feels that way.

What's also missing is a sense of camaraderie built around more than food. I'd love to see a library walking group, and I've even tried a time or two to form one. But people were always too busy to take 30 minutes a couple days a week to walk. I wonder how much more productive we would have been if we had done so.

#3 Comment By └ On December 3, 2008 @ 11:10 am

Good post—physical and emotional health should be encouraged in the workplace. But not by eliminating the chocolate drawer and pastries at meetings! I assume Emily is suggesting offering alternative healthy snacks along with the chocolate and pastries. To try and eliminate comfort food would be a dictatorial morale-killer. Sorry to pick on that one little thing in a really helpful post, but you pressed a button with me when you brought up junk food!

#4 Comment By Matthew On December 3, 2008 @ 11:18 am

Wellness programs appear (from management perspective) to have associated costs, though it need not be so. They also provide benefits – lower insurance costs, fewer missed days (both physical ailments/injuries and mental health days, including lower rates of depression).

I agree – this is a huge issue, not just in libraries, but in every workplace in the fattest, most out of shape culture in the world.

#5 Comment By Lori On December 3, 2008 @ 12:19 pm

One thing that bothers me a bit in this post is “Second, librarians are hard working dedicated people”. The irksome part of this assertion is that place with less hardworking and dedicated staff will have less issues with providing a healthy workplace. Why is this SO irksome? Because I think it’s a global belief: if you are dedicated to your job you will slave away at your desk, barely move, and compartmentalize your workday away from the rest of your needs and life.

Workplace wellness is an issue across the board in a variety of circumstances. My main concern, in the land of libraries, would be the intellectual component: namely focus on the brain and not the body further enables this workplace culture to devalue the effect physical health as on mental acuity.

AS already mentioned, until it is made clear that workplace wellness ultimately saves the company money (less sick days, better insurance premiums) and increases productivity, it will be viewed as a drain...

#6 Comment By Lisa On December 3, 2008 @ 3:49 pm

In case you think the image that led off this article represents an idea foreign to US libraries, (and for those of you with access to the Chronicle), I listened to this recently which talks about libraries as space (and library space changing because of culture).

The new library space used to start the discussion is at Goucher College and will feature exercise opportunities. Although it’s student culture that’s focused on (both in the article and in the building), it goes to Emily’s point that we provide for our patrons’ needs. But maybe changing the space for them will provide opportunities or reinforcement of a changing culture that will benefit library staff wellness as well.

#7 Comment By Lisa On December 3, 2008 @ 3:52 pm

Sorry, the links I meant to include were:

Tech Therapy: The Library Building
[10]

and

Goucher College [11]

#8 Comment By Emily Ford On December 3, 2008 @ 3:52 pm

I think that all points so far are quite true. In particular, Lori’s comment makes me think that workplace wellness extends far beyond organizational culture and into our “American” (should it be capitalist?) social culture that values the hard worker. Even in the manner I included this fleeting comment in my post shows that I am not immune to cultural influence (society’s/capitalist culture’s). Furthermore, I think Lori is pinpointing the particular thing about libraries that makes it an even bigger issue for the profession: intellectual work vs. other forms of work.

@r. Right now I am eating lunch at my desk, responding to comments on my blog post over my lunch break. Oh, and I am eating a bar of chocolate. Of all the people who shouldn't be deprived of junk food, I am one. I just think that we need to create a better general organizational culture of wellness. Janet's point is also well taken, we need to find a way to create community that does not center around food.

#9 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 3, 2008 @ 3:56 pm

@Lisa. I listened to that and it is fascinating. I was trying to find a way to work it into this post. Alas, I had already written so much! The issue with the Goucher College thing, again, is that the idea is the library space will provide for patrons and community. I wonder at what level this kind of providing for patrons will translate to the library having an organizational culture in which wellness and health play a large role. Here's the link to the ^[12]. The episode is number 36.

#10 Comment By [r](#) On December 3, 2008 @ 5:55 pm

Thanks, Emily, for the admission of chocolate-bar guilt. :-)

It seems that almost any library should be able to draw on resources/experts from the wider community to host small staff-development events centered on wellness. An academic library could have someone from the campus health center do a workshop on stress reduction; a public library could have a local yoga instructor come in for a short session.

#11 Comment By [H. Krishna](#) On December 5, 2008 @ 4:22 pm

Good post. My MLS program had a whole class on yoga and libraries called "Downward-facing Dewey." Maybe libraries could add some gyms to the cyber cafes, thus energizing both the mind, the body, and the infoshpere.

#12 Comment By [The Red Librarian](#) On December 5, 2008 @ 4:34 pm

In gulag library we have mandatory calisthenics. Dogs bite at our heels if we do not do pushup. Wellness committee say my friend not good and they throw him in snow naked. Bears eat him. We well though, committee say we must.

#13 Comment By [Sara Piasecki](#) On December 8, 2008 @ 2:07 pm

Is it up to our workplaces to ensure our wellness? Or is it up to us as individuals? If my coworkers like chocolate, but I am a chocoholic, must they put away their candy for my sake? Do we have lives outside of libraries? If so, who ensures our wellness there? Or is that where wellness begins? Just tossing out thoughts here...

#14 Comment By [Jenny](#) On December 9, 2008 @ 12:23 pm

Penn College has teamed up with Blue Cross of Northeastern PA to start a wellness program across campus. Stage 1 was to get bloodwork, bmi, ht, wt, measurements. Also, if you did this and filled out a survey, you were granted a \$100 gift card at Target. Stage 2 is a walking program. All participants were issued a pedometer and walking journal for six weeks. At the end of the 6 weeks, a drawing will be held for another prize. Meanwhile, BC representatives contacted staff to set their own goals. Mine is weight loss. I am working with a nutritionist to lose 20 lbs in 6 months. She has counseled me on many things and continues to keep in touch. It is a great plan and it is free through our College's plan.

#15 Comment By [librarian lucy](#) On December 9, 2008 @ 4:33 pm

A part of the organisational culture is how we deal with customers too - I've heard of managers who force staff to stay on the phone with creepy people (i.e. guys ringing to get you to read out the name of sexuality titles) or constantly deal with creepy/offensive customers. Luckily enough my library is in the same building as the gym and pool and the council does a weight watchers thing.

The bit that helps the most with wellness is the expectation that if we're sick we stay home. If we're a bit iffy (headachy/morning sickness/just a bit off colour) we can stay in the back room and work from there wherever possible. if a customer is offensive, abusive or creepy, it is okay to ask another staff member to either assist or take over, or refuse to serve them in some cases. Oh, and we take our mandated breaks and lunch hours, not cut them short.

#16 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 9, 2008 @ 8:06 pm

to reply to Sara's comment:

Sara Piasecki:

Is it up to our workplaces to ensure our wellness? Or is it up to us as individuals? If my coworkers like chocolate, but I am a chocoholic, must they put away their candy for my sake? Do we have lives outside of libraries? If so, who ensures our wellness there? Or is that where wellness begins? Just tossing out thoughts here...

I would respond yes and no. I think workplaces should have a stake in the wellness of their employees, but it is definitely not wholly an employer's responsibility for the entirety of an individuals wellness choices and habits. I think you are right, at least what I think you are alluding to, that wellness does begin in personal lives outside of work, but I think that some semblance of wellness and health need to be translated into the workplace. This could even be as simple as providing ergonomic work stations, valuing breaks for our eyes and brains after sitting in front of a computer for too long, etc. It doesn't all have to center around the chocolate bowl.

#17 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On December 9, 2008 @ 8:09 pm

The initiatives that you, Lucy and Jenny are mentioning are good examples of what I mean.

Where I work they have a bike to work program. For each day that I bike to work I get a punch on a card. After 30 punches, I get an incentive. This incentive is: credit toward my pre-tax dollars bus pass, parking permit, or if I don't have either of those, a small monetary incentive. It's great for people like me who: a) mainly commute by bike and b) use public transportation a lot, and c) those who just need a something little extra to get them using alternative transportation.

#18 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On December 10, 2008 @ 9:46 am

I'm late in commenting, but:

- 1) I'd stress the ergonomic work stations again. I'd suspect a lot of library furniture has not been optimized for computer use, either through time, money, or lack of interest/care. The more time I spend at my computer on a desk build for doing paper work, the more I become concerned about carpal tunnel and back/neck issues. I can't be the only one,
- 2) Work-based social events can be a good mental health aid. A chance to socialize informally with colleageues can not only allow for venting but also builds social bonds that can make work less isolating (and improve interoffice/library/department service by increasing knowledge of each other's people/issues/etc). I recommend happy hours, but your taste may vary.

#19 Comment By [Sylvia](#) On December 19, 2008 @ 4:49 pm

Mens sana in corpore sano (A healthy mind in a healthy body) – this ancient Latin proverb also shows how important is keeping our body fit. This being even more important for people who do their daily work sitting in front of the computer; results that having opportunity of wellness activities is very important to librarians even at their workplace. In my opinion having ergonomic work stations is – elementary not only for librarian, but for every employee in order to have their work done well. Congrats for making publicity for this theme.

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<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org>

URL to article: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2008/our-librarian-bodies-our-librarian-selves/>

URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://flickr.com/photos/inju/422755700/>

[2] organizational culture: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organizational_culture

[3] Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans:

<http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/default.aspx>

[4] Circle of Wellness: <http://www.ala-apa.org/wellness/index.html>

[5] How Do You Say No?: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2009/how-do-you-say-no/>

[6] Tryin' to Get My Mojo Workin': <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2010/tryin-to-get-my-mojo-workin/>

[7] It's the Collections that are Special:

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2009/its-the-collections-that-are-special/>

[8] My (Our) Abusive Relationship with Google and What We Can Do About It:

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2009/my-abusive-relationship-with-google/>

[9] Collaborating with Faculty Part 2: What Our Partnerships Look Like:

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2011/collaborating-with-faculty-part-2-what-our-partnerships-look-like/>

[10] : http://chronicle.com/wiredcampus/article/3481/tech-therapy-the-library-building?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en

[11] : <http://www.goucher.edu/x17081.xml>

[12] : <http://chronicle.com/techtherapy/>

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