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Citation Information

Doucette, Wendy C. and Tolley, Rebecca, "Reframing Occupational Stress to Mitigate Burnout: A Trauma-Informed Care and Constructive Living Approach to Foster Lifelong Resiliency and Self-Directed Life Management within Academic Libraries" (2023). *ETSU Faculty Works*. 1015.

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Reframing Occupational Stress to Mitigate Burnout

A Trauma-Informed
Care and Constructive
Living Approach to Foster
Lifelong Resiliency
and Self-Directed Life
Management within
Academic Libraries

Wendy C. Doucette and Rebecca L. Tolley



ABSTRACT

This editorial chapter addresses the problem of burnout in academic libraries by introducing a fusion of principles from trauma-informed care (TIC) and Constructive Living (CL) to offer unique, easy-to-incorporate plans of action to identify and mitigate symptoms of burnout. These two action-based philosophies, which may be new to most readers, provide strategies for considering, practicing, and adopting perspectives and behaviors that may give those suffering from burnout new ways of thinking about their professional and personal lives. We identify accessible opportunities to connect mind and body in self-care to neutralize negative self-talk, regain perspective and balance, and foster lifelong resiliency at a pace wholly determined by the individual and without formal training or expense.

Keywords: trauma-informed care, Morita therapy, coping mechanisms, occupational stress, academic libraries

Introduction

In an increasingly fast-paced technology- and service-based culture, the problem of burnout appears rampant (Lanners, 2019). The problem of burnout among academic librarians and staff, with “70% of the academic librarians surveyed, across the spectrum of age and gender... sometimes, often, or always burned out” (Wood et al., 2020, p. 525), demands further investigation and mitigation. Within the profession, burnout may arise from a plethora of sources, including leadership dilemmas caused by the lack of formal management training programs within the field of librarianship (Aslam, 2017). Neoliberal business models imposed on academic universities that value libraries’ return on investment of a business model, such as technology-based solutions rather than the humanistic, people-based helping model in which many academic librarians view their role within education, prioritize a culture of assessment (Quinn, 2000). This external push to quantify rich, faceted, often face-to-face, and real-time interactions with students and faculty involving critical thinking and scaffolded research exploration may feel like a persistent prodding to validate the work academic librarians do and demonstrate its quantitative value. Because they do not directly draw students and generate revenue, academic libraries may be classified negatively as “cost centers” that drain university resources. Being seen as having no or little direct involvement with university curriculum may preclude robust early involvement supporting collections and library instruction for new programs, thereby siloing and diminishing librarian involvement (Evans & Sobel, 2021). As with teaching and nursing, two fields where burnout rates are high (Lanners, 2019), librarianship is traditionally viewed as a “feminized” profession where long, steady work without recognition is expected (Sloniowski, 2016). Unlike these professions, libraries (and by

extension, librarians) are repeatedly criticized as being outmoded or in decline (McCormack & Cotter, 2013). All of these factors may pejoratively place academic libraries and their staff in a defensive, reactive position that needs to be countered through communication and outreach, versus being viewed as intrinsically equal members of the university infrastructure.

Beyond these external contributors to this workplace issue, Nardine (2019) reminded us, the damage caused by burnout extends beyond the workplace: “The underlying importance of recognizing and relieving burnout is that the syndrome affects an individual’s entire life and their personal ecosystem” (p. 508). As practitioners and employees grounded within the field, we offer two possible avenues for countering burnout within academic libraries: trauma-informed care (TIC) and Constructive Living (CL).

Literature on TIC

TIC enters the academic library lexicon with Katopol (2016) referencing “trauma,” “traumatic stress,” and “traumatic events” in “Enough Already: Compassion Fatigue,” though she did not connect those three dynamics to TIC in her introduction to how librarians experience stress from “dealing with difficult patrons and uncertain budgetary constraints” (p. 2) as well as other situations. She stated that while librarians are compassionate, committed, and empathetic, they must learn to “draw the line for their own mental health” (p. 2). She suggested that managers and staff address compassion fatigue that is sometimes encouraged by the organizational structure itself. Another article “introduces library staff to the concept of resilience, beginning with its origins and how it came to academic libraries” (Berg et al., 2018, p. 1), but does not frame the concept of resilience as endemic to TIC. Underlying the authors’ criticism of resilience expected from academic libraries are concepts delineated at length by Quinn’s (2000) “The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries?” and Gardner & Clarke’s (2020) presentation at the Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium, “The Library Is Not a Restaurant: Reference Appointments and Neoliberal Languages.” Likewise, Hudson-Vitale and Waltz (2020) did not cite TIC in their excellent compilation of strategies managers can use for supporting mental well-being in remote and hybrid working postures, “Caring for Our Colleagues: Wellness and Support Strategies for Remote Library Teams.” The authors placed the responsibility of library worker health and wellness upon the “shoulders of individual employers” (p. 497). While these two articles addressed undercurrents contributing to burnout in academic librarians, they did not reflect the framework of TIC, which advocates self-care as a strategy for reducing both compassion fatigue and secondary traumatization or retraumatization that a person may experience when helping others who exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome or who disclose past traumas.

Several other articles of note specifically addressed trauma, trauma-informed pedagogy, and post-traumatic stress syndrome, but they focused externally on student populations, rather than internally on library workers and organizational cultures and behaviors. Phelps’s (2015) excellent “Veteran Student Experience and The Academic Librarian” discussed trauma history and postcombat issues of this student population and introduced

readers to “unique challenges” they face as they adjust to the culture of higher education and cope with “both visible and invisible injuries” (p. 237). Conley, Ferguson and Kumbier’s (2019) “Supporting Students with Histories of Trauma in Libraries: A Collaboration of Accessibility and Library Services” looked at students with marginalized identities including LGBTQ+, disability, students of color, and international students who are “susceptible to discrimination” (p. 530). While they cited “trauma-aware” and “trauma-informed,” they neglected to situate their work within the framework as defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA; Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014). Two other articles appeared in 2019: Thomas and Lovelace’s “Combining Efforts: Libraries as Mental Health Safe Spaces,” which collected artwork created by faculty, staff, and students that helped the artist process their mental health. They cited West Virginia’s high ACEs score, as well as resiliency, but did not refer to the SAMHSA framework. ACEs, the acronym for *adverse childhood experiences*, quantifies a person’s exposure to trauma before the age of 18 by assigning a number to the person—hence the ACEs score. Barr-Walker and Sharifi’s (2019) “Critical Librarianship in Health Sciences Libraries: An Introduction” referenced “recent hospital initiatives” like mandatory training around TIC as they discussed social justice activism around systemic racism, White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism (pp. 258–259). One of the six guiding principles to the SAMHSA trauma-informed framework is cultural, historical, and gender issues, which address systemic racism and sexism. Finally, Gohr and Nova’s (2020) “Student Trauma Experiences, Library Instruction and Existence under the 45th” used trauma-informed pedagogy as a means for librarians and library workers to “critically intervene” and “interrogate systemic injustice and the school’s role in traumatizing students” (p. 184). While library scholarship advances in the area of trauma-informed, trauma-responsive, or, as it is sometimes called, “resilience-informed,” there is no research currently published focusing on using this framework as an intervention with library workers in academic institutions. This area is ripe for exploration.

TIC in Libraries

Working with traumatized students, staff, and faculty within our organizations may lead to compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatization, or secondary traumatization, all which lead to burnout. TIC provides a framework allowing organizations to realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for recovery; recognize the signs and symptoms in clients, families, staff, and others involved in the system; respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seek to actively resist retraumatization. There are six guiding principles within the SAMHSA framework (Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014): (1) safety; (2) trustworthiness and transparency; (3) peer support and mutual help; (4) collaboration and mutuality; (5) empowerment, voice and, choice; and (6) cultural, historical, and gender issues. For those working in toxic workplaces, the first principle of safety is lacking, as are many of the other principles, in particular trustworthiness and transparency. Stress and anxiety felt from an unsafe work environment lead to burnout. While none of these principles detail

self-care, the practice is implicit within the framework within the principles peer support and mutual help, collaboration and mutuality, and empowerment, voice, and choice.

We suggest that academic libraries, whether operating formally or informally within a TIC framework, reduce many of the stressors leading to burnout. Altering the organization's policies, procedures, and practices to reflect a trauma-responsive posture promises relief from the circumstances those working in academic libraries experience, like low morale. Although academic library leadership may not buy into the concepts, individuals can express their agency while juggling a bit of cognitive dissonance by self-adopting and regularly practicing one of the core trauma-informed principles of self-care.

Possible actions steps include the following:

- Describe your goal. For instance, not crying in work meetings may be a goal.
- Brainstorm which steps need to be carried out to keep from crying in a meeting. This could include tried-and-true aversion-therapy tricks such as placing a rubber band on your wrist and lightly snapping it when you feel the urge to cry. Another trick is writing affirmations on your skin in a location visible to you on which you can focus your attention. Words like: "Calm," "Peace," and "Be Grounded" may help.
- Reward your progress. Set up a rewards system that does double duty by acknowledging that you made it through the meeting and by helping you self-regulate after leaving the meeting, like a quick walk outside, a few minutes sitting under a tree adjacent to your building, or several refreshing drinks of water. Understandably, not everyone has quick access to nature from their academic libraries. Research on *shinrin-yoku*, or "forest bathing" reveals that "turpenes, pinenes, limonenes, and other essential oils emitted by evergreens and many other trees" decrease cortisol levels, sympathetic nerve activity, blood pressure, and heart rate, as well as elevating moods and lowering anxiety (Williams, 2017, p. 314, 388). Inhaling essential oils of conifers such as Siberian fir, juniper, or Atlas cedarwood either directly or via an aromatherapy diffuser may boost your mood.
- Evaluate your progress by jotting notes about the effectiveness of your action plan, then assess and tweak your action plan as necessary.

It may be helpful to follow Carolyn Leaf's (2020) advice about not dwelling on your problems by dividing them into thirds. For example, spend one third of your time defining and journaling about your problem, another third planning your solution, and the last third transforming your solution in a positive action plan (p. 90).

TIC's underlying emphasis on self-care helps alleviate burnout. While awareness of these concepts on a personal level may mitigate burnout at the individual level, library administration's buy-in to the precepts and promotion of TIC may reduce burnout exponentially within the institution and across campus. A thorough overview of all aspects of TIC in libraries, including characteristics of a trusting and transparent library organization; discussion questions to promote a sense of psychological safety among library workers; guidance on creating safe zones for LGBTQIA+ children, teens, and adults; self-assessment tools to support change toward trauma-responsive library services; and suggestions for administrators, is available in *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services* (Tolley, 2020).

Literature on Constructive Living

Developed by anthropologist and therapist Dr. David K. Reynolds as an informational self-directed guide for lay people, Constructive Living (CL) is an action-based American philosophy founded on the principles of Morita psychotherapy. Created by psychiatrist Dr. Shoma Masatake Morita in the 1930s as an inpatient, clinical treatment for anxiety in Japan, Morita therapy is practiced in many parts of the world, particularly in the Eastern hemisphere. In a recent randomized controlled trial of patients diagnosed with *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (*DSM-4*) major depressive disorder, with or without *DSM-4* anxiety disorders, Morita therapy was determined to have a recovery and response rate “comparable to or exceed[ing] those found for current NICE-recommended treatments for depression” (Sugg et al., 2018, p. 11).

Not surprisingly, the majority of the academic literature on CL is found within the field of psychotherapy, and always in the context of Morita therapy. Surprisingly (and disturbingly), as an Indigenous (non-Western) creation, Morita therapy falls outside of traditional (Western) psychology and remains little known or taught in Western-dominated psychology programs (Balogh, 2020). A literature search reveals repeated objections from within the field of psychology that ignore Eastern viewpoints by labeling them as “alternative” (LeVine, 2018, p. 85), alleging “Eurocentrism” (Lee, 2005, p. 5), “xenophobia” (Hwang 2009, p. 932), the deliberate exclusion of global Indigenous treatments in training mental health providers (Pedersen & Pope, 2010), and defending the need to respect Indigenous therapies (Hwang, 2009; Pedersen, 2009). Pedersen and Pope (2015) observed that, in contrast to the Western focus on individuals and individuality, Eastern psychology is socially oriented, focusing on collectivity and empathy. They went so far as to say that

Western counseling and psychotherapy have promoted the separated self as the healthy prototype across cultures, making counseling and psychology part of the problem, through an emphasis on selfishness and a lack of commitment to the group, rather than part of the solution. (Pedersen & Pope, 2015, p. 23)

The value placed on collective harmony and empathy, as well as the multicultural aspect of CL, suggest it may be an effective and inclusive workplace tool. An extensive literature search outside of psychology revealed no academic applications of CL targeted toward libraries, making this the first published proposed use of this philosophy within librarianship.

CL in Libraries

Burnout is ultimately a problem of stressful *feelings*: of feeling victimized, ostracized, unappreciated, and lacking in power, with mental equilibrium and emotions out of balance. Following the definition of burnout as “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” (World Health Organization, 2020), the first overture we

can make as individuals to break this cycle is to examine our strategy for managing stress. Not all contributors to burnout are equal: some stressors in the workplace are merely irritating, while others involve complex group dynamics. As an example, Kinchin (2019) notes microattention to detail as a collective dysfunctionality: “small changes to relatively minor procedural issues... are often discussed extensively and with passion whilst the ‘elephant in the room’ is left for another time” (p. 158). While CL includes strategies for all situations, including reframing occupational stress, the work takes place at the individual level; as Reynolds (1984) put it, “*doing* something about the problem that caused the upset in the first place” (p. 4).

The philosophy and structure of CL are profound and multilayered, but they are explained simply and are understood easily by the beginner in the book that introduces the concept: *Constructive Living* (Reynolds, 1984). Like other Eastern healing modalities that integrate the body and mind such as yoga and particular forms of breathing, CL also focuses on awareness of the present moment, but not for contemplation. Although it acknowledges emotion, the goal is to “present a valuable alternative to *emotion*-centered living” (Reynolds, 1984, p. vii). As with all Zen-inspired models, CL advises experiencing emotions neutrally without intense and repetitive analysis, then behaving in the appropriate way for that particular moment. Regardless of whether we find them pleasant, these feelings may provide indicators to the most appropriate solution. As Reynolds (1984) explained,

If you can't control your feelings directly by willpower, and you aren't responsible for what you're feeling, the best strategy for dealing with feelings is to accept them and see what you can learn from them. Sometimes feelings give us signals about something we need to do. If I feel nervous before a lecture, I'm prompted to spend time preparing the speech. If you suddenly start feeling uncomfortable every time your supervisors are around, you may need to talk things over with them. The notion I'm trying to get across here is simply this: Feelings often arise out of situations that can be changed. And then the feelings too will change (pp. 10–11).

Stability, in CL, comes through the consistent practice of directed action (behavior). By immersing ourselves in the action of work—whatever that work may be, and regardless of whether or not we feel like doing it—we divert attention from the ego and the running interior dialogue of its (mis)perceptions, preconceptions, ruminations, and the like, focusing instead on the present and what needs doing now without undue attachment and anticipatory emotion or expectation.

The emphasis in Constructive Living is on the doing itself. The rewards for teaching and research and writing are in the quality of the activities themselves, not in the end results. We hold purposes and goals for direction of behavior, but it is the *achieving*, not the achievement, that is valuable and controllable. Remember: Whether

success or failure comes, reality *always* brings something to be done next. Reality always presents the circumstance wherein we can sharpen our self-application to action (Reynolds, 1984, p. 80).

It is common for individuals suffering from burnout to become unmotivated (not wanting to start projects) or feel overwhelmed (not knowing where to begin). The action of focusing only on the task at hand provides direction and is inherently calming. Abandoning the notion of multitasking allows us to stop fracturing our attention unnecessarily and, with practice, reduces the habit of jumping from task to task before attaining viable stopping points within projects. This deliberate focus reestablishes a sense of centeredness which increases calm and improves personal organization.

As a reality check to the external pressures of assessment culture and the demands of others, the timing and type of action undertaken are determined by the user. This empowering choice is not goal-oriented, but simply action-oriented. There are no internal schedules or goals and nothing to track, report, or explain. Unless deliberately shared, the practice of CL remains wholly private to the individual.

While restoring a sense of control through behavior, CL has the ability to generate order and progress in the midst of chaos and despair, defuse emotional response, and reestablish personal perspective toward a more realistic, balanced state. This simple, self-directed method allows for slow, steady, and enduring change in individual habits, behavior, and thoughts. One of the six principles of CL is that “feelings follow behavior” (Reynolds, 1984, p. 38). As we reduce the level of emotion during work (attending to tasks with sincere focus versus thinking or complaining about a coworker, for example), more work is accomplished, which in turn begins a positive cycle of contributing to a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Extending the CL mindset to all aspects of life can eliminate the tunnel vision sensation common to sufferers of burnout whereby the responsibilities of work—only on one aspect of life—become magnified and distorted, intruding into nonwork personal hours and negatively affecting overall mental, and even physical health and sleep. CL’s rule of doing only the one thing that needs doing at any time necessarily encourages focus and balance.

Although CL is enacted at the individual level, its theory, application, and effectiveness can be introduced and discussed as a group. At our institution, work-based applications of three Japanese philosophies (Morita therapy, Naikan, and kaizen) have been presented at the monthly All-Hands library employee professional development meetings, taught to graduate students in research workshops as a tool for focus and motivation, and presented to all campus in an annual spring stress management series created by the library. The book *Constructive Living* (Reynolds, 1984) provides a thorough explanation of concepts and principles, including real-life examples, exercises, and applications.

Concluding Thoughts

As complementary practices, TIC and CL counter burnout by minimizing negative self-talk, catastrophizing, and straying outside the bounds of the present. TIC and CL can

give those suffering from burnout new ways of thinking about their professional and personal lives through tools and strategies for connecting mind and body in self-care. With grounded awareness and action-centered behavior, both philosophies contain the potential to restore balance, foster lifelong resiliency, and maintain professionalism in the workplace. Given that each individual's quality of life is largely dependent on how they believe they are treated by others and what they believe they are capable of doing, these practices and changes in thought may result in improved resilience, increased calm, and less reactivity at the individual level in all areas of life.

With the recent shift to working online as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, for many library workers, the workplace has shifted in space. As the formerly hard separation of work/home and public/private blurs, employees may find it more critical to mental health and equilibrium to maintain professional boundaries, including that of self-talk and self-perception. Whether incorporated into LIS curriculum, through post-LIS training (courses, webinars, presentations), or other means, TIC and CL have the capacity to mitigate symptoms of burnout within libraries of all types at a pace wholly determined by the individual and without undue training or expense. While we strongly believe these practices may provide significant assistance in reducing the symptoms of burnout at the individual level, we present them as informational guidelines and not as a substitute for any type of medical assessment.

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