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Mental Illness in the Library: Ten Tips to Better Serve Patrons


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Mental Illness in the Library

Ten tips to better serve patrons

By Nick Harrell and Cindy Guyer



“Librarians are tour-guides for all of knowledge.” – Patrick Ness, author

This quote illustrates the unmatched level of service provided by our profession. Law libraries and law librarians in particular provide unique legal resources and services to many groups of patrons—students, attorneys, judges, and the public. Some members of the public are easy to help, and others can be more difficult, such as those with a mental illness. So how can we be better “tour guides” for these individuals?

Last year we presented a poster at the 2014 AALL Annual Meeting in San Antonio with tips for improving services to and relationships with patrons with mental illness. In this article, we explore those tips further and provide some examples of how they can be implemented. It's worth noting that these tips would improve service to all groups of patrons, with or without mental illness.

1. Provide Quality Customer Service

Patrons use law libraries for two basic reasons: (1) they want access to library resources (primary and secondary legal materials, study space, internet access, etc.), and (2) they want help accessing and utilizing those resources. The latter reason keeps reference librarians employed and demands that we provide quality customer service. That high level of customer service should extend to all patrons who come to us with research needs, regardless of their mental health status.

From time to time, we all can fall into the trap of discrediting the research needs of members of the public, particularly when their legal issues or complaints seem baseless or suggest that the patron might have mental health issues. It can be especially difficult to take those research needs seriously when we have other responsibilities requiring our attention. At the University of Colorado, we have had a regular patron use our resources to pursue a seemingly meritless case through both the Colorado and federal court systems. With the peculiar subject matter of his claim, its low likelihood of success, and this patron's other abnormal behavior, it is sometimes challenging to dedicate time to helping him with his research needs. Most recently he has begun working on a petition for certiorari to the United States Supreme Court. Although it is not likely that his petition will be granted, we make a conscious effort to respect his research needs by helping him find the appropriate resources and treating him cordially as we would any other patron.

2. Be Clear and Direct

Sometimes patrons request a level of service beyond what is appropriate for a law librarian. While the line between what is research help and what is legal advice can be blurry, we should make it very clear when public patrons request help that is beyond what is appropriate. Common inappropriate questions include: "What do you think this statute means?"; "Is it illegal to do . . .?"; "Can

the government do . . .?" These types of questions can come from any patron; however, patrons with mental illness sometimes are more persistent in their questioning and skeptical of responses that are not direct answers to their legal questions. In these scenarios, it is best to explain that librarians can provide help with research, explain what resources are available and how to use them, but also note that librarians cannot provide any opinions or advice to the merits of their claims.

Although we should strive to provide quality customer service, we do have to set limits on the resources we dedicate to any individual patron. Librarians should make clear that they have other responsibilities if a patron begins consuming too much of their time. If you need to cut your time short with a particular patron, you might suggest a research guide or text on the subject of the patron's research issue and then check back if time allows.

3. Be Informed

One of the best ways to better serve patrons with mental illness and fight the stigma of mental illness is to learn more about mental illness. Mental health organizations, such as the National Alliance on Mental Health and Mental Health America, make information about mental illnesses and symptoms readily available on their websites. Knowledge about mental illness makes it more familiar and might make unusual behavior seem less disconcerting or threatening.

Familiarity with symptoms of mental illness may also empower a librarian to inform a dean of students, human resources, attorney assistance programs, or other appropriate groups if patrons begin displaying symptoms of mental illness. At the same time, librarians should not try to diagnose or label patrons with mental illness, as this is best left to trained mental health professionals. At the University of Colorado, we had a homeless patron come in regularly to use our services who was also in the process of applying to the University of Colorado Law School. Everyone on the library staff had pleasant interactions with her and enjoyed her presence. However, after several weeks, we began to receive elaborate, confusing emails from her seeking a student employee position at the law library. The library was not able to hire her for several reasons, not least of which was because she was not yet a student at the university. But due to

concerns about her mental health and well-being, we were able to recommend her to local social services agencies who could help with employment, housing, and mental health services. Providing these recommendations via email avoided a potentially challenging or awkward conversation. Similar recommendations could be provided in person by creating flyers or other handouts with information on how to contact local social services agencies and mental health organizations.

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4. Collaborate with Colleagues

Mental health and library literature can provide great information but may be of little help in the midst of a challenging situation with a patron with mental illness. Thankfully we can turn to our colleagues where those resources leave off. Whether they are more experienced, fresh out of school, or simply have a different life story, our colleagues often provide us with different vantage points. Colleagues can give us an objective perspective when we are going through a challenging situation. Instead of reacting with emotion, a colleague may be able to provide dispassionate advice or step in and help manage the situation. Most of us are able to tell when an interaction between a co-worker and a patron is not going well. In those situations we should offer assistance. Similarly, if we are having a difficult interaction, we should politely remove ourselves from the situation and seek help from a colleague. Saying something like "You know, I have to check with someone else about that" can provide a way to step away and find support. In those situations, an objective colleague can shed light on the situation and either direct a course of action or step in and resolve the situation.

Furthermore, colleagues can help us brainstorm creative solutions to challenging situations. New initiatives tend to be executed better by a group of folks working together toward a goal. Discussing challenging situations involving patrons with mental illness may draw attention to the need for creative solutions to potential problems and address possible safety concerns.

Colleagues can also help maintain our own mental health. After a difficult situation, it can be helpful to vent with a colleague about frustrations and challenges. Importantly, these discussions should not turn vitriolic, and it should focus on the frustrating behavior without demonizing any patron involved in the challenging situation. Such conversations should take place in staff areas away from patrons. Librarians shouldn't hesitate to consult a professional therapist if repeated or particularly traumatizing or challenging situations have a lasting negative impact on their emotional or mental health.

5. Develop and Consistently Enforce Library Rules

Most patrons have a sense of what is appropriate in a library. However, when someone exhibits inappropriate behavior, it is helpful to have rules already in place to enforce. Rules should be posted to a library's website, at the library entrance, and in any designated public patron areas, as well as distributed to patrons who are new to the library. Explicit rules put patrons with mental illness on notice of what behavior is appropriate in the library. According to mental health professionals, people with mental illness typically comply with explicit rules, and when told there are rules against certain behavior, they will change their behavior to conform to the rules.

At the same time, library rules should have enough flexibility to accommodate all patrons. At a minimum, library rules should comply with the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and other laws that prohibit discrimination based on mental health status. When possible, library policymakers can consider how current and prospective rules may impact patrons with mental illness. Noise policies, loan periods, and other library rules need to be crafted to ensure the smooth operation of the library. But those same rules should not be so stringent that they alienate patrons with mental illness. A patron who talks to herself may be exhibiting a common symptom of mental illness that can run afoul of noise policies if that talking becomes distracting to other patrons. It is appropriate to inform or remind the patron that the library has a noise policy and that he or she may be creating too much noise. In addition to conveying the information about the noise policy, a librarian might offer a study room or recommend a place in the library that is more accommodating to noise. Well-crafted rules provide support to address inappropriate behavior and enough flexibility to develop creative solutions to reoccurring problems.

6. Be Creative

When patrons come to our libraries, one of our goals is to ensure that they are able to find and access our resources with ease. However, this goal can be challenging to meet when it comes to patrons with mental illness. To achieve that goal, we need to be creative in order to maximize their library experience and provide quality customer service. One way is to create web browser bookmarks or computer shortcuts for commonly used library resources, which will help patrons easily and quickly find the resources they need. Additionally, consider creating simple one-page guides and tips for using these resources and placing print copies near the public workstations. These bookmarks and shortcuts will not only benefit those patrons with mental illness who struggle with memory problems or are frustrated easily, but they will also require less time and effort of librarians who would normally have to aid those patrons.

We should also address the needs of patrons who are not web-literate or computer-savvy. In fact, individuals with mental illness often fall in the economic and social categories that are at the less-privileged end of the digital divide. Even though many libraries are reducing print acquisitions and decreasing their print collections, it's important to offer print resources for patrons with mental illness. Consider starting a *pro se* library with commonly used self-help resources, such as Nolo publications, form books, and practice guides. At the USC Law Library, we have such a library that we keep current and close to the reference office, along with a quick guide organizing the titles by area of law.

Of course, there will be situations where your library does not have the specialty resources or expertise to assist a patron's particular legal issue. However, that doesn't mean you can't still provide assistance. In such situations, you can refer the patron to local legal aid and pro bono and low-cost organizations. Create a list of these referrals with their contact information, including their hours of operation and website URLs. Have copies of this list available to give to patrons still in need. By doing this, you will comfort a possibly frustrated patron and make his or her trip to your library worthwhile by still serving as a valuable informational resource.

7. Frame Modifications as Disability Accommodations

As mentioned previously, we have policies and procedures intended to keep our library running smoothly and to provide services to all patrons fairly and equally. However, for patrons with mental illness, these policies and

procedures may require modifications. But instead of seeing this as providing exceptions with a negative connotation, frame the modifications more positively as accommodations for a disability. Examples of modifications include offering a longer hold or reserve loan period, accompanying patrons to retrieve sources, or offering the use of a separate research space such as a group study room for a single user. Some patrons need more individualized services that could include one-on-one training for using certain databases or a library tour if a patron is unfamiliar with your library.

At the USC Law Library, we had a situation recently where a patron with mental illness was coming to our library almost daily for a month for his research on filing an appeal. He was using the same sources, but he had difficulty remembering the names and locations of the sources. One of our staff members decided it would be more accommodating to keep those sources on a library cart so he could retrieve the sources more easily and quickly. She also wrote down the names of the publications for him in case they got re-shelved or he went to another library. This is just one example of modifying library policies as a disability accommodation. Requiring little time and effort, this simple accommodation allowed our library to better serve a patron with a mental illness.

8. Give Power to the Patron

Patrons with mental illness can exhibit behaviors that are loud, awkward, or aggressive. These behaviors are disturbing to other patrons and library staff and therefore must be addressed. To do so, focus on the inappropriate behavior but not the patron. Instead of telling the patron "You are disturbing other patrons," kindly say "The yelling and slamming the books down on the desk are inappropriate for our library." Then give the patron the choice to modify the behavior or be asked to leave the library. For example, "To continue using our library and books, could you please refrain from such behaviors? Otherwise, we'll have to ask you to leave. It's up to you, sir." In this way, you give the patron the power to eliminate the disturbing behaviors or be subject to restricted access.

Many times, patrons with mental illness may simply need to understand appropriate behaviors in public spaces. Consider drafting a code of conduct for your library consistent with these tips to share with patrons who display disturbing behaviors. This is another way to focus on the behavior and not the person. See these situations as teaching

opportunities for patrons to learn what is expected and permissible at your library.

9. Underreact to Unexpected Situations

Disturbing behaviors can sometimes escalate into scary and unexpected situations. Patrons with certain types of mental illness can be very emotional, become frustrated easily, or lose their tempers quickly. When this happens, such patrons can exhibit frightening or threatening behaviors. The most essential tip we can offer is to not match these behaviors. Rather, know that you have the power to de-escalate the situation by underreacting. This can be done by listening to the patron patiently and responding slowly and calmly with an even, low voice. Keep an arms-length distance so the patron doesn't feel intimidated. Don't try to joke with the patron in hopes of reducing tensions because this may only confuse or further upset the patron. Maintain a professional, detached manner, and try to prevent emotion from influencing your reactions.

Of course, your safety is paramount. Providing good customer service does not give anyone permission to abuse you or your library services. Follow your library's policies and procedures for addressing challenging situations. Call on a colleague for assistance or security personnel if warranted. After these unexpected situations have passed, remember to appropriately cope with work-related stress, because your mental health is important too.

10. Respect the Privacy of the Patron

Patrons with mental illness often come to law libraries seeking assistance for their own legal issues. Some of them may feel very uncomfortable or paranoid about sharing personal information but feel they must in order to obtain librarian assistance and be directed to the

appropriate resources. In cases where you sense that the patron is uncomfortable, provide adequate privacy to allow the patron to discuss personal information and direct the patron to private, quiet spaces for conducting his or her research. Acknowledge that what is being shared is personal and will be kept in confidence. And follow through in maintaining the confidentiality of the patron's legal issues by only discussing such issues with your colleagues as necessary. Respecting the privacy of patrons is common sense and applies to all we serve, but it may be even more crucial for patrons with mental illness. Honor their privacy and you honor them.

All libraries are unique in their services, collections, and the populations they serve. It's possible that not all of these tips can be implemented at your library or would have to be adapted for your unique circumstances. In June 2014, the AALL Social Responsibilities Special Interest Section formed a Standing Committee on Disability Issues to address both mental and physical disabilities issues in law libraries. Specifically, that committee discussed some options for improving services to patrons with mental illness and promoting mental health among law librarians. Please contact us if you would like to become involved in the standing committee. ■

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importance of law library professionals in furthering the goal of infusing practice-ready skills throughout the law school experience.

With some well thought-out changes in law schools and the law librarian's role, new graduates can fearlessly jump over the skills gap to find success as they begin their personal and professional journey into law. ■



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Additional Resources

For more information on how your library can better serve patrons with mental illness, consult the following resources:

- American Library Association, "Mental Health First Aid USA for Library Staff," www.ala.org/onlinelearning/mental-health-first-aid-usa-library-staff (webinar) (2012).
- Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies. "People with Mental Health Issues: What You Need to Know Library—Library Accessibility Tip Sheet 7" (American Library Association, 2010).
- Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies. "Guidelines for Library Services for People with Mental Illness" (American Library Association, 2007).
- Ford, Stephanie. "Old Problem for New Reasons: Overcoming the Challenge Presented by Mentally Ill Library Users" in *The Reference Librarian* pp. 83-90 (Haworth Press, 2002).
- Hecker, Thomas E. "Patrons with Disabilities or Problem Patrons: Which Model Should Librarians Apply to People with Mental Illness?" *53 Reference Librarian* 5 (1996).
- Murray, Jennifer S. "Library Psychiatry: Is There a Place for the Mentally Ill in Your Law Library?" *AALL Spectrum* pp. 10-13 (November, 2009).
- Quinn, Brian. "How Psychotherapists Handle Difficult Clients: Lessons for Librarians" in *The Reference Librarian* pp. 181-196 (Haworth Press, 2002).
- Torrey, E. Fuller, Esposito, Rosanna and Geller, Jeffrey. "Problems Associated with Mentally Ill Individuals in Public Libraries." *Public Libraries* pp. 45-51 (March/April, 2009).
- Turner, Anne M. *It Comes with the Territory: Handling Problem Situations in Libraries* (McFarland & Co., 2004).
- Willis, Mark R. *Dealing with Difficult People in the Library* (American Library Association, 1999).

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the Task Force on the Future of Legal Education are growing evidence that cultivating a "practice-ready" educational environment for law students is a wise move.

The top three things for law librarians to remember are: (1) law firm librarians should collaborate with local (or virtual) academic librarians to form cooperative alliances, (2) academic librarians should work with faculty and administrators in their own institutions to integrate real-life research, resources, and projects during the entire academic year, and (3) law school administrators should be encouraged to realize the