

LIS Mental Health: Creating a Community and Breaking the Silence

by Violet Fox and Kate Deibel

Mental health is an issue that impacts everyone. Maintaining a healthy emotional and psychological state is an important consideration for people of every ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Sadly, there is also great stigma associated with mental illness. People with mental illness are often the villains in our stories. Struggling with depression, not moving past trauma, or facing daily anxiety are often thought of as personal failings and lead to people isolating themselves. One effective way to move past this isolation is to talk openly about mental health and illness and, by revealing that many of our peers face mental health challenges, demonstrate that no one needs to struggle alone. LIS Mental Health is one such effort.

The idea behind LIS Mental Health Week began in October 2014 when Cecily Walker, inspired by a recent Geek Mental Help Week, [proposed the idea](#) of a week in which all people who work in libraries could come together to talk about mental health. Walker suggested that library workers could write about mental health issues, record a podcast episode about mental health in the profession, publish articles about mental health in professional journals or on their websites, and/or organize local events to talk about mental health issues. Kelly McElroy helped Walker make the idea a reality and January 18-23, 2016 was designated by Walker and McElroy as the first LIS Mental Health Week. In 2017, a subsequent LIS Mental Health Week was held January 30-February 3, coordinated by McElroy, Courtney Boudreau, Kate Deibel, and Jessica Schomberg.

During the LIS Mental Health weeks, various online activities were coordinated to promote and encourage discussion of mental health within library, archives, and related information

professions. Twitter discussions, including both asynchronous conversation as well as scheduled hour-long chats, used the #LISMentalHealth hashtag to coordinate discussion on various issues such as self-care, institutional support (or the lack thereof), perceptions of mental health, and more. Postings about mental health on personal and institutional blogs further propelled dialogue. Resources and support services information were compiled through crowdsourcing. Efforts were also made to ensure that people felt safe in their discussions; options for writing anonymous blog posts and tweeting anonymously were provided.

Overall, the general response was strong and positive. Participants shared their frustrations with the stress caused by insecure and low-paying jobs, frequent moves (leaving behind not only friends and family but trusted doctors and therapists), and financial debt. Those that were willing to share their own stories lamented that such openness could potentially threaten their future employability. Intersectional aspects of managing mental illness alongside other racial issues (especially within the very white field of LIS) led participants of color to invoke worries of burnout and exhaustion. Although some naysayers criticized how much the discussions focused on library professional themselves, LIS Mental Health Week helped emphasize that if we are to address mental health issues in our communities, library workers need to take steps to recognize and address their own mental health challenges.

Inspired by the [#LISMentalHealth](#) Twitter chats and continuing discussion, in September 2017 Violet Fox and Annie Pho began exploring ways to further collect and disseminate these important library mental health discussions. They took inspiration

from the work of LIS Microaggressions, a project created by Cynthia Mari Orozco in 2014. The team behind LIS Microaggressions [describes their Tumblr](#) as “a space for those working in libraries, archives and information fields to share their experiences with microaggressions.” This social media-fueled project has found an audience eager to hear more and has resulted in seven published LIS Microaggressions zines and several presentations.

Excited about the possibility of a similar zine collaboration, Fox and Pho compiled a team of people who had been active in the [#LISMentalHealth](#) dialogue on Twitter. The team, consisting of Kate Deibel, Violet Fox, Nicole Gustavsen, Kelly McElroy, Abigail Phillips, and Annie Pho, agreed on a title for the zine (“Reserve and renew,” a play on traditional library circulation activities) and on the scope of the call for submissions:

Contributions are welcome from anyone involved in “big tent” librarianship or archives: if you work or volunteer in a library or archive (currently or formerly), if you’re working towards a library degree, or are otherwise involved in library or archives-related work, we want to hear from you.

Submissions might include:

- *personal narratives*
- *creative writing and poetry*
- *visual arts (drawing, painting, photography, collage, comics, digital art, photographs of embroidery, etc.)*
- *encouraging thoughts*
- *tips for coping and radical self-care practices*
- *consideration of the effects of capitalism and oppression on mental health*
- *calls for changes in how we think about mental health & wellness*

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Like all previous #LISMentalHealth efforts, submissions could be submitted and published anonymously. The editorial team also decided that the printed zine would be sold online and in person at library conferences and that proceeds would be donated to [Mental Health First Aid](#), a public education program that aims to help communities understand mental illnesses, seek timely intervention, and save lives.

The submission period was open for three months and over twenty submissions were received. Creations for the zine included a summary of a scientific study on low morale in the workplace, poetry, images of embroidery, found images, radical self-care tips, and personal narratives focusing on hospitalization, workplace stress, and other experiences of mental illness.

The zine is scheduled for release at the American Library Association Midwinter Conference in February 2018. The editorial team of “Reserve and renew: the LIS Mental Health zine” views the collaborative work as an engaging way to highlight the importance of mental health and hopes that its publication will inspire further conversations and further action in the support of the mental health of library workers.

The third LIS Mental Health Week is scheduled for February 19-23, 2018. Find more information about the zine and join in the discussion at the [LIS Mental Health Tumblr](#) or via the [#LISMentalHealth](#) hashtag on Twitter.