



Ending the Silence

Utilizing Personal Experiences to Enhance a Library Mental Health Initiative

Authors _ **Sabrina Thomas** (tho4@marshall.edu), research and instruction librarian at Marshall University, and **Kacy Lovelace** (kacy.lovelace@marshall.edu), student success and research librarian at Marshall University

This article summarizes a panel presentation given at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Washington D.C. (June 22, 2019). The panel consisted of Sabrina Thomas, research and instruction librarian at Marshall University; Leah Tolliver, director of wellness programs and the Women's and Gender Center at Marshall University; C. Michelle Alford, senior library IT consultant at Marshall University; and Kacy Lovelace, research and student success librarian at Marshall University. Tenikka Phillips, EAP coordinator at Cabell Huntington Hospital, worked extensively on the project but was unable to take part in the panel presentation. The following is a conversation between Sabrina Thomas and Kacy Lovelace discussing how their own personal experiences with mental health challenges and trauma served to enhance the mental health initiative in their academic library.

Sabrina: Shame is a powerful motivator. Shame can motivate one into years or even decades of silence. For years, I struggled with my own shame from early childhood trauma of abuse, neglect, and years spent shuffling from one foster home to the next. The abuse and trauma were so severe as to leave lingering mental health damages that still affect me today. It was shame that kept me silent when I suffered from postpartum depression after the birth of my first child. Shame and silence magnify suffering, and it is this shame and silence that I wished to combat by breaking free.

There is one thing I have found to be more powerful than shame, and that is righteous indignation. Anger, too, can be a powerful motivator—and liberating when channeled properly. I am angry that I allowed the stigma of mental health challenges and illness to keep me silent about my struggles for so long. Breaking free from my own silence, I wanted to build a bridge to quality, credible information for those who were like me. Fortunately, I

work in a library, and librarians are master bridge builders, connecting people to resources, people, information, and ultimately, to a better place than they were before they started.

Kacy: Shame has always been a powerful motivator in my life as well. Childhood trauma: abuse, emotional neglect, and being a pawn for my divorced parents' power struggles, has led to a life-long struggle with mental illness, low self-esteem, and an inability to connect with others as deeply as I would like.

When we discuss trauma, we often talk about resiliency as well. It is important to discuss our ability to recover from the hardships that we face. I consider myself incredibly resilient, with a resiliency score of fourteen on a fifteen-point scale; however, I am guilty of using that resiliency to hide my trauma. Because I could compartmentalize, and because I wanted to appear as "normal" as possible, I acted as though the trauma never happened,



even as its effects impacted my daily life and every type of relationship that I've ever attempted to make.

It wasn't until I realized that speaking up about my own trauma helped others feel safe enough to discuss their own, that I began to share my story. Becoming a librarian, and working to build the mental health initiative in our library and on our campus, not only gave me a sense that I was helping others cope, but it was instrumental in helping me cope with my own traumatic experiences.

Sabrina: Becoming trauma-informed is a solid first step to building a mental health initiative in your library. Being trauma informed, libraries are uniquely situated to be safe spaces of intellectual freedom. A trauma informed library is a library in which the librarians and staff better understand how to help and serve those library users who have mental health challenges, illnesses, and stresses. We can do this by harnessing what we already do well.

First, our walls and our displays can play a vital role in ensuring that the library is a welcome and inclusive place for all people, including those with mental health challenges and illnesses. Creating a display of books on mental wellness is a solid first step. In spring of 2019, I created *Don't Call Me Crazy: Resiliency through Art*, a library exhibition for Marshall University. In it, students, faculty, and staff both present and past were encouraged to submit artwork that reflected their experiences with mental health or informed their creative process. Advocacy and support begin with our own environments. What is on our walls and in our displays and what is the message that they are sending? Is your library truly open to all? Our spaces must be welcoming and inclusive if our intentions are truly to connect people to resources and information.

As a reference librarian, I grew accustomed to waiting to be asked questions. Those with mental health challenges and illnesses often face discrimination as well as stigma. It is this fear that prevents many from approaching our service desks for help. To combat this, I organized a team of librarians and staff to create both print and online research guides that listed places to find help, both on and off campus. We began to speak of our study rooms as safe spaces to process stress. We collaborated with the Women's Center and the Counseling Center to organize multiple panel presentations with experts from across the mental health fields so that library users could meet face-to-face with knowledgeable professionals. Noting that anonymity was vital to helping connect people to information, we utilized social media to livestream the events, showing only the panelists. We encouraged both face-to-face and online attendees to ask questions anonymously.

While protecting anonymity, I fostered inclusivity by inviting panelists who experienced mental health challenges and illnesses to highlight both the good and the bad ways that these issues affected their lives. I did this specifically to foster an environment in which people could speak freely without fear of judgment. Demonstrating that mental health challenges and adverse childhood experiences could be not just overcome but harnessed as tools to help others was one of my ultimate goals.

Kacy: Creating the online research guide was an incredibly rewarding process. It not only provided a dedicated space for providing information about our discussion panels and pertinent trainings, it continues to act as an ever-growing, centralized location for providing invaluable resources for those in need. When we feel vulnerable, it can be difficult to reach out for support. Vulnerability is not only healthy—it is crucial to healing past wounds and creating connections in our present and future. Allowing those within our university family to see our trauma and our disabilities will only encourage them to do the same.

It is important to note that not everyone was enthusiastic about all aspects of our initiative. In particular, the art exhibition was the recipient of several challenges by students. Each challenge was considered with appropriate gravity by the Head of Access Services and the President of the university, but each challenge was dismissed because of the commitment to free speech that our library and university hold dear. We are committed to enabling and furthering the expression of free speech; that is one of the primary goals of the art exhibition. Ultimately, our goal, both through the initiative and as a library, is to provide safe places for students, faculty, and staff to explore and discuss information, ideas, and ways to access help.

Sabrina: By first outing myself as one who suffered with a learning disability, I was placed in a better position to help those with learning disabilities. Because I suffered from postpartum depression in the past, I came to understand mental illness as not necessarily a permanent disability but a temporary disability. Each time a challenge arose, I grew from that challenge. Ultimately, it is by ending the conspiracy of silence, outing ourselves, and facing down the fear of discrimination that we help those around us. I challenge librarians to look at their own life experiences, their own fears, and use them as springboards to help their library users. Begin with your own walls and grow from there.