



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Stress is basically a disconnection from the earth, a forgetting of the breath. Stress is an ignorant state. It believes everything is an emergency.”

-Natalie Goldberg, from
the Infopeople workshop
“Stress Management for
Library Staff”

Last week I attended an Infopeople workshop on the topic of stress management. Presenter Edmond Otis started out by pointing out that library jobs are more stressful than people realize. He asked each of us to name one stress in our work lives and the answers were revealing. Many people mentioned time management, as well as staffing shortages, difficult patrons, the library structure, inconsistent application of policies and rapid change.

I found it comforting and fascinating to see that issues in my own library are actually universal. In fact, that was one of the best parts of the workshop: the opportunity to talk to librarians from other library systems about our daily work lives.

The day was divided into four sections. The first was understanding stress – how it feels, why it is stressful to work at a library. We looked at our organizations, how we spend our time, people who come to

our libraries and our co-workers. One interesting point Otis made was that even though the challenges of modern society are quite different from 100 or even 20 years ago, our bodies haven’t changed that much. We are physiologically designed to consider anything stressful as a matter of life and death. Basically, we overreact, with tense muscles, shortness of breath, sweaty palms, dizziness, increased heart rate, sleeping problems, over or under eating and irritability, even though the stressor may be relatively minor. In addition, we react to good stress, like a new job, and bad stress, like being fired, in the same way. Our bodies can’t tell the difference.

The next section was about creating a lifestyle that includes a balance of work and relaxation. He emphasized the importance of taking time for ourselves, doing something that occupies our minds, our actions and our emotions, like gardening or dance. Included in this

section were tips on nutrition, sleep, exercise and lifestyle. Getting enough sleep, starting the day with breakfast and distinguishing the urgent from the important were all touched on. The exercise for this part was a “Vulnerability to Stress Scale,” from the UC Berkeley Wellness Letter, August 1985. There were 20 questions and points were assigned to each. A low score meant less vulnerability to stress and a high one meant more. Included were statements like: “I have a network of friends and acquaintances” and “I give and receive affection regularly.”

The third section was “Tools for Reducing Stress in the Library.” We examined staff and patron relationships, time management, procrastination and social networks. Otis emphasized the importance of good communication, teamwork and taking breaks during the day. One point he made over and over was our ability to

choose our stress, rather than letting it choose us. For example, there may be a choice between talking to a supervisor about an issue or letting it go. Both choices are stressful, but actually consciously choosing one, rather than not dealing with it, makes it less stressful. A quote from William James applied to this: “The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”

The final section was three relaxation techniques: Progressive muscle relaxation, meditation and guided imagery and visualization. Three in a row was definitely relaxing and a good way to go back out into the world of BART and getting home. The whole day was illuminating and I know that no matter whether I apply any of the techniques or not, simply becoming more aware of the daily stressors will improve my life.