Prioritizing Self-Care as a New Librarian
A BIPOC Perspective & Guide

by
Karen Tinajero-Vazquez
Defining “Self-Care”

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare”

Audre Lorde

Roots In Activism

Activists such as the Black Panthers in the 1970’s described self-care as a way for Black Americans to “preserve their humanity in the face of systemic racism” (Lakshmin, 2023).
Anatomy Of the Mystical Librarian

Always says yes

Caretaker

Sometimes referred to as a "hero"

Provides excellent service

Prioritizes others first

Always saves the day

Kind and compassionate

Librarianship is their "calling"

Goes the extra mile
Why Is This Harmful?

Vocational Awe

Belief that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred and, therefore, beyond critique (Ettarh, 2018).

Resilience

Stories of resilience are currency in white culture. Those of us who succeed “against all odds” are praised for our resilience instead of critiquing the system.

Productivity

As “caretakers” librarians feel the need to prove their “value”, which can take an emotional toll. The need to prove ourselves is harmful because we take on additional labor. This is especially true for BIPOC librarians.
The Imposter Myth

It is common for high-achieving people who doubt their abilities and achievements.

The concept of imposter syndrome was not originally defined with systemic racism, classism, xenophobia, and other biases in mind (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

It places the blame on the individual, not the system.
Dismantling the Myth

Let’s stop telling ourselves we are imposters.

Librarians need to build environments that challenge what is “professional” in academia.

Train leadership in intersectional feminism and critical race theories, create affinity groups, and validate the knowledge and experience of newer librarians.

As librarians, we must embrace collective self-care by validating the unique knowledge and experience of BIPOC and early career librarians.
Much of the responsibility falls to senior librarians to validate the knowledge and experience of marginalized employees.
How can we apply Validation Theories?

Review Evaluation Processes
Consider the language you use in evaluations. Are you using outdated or oppressive language?

Refine Onboarding Processes
Embrace collective knowledge by refining onboarding processes that are informed by both senior and new librarians.

Resist The Deficit Model
New librarians do not lack knowledge. We come with existing knowledge.

Rethink Professional Development
Consider internal self-led professional development such as mini-workshops led by librarians at every level.
Define Your Values

“When I devote myself to something that does not flow from my identity, that is not integral to my nature, I am most likely deepening the world’s hunger rather than helping to alleviate it”

The Courage to Teach

Write and reflect on your values, whether that’s in your teaching philosophy or a journal. Think of it as your “policy”. This can and should change over time.

This will help you set boundaries and stay true to your authentic self.

Senior librarians can facilitate this by sharing their own philosophies, sharing their favorite books or articles, or developing an annual workshop.
Why is setting boundaries so scary and difficult? Not because we can’t identify our own boundaries but because we are worried about the backlash (Lakshmin, 2023).

Recognize the cultural components, too. Many non-Western cultures adopt a communal mentality toward decision-making. It’s hard for some of us to say no.

This can also be a strength; if we develop collective and communal caretaking, librarians can thrive while maintaining healthy boundaries.
How to Set Boundaries

**For New Librarians...**

Use direct and clear communication, don’t ask for permission.

If it’s too scary, start small. Practice setting boundaries in less stressful situations (like friends or family).

Set the guilt aside. It will always be there in the background; learning how to live with it is more important.

If you don’t feel confident about communicating your expectations, that’s okay! Boundaries are not a natural instinct, they are learned. You have to practice and train it like a muscle (Lakshmin, 2023).

**For Senior Librarians....**

Ask yourself if you are setting enough boundaries. You set the norms and expectations for faculty and your peers.
Student-Librarian Relationships

If we ever hope to help our students feel like they belong in the classroom, BIPOC faculty must be collegially supported and also be able to feel as though we belong, too.

It Starts With Us

How does self-care enhance instruction and relationships? Having compassion for yourself has a rippling effect to those around us. This creates a culture of collective care.
Reflection

Try reflecting after every class, workshop, meeting with faculty, or whatever is significant to you.

Embrace vulnerability.

Reflect on your perspectives, biases, and assumptions.

Use a notebook, sticky notes, or a word doc; whatever works for you.

In research, reflection recognizes that the researchers’ own perspectives/biases influence their work.

In this case, reflection recognizes that our own experiences and perspectives influence our relationship with students and faculty.

Both new and senior librarians should engage in consistent reflection.
Finding Support

Look externally: We may not have support in our departments, but it’s okay to branch out across campus to find someone we connect with.

Join a mentorship program (many roundtables through the American Library Association offer this!)

Don’t be afraid to ask - many people are more than willing to be a mentor or routinely meet up for a chat.

We Here provides a safe and supportive community for BIPOC in library and information science professions: https://www.wehere.space/

In the spirit of embracing collective care, I am available as a friend to support you

Karen Tinajero Vazquez
ktinajerovaz@csusm.edu.
Bibliography


