Cultivating Empathy in Public Services

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What is empathy?
“Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself.”

-Mohsin Hamid
Empathy Defined

“The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; also : the capacity for this” (Merriam-Webster, 2018)
Empathy Qualities - According to Brene Brown

- Perspective taking
- Judgement free
- Recognizing emotion in others
- Communicating emotions
Mental Health in the United States

Approximately 1 in 5 adults experiences mental illness in a given year (NIMH, 2017).

20% of youth ages 13-18 live with a mental health condition (NAMI, 2016)

Five times as many high school students scored above common cutoffs for psychopathology (including anxiety & depression) in comparison to older cohorts (Twenge et al, 2010).

Multicultural & LGBTQ communities have less access to treatment, and in some cases higher incidences of mental illness (SAMHSA, 2016; NAMI, 2016)
“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

-Ian MacLaren
How can we build empathy?

Empathy building is akin to writing. You just have to practice it to get better.

Empathy on a string.
## The Hard Battle - for Assets
(The Search Institute)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Identity</td>
<td>Who knows about you as a person?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture &amp; Values</td>
<td>Who teaches you about religion or culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Influence</td>
<td>Who are role models? What groups help shape who you are?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Roles</td>
<td>Do you have a role that provides a feeling of purpose?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Systems</td>
<td>What groups can you depend on when things are tough?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happiness &amp; Health</td>
<td>What makes you happy? How do you stay healthy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Place</td>
<td>Where can you store your belongings? Where can you rest?</td>
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Take 1 min to write down your own assets...

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Imagine...
Reflective Listening - The First Step

- Reduce or eliminate distraction
- Embrace the speaker's perspective without necessarily agreeing
- Mirror the mood of the speaker
- Summarize what the speaker said
- Respond to the speaker's specific point, without digressing to other subjects
- During the reflective listening approach embrace the technique of thoughtful silence, rather than to engage in idle chatter

[Dalmar Fisher, an associate professor at Boston College]
Other Empathetic Exercises

- Compassion Meditation
- Team Building Empathy Exercises
  - Weekly highs & lows
- Empathy Bingo
- Are You Listening?
Compassion Fatigue - What is it?

- Secondary trauma
- Rewires your brain
- Symptoms similar to chronic stress
Compasion Fatigue - Self Care

- Healthy Lifestyle
- Enjoyable activities
- Take quiet breaks
- Share the load with your co-workers
- Remember that you are not a counselor
Compassion Fatigue-Setting Boundaries

- Redirect chatty patrons
  - “I’m sorry to hear about your difficulty walking. Let’s get back to getting you online.”

- Put the onus back to patrons
  - “I am sorry to hear about your financial situation. Read these few resources and let me know if you need more.”

- Meet underlying needs
  - “You really have wonderful stories, would you like to volunteer with our Partners in Reading for Seniors program?”
“Empathy comes from the Greek empatheia—em ("into") and pathos ("feeling")—a penetration, a kind of travel. It suggests you enter another person’s pain as you’d enter another country, through immigration and customs, border-crossing by way of query: What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?” - Leslie Jamison, The Empathy Exams
What are some ways in which you think you might already be practicing empathy with patrons?
POLL

Let’s talk about our concerns & brainstorm ideas...
What is empathy?
Continued...
Learning Outcomes

1. Define empathy from a variety of different viewpoints in order to understand its complex nature.

2. Identify active and empathetic listening practices which can be employed in public service settings in order to grow skills for helping library patrons.

3. Discuss the benefits and risks of expressing empathy with patrons in order to develop a framework for when and how to do so in public services.
Q&A

Further Resources link
References


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