

## Case Study 2: The Patron with Personal Issues

### SCENARIO:

A patron said, “I don't know what to do with my life....” I thought it was just a stressed-out conversation starter but realized quickly that the student wanted to talk with someone about personal issues. I asked them if they wanted the information for campus mental health services. He said, “Yes please.” I emailed him the link to their webpage, along with the phone number so he could call and make an appointment.

### RESPONSE:

This scenario calls to mind the many times I've heard from academic or public librarians, “But I'm not a social worker.” While this is true, librarians in any setting are what the literature calls gatekeepers, what I would define as mental health “watchdogs.” The way that this librarian responded to this patron in need is a textbook case of what this watchdog role comprises. The question he posed is not your typical “I need help with references.” This responding librarian seemed to realize that as they “thought it was a stressed-out conversation starter.” At a certain point, the librarian recognized that this was something more. Depression? Anxiety? A suicidal intimation?

The slide from the training curriculum from NNLM's webinar “Providing Mental Health Information at Your Library” is instructive here: Use the same approach as any other reference interview. Respecting confidentiality is key. Giving the message that the librarian and the librarian alone is listening is key. So is listening empathically. Active listening sometimes means reading between the lines, but ultimately, this patron was looking for information like any other. A follow-up question, though not stated in the scenario, might have been, “You seem confused. How do you think I can help you with that?” The webinar facilitators make the important point that librarians need to keep within their scope of practice. Engaging in a deeper conversation about this patron's concerns would be out of that scope. Having the campus mental health services email and phone number accessible is within it.

However, there is a caveat. It seems within a librarian's scope of practice to assess for suicidal ideation or intention. A simple question, “Do you feel like harming yourself?” may not come naturally but should be part of a reference librarian's arsenal. Knowing proper protocol if the patron would have said, “Yes” should be part of that arsenal as well.

Another piece of information that seems relevant here is this appears to be a phone or live chat encounter. This reality is one that both academic and public libraries (and particularly the latter) need to account for, a consequence of the pandemic. What are protocols for engagement when that engagement is remote? Are they different than when they are in person? We are limited in our capacity to “help” when it comes to mental health crises when the patron is alone in his dorm room or apartment. What that requires then in part is for librarians to have campus and community resources at their avail. Does your library have such a resource guide accessible to all?

Finally, what about follow-up? If you are respecting the confidentiality of this patron, it would not be appropriate to call campus mental health services to check if he followed through on his call. Could you say, “Do me a favor and call/chat me back when you've made the call”? Is saying this within one's scope of practice? I would say this is a good question for a staff meeting. Policy around such issues might need

to be clarified. It might be important to do so (whether or not the patron actually does follow through) just for the librarian's peace of mind. Remember—part of follow-up in the AEF model is self-care.