

Case Study 6: The Woman and Her Dog

SCENARIO:

A woman started coming to the library, bringing in several bags and a dog on a leash whenever she visited. She would use the public computers and stay for hours. One day she told staff that there were people out to get her and she had been driven away from the area but had returned. Another time she was outside of the library smoking when a police officer drove by and stopped to talk to her. The woman accused the branch head of calling the police on her. Still another time this woman showed the branch head that she had some kind of stick or bar hidden in her pants to defend herself in case people came after her. She was not threatening the branch head or anyone else but was showing her she was ready to defend herself. The woman was not agitated or angry so the branch head left her alone and she left the library after a while.

RESPONSE:

Librarians don't need to and are not expected to diagnose their patrons, but in this case it might be helpful to know a bit about Schizophrenia and how it is presents itself in some individuals. So let's use the AEF model, aided by our knowledge about Schizophrenia, to consider the best approach to this case.

ASSESS:

- **What is going on here?**

There might be lots that is going on, but there are some assumptions we can make about the woman because of her evident paranoia. Paranoia can be a symptom of Schizophrenia (but doesn't have to be). One of the questions to ask is how reality-based is the paranoia. It is possible, of course, that this woman is being pursued by "people out to get her," which would explain the pseudo-weapon in her pants. It is also realistic for her to feel threatened by the police, especially if she is unhoused as is implied by her having several bags and a dog accompanying her. On the other hand, her suspicions could be completely unwarranted. Does it matter? (See below for more on that.) If this is an example of Schizophrenia, you should look for certain symptoms:

- Is there evidence of hallucinations? Does she indicate she is seeing or hearing things that are not there to your eyes? These would be considered positive symptoms.
- Does she have difficulty processing information? When talked to, does it seem she cannot track or make logical sense of what she hears? This is what the curriculum labeled as cognitive symptoms.
- Or does she demonstrate a more lack of affect, what the training materials referred to as negative symptoms?

What is the value of knowing any of this? While you are not a clinician who will treat her, a proper assessment—knowing what could happen if Schizophrenia is involved—could foster a positive rather than negative engagement with her.

- **What is my role? Who else can/should help?**

It doesn't appear from the scenario that this patron is a threat to anyone, staff or otherwise, for you to take a disciplinary role. It also seems that the woman is comfortable enough with staff to

keep coming back. The library is a safe space from those who might be “out to get here.” As staff, you are part of that safe space and warm, empathic engagement will go further than a more suspicious, hands-off approach.

There is one detail to keep on your radar and inform other staff members, including security: her use of the stick to defend herself. Library policy may not deem such an item as a weapon, but it certainly is something to keep an eye on if she continues patronizing the library.

- **What space is the encounter occupying?**

The woman is not occupying any space in a way that violates library policy, even though she “stays for hours” on the computer. She is smoking in designated areas, assumedly, and doesn’t appear to be interacting with other patrons in a way that arouses concern.

ENGAGE:

- **How do I respond with calm, welcoming, yet firm verbal communication?**

Knowing a bit about how to engage someone living with Schizophrenia might be helpful here, whether or not this is her diagnosis.

- *Tip #1:* Get to know her, but don’t be too intrusive. As mentioned above, the fact that she is a regular patron indicates she feels safe in the library. You can give her small indications that she can continue to feel safe by greeting her by name, if you know it, asking how her day is going, etc. This is the time to be aware of the assumptions you are making about people who are unhoused or living with mental illness. You certainly don’t have to be her best friend, but making tiny interpersonal inroads can go a long way if she does start to escalate because of her paranoia.
- *Tip #2:* Don’t argue with her or contest her belief that others are out to “get her.” Unless you hear otherwise from a professional working with her, you can accept it as truth because it is her truth. Unless she begins to involve staff or other patrons into these beliefs, it isn’t your business.
- *Tip #3:* If she begins to hallucinate about people, objects, etc. that clearly are not there, don’t take a defensive posture. You can be honest about the fact that you don’t see what she says, but use a neutral, calm tone.
- *Tip #4:* Unless library policy calls for it, I wouldn’t suggest taking her “weapon” away. Doing so would assumedly make her feel unsafe and escalate her behavior unnecessarily. If, according to policy, the stick or bar is considered a weapon, negotiate with her where she can keep it. Perhaps you could designate a space outside the library that is hidden and talk with her about keeping it there when she comes inside.

- **How do I respond with calm, welcoming, yet firm nonverbal communication?**

The first rule of de-escalation is to remain calm, and exerting a calm, warm presence throughout your engagement with this patron is key. Let’s assume that we are talking about Schizophrenia here. Here are some tips to incur positive nonverbal engagement:

- Avoid too direct or continuous eye contact.
- Get on her level, if possible. Sit down next to her; stand at an appropriate distance. Don’t appear like you are “lording over her,” as that might fuel her suspicions.
- Smile. She will likely respond with a smile as well.
- Be aware of her encounters with other patrons, but don’t spend time policing her on that. Some patrons might be uncomfortable engaging with her, but it isn’t your job to take away that discomfort.

- **How do I keep myself safe?**

All of the tips above contribute to your maintaining safety for her, yourself, and other patrons and staff. People with Schizophrenia might appear to lash out when they feel threatened, so alerting the branch manager or security personnel when she is in the building isn't a bad idea. What you don't want to do is make her feel like she is being watched. That might fuel her paranoia.

FOLLOW-UP:

- **How can I ensure that the problem is resolved?**

Well, there is no problem per se, here, but it might be a good idea to note in writing her actions and behaviors. This act isn't done to make her feel like she is a "problem," but just as valuable information should her behavior escalate into something more than paranoia.

- **How can I debrief/take care of myself after the encounter?**

There may not be need for debriefing in this case, but involving others in observing her interactions and use of library space might be instructive for you. Again, doing so isn't because you want to police her actions or plant unnecessary suspicions about her in your colleagues' minds. It is part of keeping all safe. You should never bear the responsibility alone of taking care of a potentially risky or unpredictable patron.