BETH WAHLER
CONSULTING

SELF-CARE AND COMMUNITY CARE STRATEGIES FOR LIBRARY STAFF
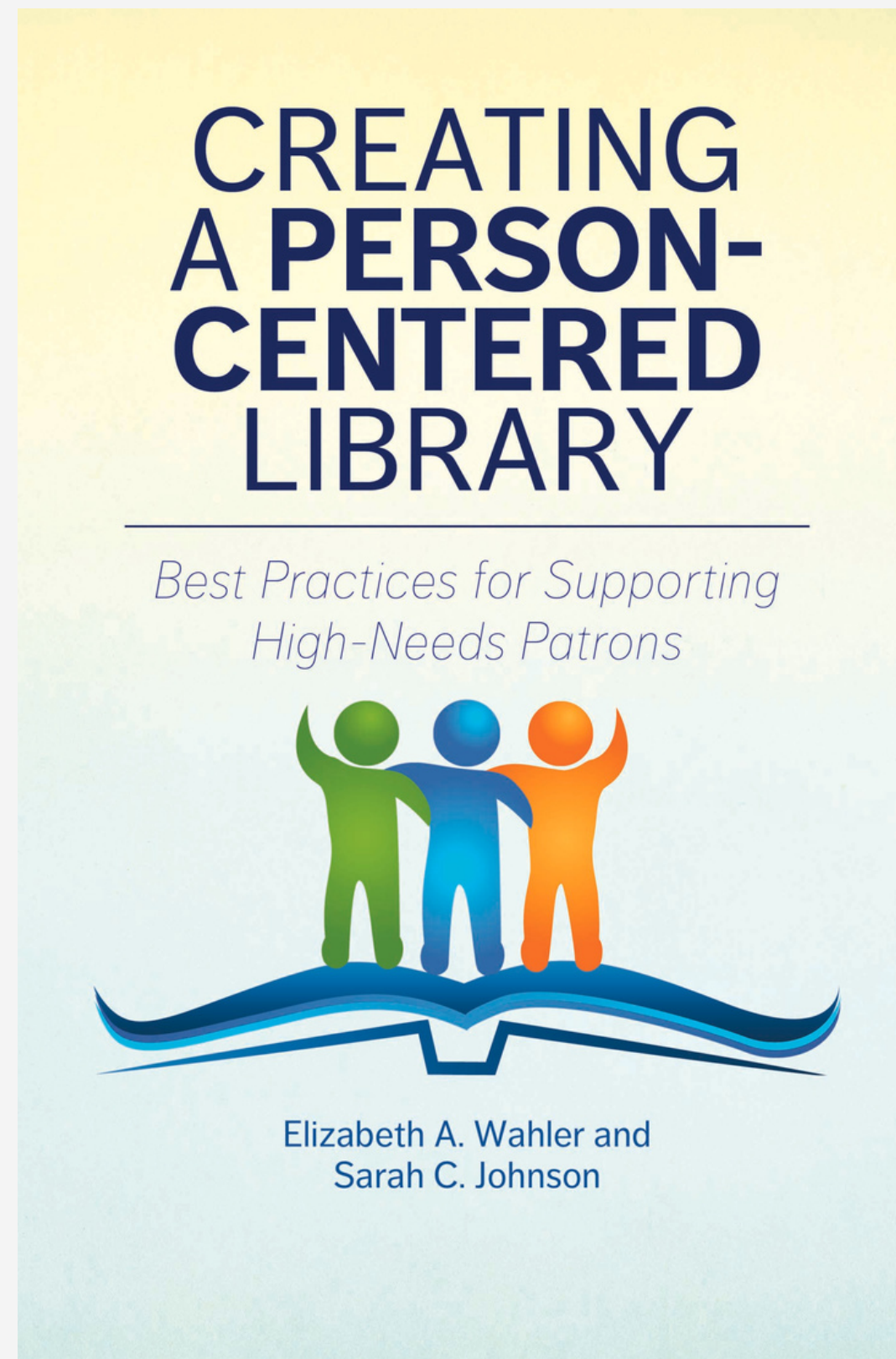## BETH WAHLER, PHD, MSW

ABOUT BETH:

- Social work practice experience with poverty-related needs, homelessness, substance use disorders, mental health, trauma, and other barriers to economic stability and mobility
- Administrative experience in a variety of both practice and educational settings, including leadership for organizational change
- Collaborations with libraries for 8+ years
- Research focused on trauma-informed librarianship, public library patrons' psychosocial needs, library staff trauma and needs, and ways to address these needs
- Experience with social workers in public libraries
- Consulting business focused on individual library needs assessments, training/professional development, library-based social service program design/development, leadership coaching/support, and program evaluation

FORTHCOMING BOOK IN DEC 2023

CREATING A **PERSON-CENTERED** LIBRARY

Best Practices for Supporting High-Needs Patrons

Elizabeth A. Wahler and
Sarah C. Johnson

Published by Bloomsbury
Libraries Unlimited

Available for pre-order now at
Bloomsbury.com

OBJECTIVES

- Synthesize Information about Changing Library Patron Needs

- Understand How These Needs Impact Staff

- Discuss self-care and "community care" strategies for supporting library staff

CHANGING LIBRARY NEEDS

- **Historical changes affecting public libraries:**
  - **Deinstitutionalization in the 1960's brought increases in people experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness (Cart, 1992; Torrey, Esposito, & Geller, 2009).**
  - **The Great Recession and mortgage crisis in 2007-2009 brought an increase in people experiencing challenges related to poverty (Jaeger et al., 2014).**
  - **Shortage of emergency shelter beds (Henry et al., 2018)**
  - **Increasing costs with stagnant wages**
  - **Minimum wage has been $7.25/hour since 2009**
    - **Estimated current living wage for Pennsylvania for a single adult with 0 children = $16.41/ 1 child = $34.45/ 2 children = $44.42 (MIT Living Wage Calculator, 2023)**
  - **Increasing municipal statutes that criminalize homelessness (National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty, 2019)**
  - **The COVID pandemic**
  - **Current political climate**

PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS OF LIBRARY VISITORS

- Psychosocial needs of public library visitors have been increasing in recent decades
  - Top areas of need (Pressley, 2017; Provence, et al., 2021; Torrey et al., 2009; Wahler et al., 2021)
    - Homelessness or unsafe/unstable housing
    - Mental health challenges
    - Substance use/overdose
    - Poverty-related needs
- These needs have been increasing since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hertz-Palmor et al., 2021; Horowitz et al., 2021; NAEH, 2020)
- Although frequency of needs varies, rural and urban libraries are experiencing the same types of unmet visitor needs (Wahler, 2022)

STRAINED LIBRARY STAFF

- Libraries are feeling the strain
- Staff are not often trained or qualified to assist with these levels of need (Anderson et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2018)
- Staff sometimes feel conflicted about their role with these needs (Wahler et al., 2020)
- Visitors with these needs often take more time for staff, stretching them too thin or causing difficulty in meeting needs of all patrons (Soska & Navarro, 2020; Torrey et al., 2009; Wilkins Jordan, 2014)
- Violence occurs in many libraries, and some staff fear for their safety or the safety of others due to visitor/patron behaviors (Anderson, 2018; Clark, 2019; Torrey et al., 2009; Wahler, 2022)
- Some libraries have to frequently call police or for emergency assistance

LIBRARY WORKER TRAUMA

- In the US, front-line library workers from all types of libraries (urban, suburban, and rural) report high rates of trauma from workplace incidents (Fisher, 2022) and over half report experiencing violence in their job (Wahler, 2022).

- Incidents include verbal abuse, physical aggression and attacks, threats of violence, sexual harassment, threatening with weapons, and destroying library property

- These incidents have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began, are continuing to worsen with the current political climate

- Some library staff experience symptoms of PTSD, trauma responses, or experience worsening of a pre-existing mental health condition

COMMON LIBRARY BEHAVIORS FOR STAFF EXPERIENCING TRAUMA

- Describes feeling burned out
- Feels depressed
- Feels ineffective or powerless at work
- Dreads coming to work/calls in sick
- Isolates
- Is frequently irritable
- Is often frustrated with people
- Lacks creativity
- Has difficulty with concentration
- Has difficulty sleeping
- Uses unhealthy coping mechanisms like overeating, drug/alcohol use
- Demonstrates poor boundaries

"INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL"

- Term coined by psychologist Jennifer Freyd (University of Oregon, n.d.)
- Refers to "wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals committed within the context of the institution."
- Can magnify or worsen the trauma for the person who experienced it
- Reported by library staff in a number of studies on library trauma/workplace violence, harassment, and abuse

SECONDARY/ VICARIOUS TRAUMATIZATION

- A trauma response that appears due to the act of listening to trauma stories of others

- Secondary trauma impacts helping professionals, including library workers, and can be a common occupational hazard for anyone working directly with trauma survivors

- The risk is greater for women, people who are highly empathetic by nature, or people who are trauma survivors themselves. The risk is also higher for people who do not have adequate training to deal with others' trauma and people who are socially or organizationally isolated.

- Secondary traumatic stress compromises care of others, can lead to hopelessness or feelings of professional worthlessness, and lead to people leaving their jobs or their helping field altogether.

(NCTSN, 2022)

BURNOUT

- "A syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."

- Three components/dimensions:
  - Feelings of exhaustion
  - Increased negativity/cynicism about one's job
  - Reduced effectiveness at work

- Risk is increased by:
  - Lack of control at work
  - Lack of job resources
  - Unclear job expectations
  - Dysfunctional work dynamics
  - Isolation/lack of social support (at work or home)
  - Work-life imbalance

- Often results in low morale and disengagement

(Mayo Clinic, 2021 and WHO, 2019)

COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIES NEEDED FOR SUPPORTING STAFF WELLBEING
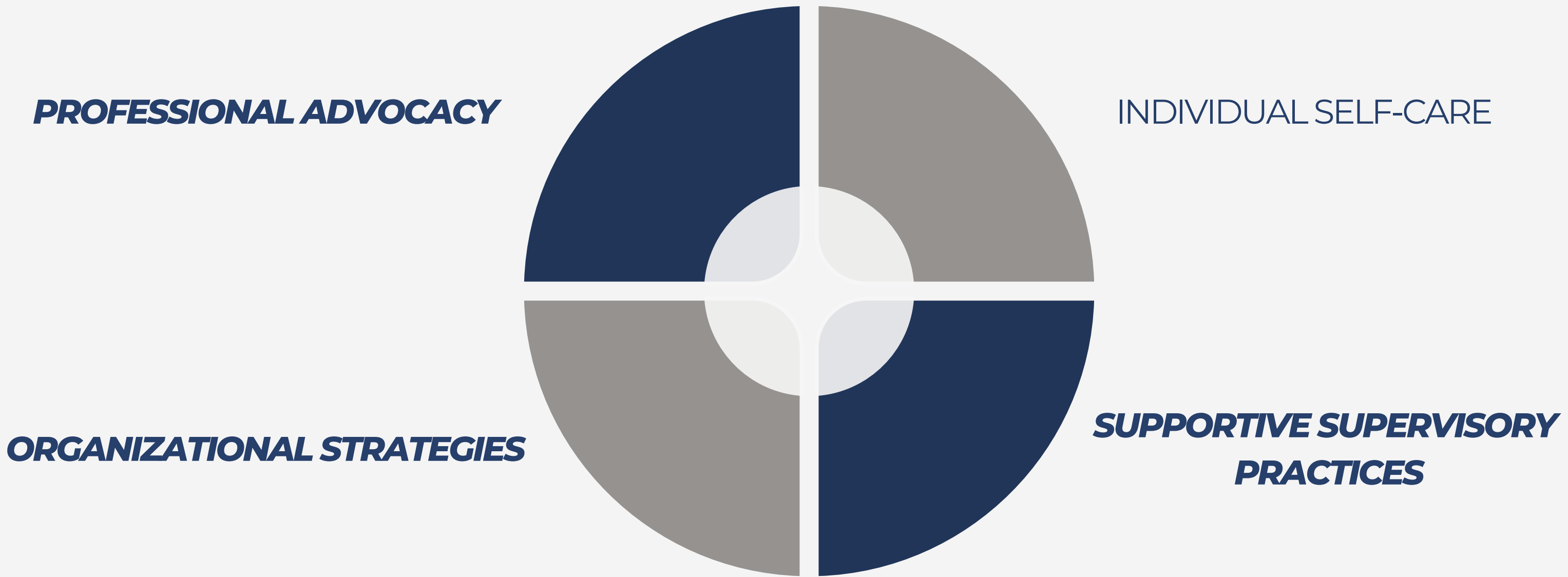
PROFESSIONAL ADVOCACY

INDIVIDUAL SELF-CARE

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORY PRACTICES

COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIES NEEDED FOR SUPPORTING STAFF WELLBEING

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INDIVIDUAL SELF-CARE

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SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORY PRACTICES

"COMMUNITY CARE"

INDIVIDUAL SELF-CARE

SELF CARE

- Self-care is any strategy we use as individuals to improve/increase our overall wellness
- Wellness is multi-dimensional so we need to consider activities we can do for physical, psychological, social, intellectual, and spiritual care
- We need a "toolbox" of both long-term and short-term/immediate strategies
  - Long-term strategies help build up our overall resilience to stress
  - Short-term strategies improve our immediate response to high-stress situations and the resultant dysregulation
- Focus on sustainable, affordable, and time-efficient strategies- self-care doesn't have to be something grand, big, or expensive
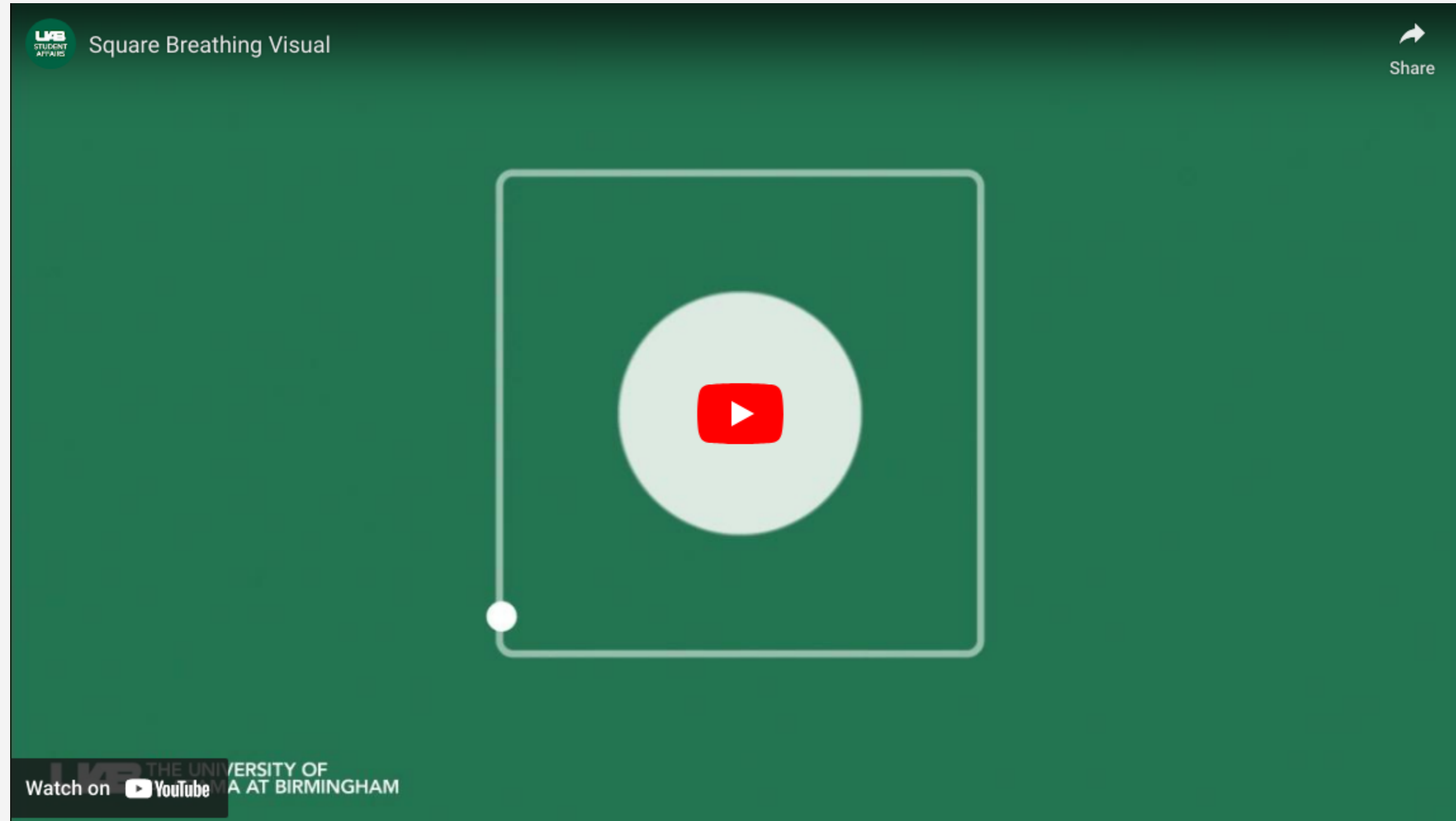- Small strategies add up over time!

SELF CARE STRATEGIES: SHORT-TERM

- Notice when you feel yourself physically reacting to stress:
  - Elevated heart rate
  - High tension
  - Feeling of panic
  - Shortness of breath
  - Sweating
  - Difficulty concentrating/focusing
  - High emotions
  - "Fight or flight" response

- Focus on activities that can help regulate our nervous systems:
  - Deep breathing, square breathing, and other breathing exercises (be mindful that these don't work for everyone, though!)
  - Practice a pause
  - Sensory breaks/brain breaks
  - Music/singing
  - Stretching/yoga/short walks
  - Meditation/mindfulness/visualization
  - Positive self-talk

SQUARE BREATHING

SLOWED BREATHING

SELF CARE ASSESSMENT

- Although they all have limitations, an assessment is a good starting place to determine what we're doing well and in what areas we could improve
- Provides ideas for additional self-care strategies to try
- Helps give us a baseline to assess change over time
- Consider using a publicly available assessment tool such as the one listed below:
  - Self-Care Assessment Worksheet
- Be sure the assessment tool used asks about multiple areas of self-care, such as physical, psychological, and spiritual self-care to reflect multiple dimensions of wellness
- Self-care assessments can help us identify strategies to incorporate into our own self-care plan ("take what you need and leave the rest").

SELF CARE STRATEGIES: LONG-TERM

- Physical:
  - Regular meals, healthy diet
  - Regular medical care
  - Exercise/physical activity
  - Sleep hygiene
- Psychological
  - Journaling/reflection
  - Gratitude practices
  - Therapy/counseling as needed
- Social/relational
  - Regular contact with family/friends
  - Engage in social activities that bring enjoyment
- Intellectual
  - Read books for pleasure
  - Take a class of interest
- Spiritual
  - Spend time with nature
  - Take time for reflection/meditation
  - Read inspirational literature
- Professional
  - Take annual leave and daily breaks
  - Seek peer support
  - Say no/set boundaries when needed

LIMITS OF SELF CARE

- We can't "self care" ourselves out of poor organizational practices, discrimination/bias, abuse, etc.!

- Self-care takes resources- time, focus, relationships, money- that many don't have

- Trauma, vicarious trauma, and burnout are related to workplace/structural factors, so the onus isn't all on an individual to take care of themselves!

COMMUNITY CARE STRATEGIES

SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORY PRACTICES

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- Create a "culture of care" for staff
- Reach out/connect with employees (model relationship-first approach) and create multiple opportunities for connection
- Encourage staff self-care assessments and brainstorm/share self-care strategies together
- Provide regular supervision for staff (group or individual)
- Encourage and model boundary-setting and saying "no" when needed
- Normalize talking about mental health and acknowledging the realities of the job
- Require staff to take breaks for lunch or other mandated breaks
- Have fun at work! Incorporate fun, laughter, and social/relationship building into work activities
- Help reframe situations for staff- "This isn't about me" when things feel personal, "What happened to this person to make them act this way" when frustrated.
- Encourage full use of annual leave, and taking days off for "mental health days" as much as physical illness
- Ensure staff are knowledgeable about wellness benefits offered through their job at the library
- Address bullying and other inappropriate work behavior so the environment is safe for all and expectations are consistent
- Use your position to address inappropriate patron behaviors, especially when patrons harass staff from marginalized groups
- Implement reflective practice strategies

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

- Borrowed from education, social services, and healthcare
- A strategy for helping staff deal with challenging work environments
- Incorporates activities (group or individual) to allow staff to process workplace scenarios, reflect on their personal responses to those scenarios, analyze their response and actions, and learn new skills to improve their response to future workplace situations
- Used intentionally and on an ongoing basis, not just as a response to a crisis
- The focus is on how "we" as a library can improve, not how "I/you" can improve (take care not to place blame)
- Has been found to help staff recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, learn new skills, improve motivation, and improve the quality of service delivery

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

- Commit to supporting "sustainable practice" (Zettervall & Nienow, 2019)- Puts accountability on the organization, rather than solely the individual, for activities aimed at caring for mental health and wellbeing
- Administration should consider taking steps to support staff well-being such as:
  - Adopt a trauma-informed approach
  - Shift focus from self-care to community-care (with the library as the community)- everyone is in this together!
  - Allow time in the schedule for staff support groups/pairs to meet (partner with another library if needed)
  - Add wellness spaces (or quiet, sensory-friendly spaces) for staff
  - Intentional scheduling- Rotate staff to reduce demand on specific person(s)
  - Add staff support/training days for wellness, team-building, and professional development (it's okay to close the library sometimes!)
  - Ensure policies and practices support staff rather than solely being patron-focused
  - Reduce hierarchies and create avenues for shared decision-making
  - Build community partnerships to offer wellness-focused programming for staff (yoga, mindfulness, etc.)
  - Advocate with city/county admin to offer adequate support programs/EAPs
  - Hire with the realities of the job in mind- be transparent
  - Clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations
  - Conduct a needs assessment and obtain consultation as needed

TEACH AND PRACTICE BOUNDARIES

- Often, library staff are hesitant to set boundaries with visitors out of a desire to always seem warm, welcoming, and friendly
- Boundaries are healthy and help people learn expectations, as long as they are applied consistently
- Boundaries are part of ensuring a psychologically and physically safe environment
- When setting a boundary:
  - Speak in "I" or "our library" terms rather than "you" terms
  - Especially in situations where safety is at risk, be clear and firm in your language and tone of voice
  - Inform people of the consequence of violating the boundary
  - Follow through
- Train and practice to ensure staff are as comfortable as possible with this!

ADDRESS TRAINING NEEDS OF STAFF

- Trainings could include*:
    - De-escalation and working with people in crisis
    - Setting boundaries
    - Mental health (Mental Health First Aid is recommended)
    - Trauma and trauma-informed librarianship
    - Substance use
    - Homelessness
    - Poverty
    - Community resources
- Trainings should be:
    - Relevant
    - Practical
    - Teach skills, rather than focusing on theory and concepts only
    - Use staff time efficiently
    - Be adaptable for staff schedules and travel limitations

*Comes from needs assessments of broad samples of library staff, but libraries should consider doing their own training needs assessment to determine staff priorities/needs

PROFESSIONAL ADVOCACY

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For long-term improvement of library staff wellbeing and a reduction in stress, we also need large-scale professional advocacy for library workers:
- Increase accurate perceptions of library work by the public
- Ensure that LIS programs prepare students for the reality of the work
- Advocate for adequate funding for libraries
- Ensure adequate mental health and health-related supports for library workers
- Provide helpful professional development opportunities
- Support research on effective supports for library workers
- Provide fiscal resources to support programming and services for high-needs patrons as well as staff training and development

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- University at Buffalo School of Social Work's *Self-Care Starter Kit*

- Self-Care for Library Workers- Califa.org

- State Library of Oregon's Continuing Education Resources for Library Staff on Self-Care

- *Creating a Person-Centered Library: Best Practices for Serving High-Needs Patrons* (Coming in Dec 2023) by Elizabeth A. Wahler and Sarah Johnson

- *The Reflective Practice Guide: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Critical Reflection (2015)* by Barbara Bassot

QUESTIONS?

THANK YOU !

CONTACT ME:

✉ Beth.Wahler@SWintheLibrary.com

🌐 www.SWintheLibrary.com