

Emma Wood

Research

The good, the bad, and the anxious

In research and in life, human beings are prone to uncertainty and susceptible to the circular thinking of worry. According to the DSM-5, anxiety is anticipation of future threat. Sometimes that threat comes in the form of an overlooked article or a feeble bibliography, darkening the sky of a promising idea for a scholarly endeavor. Anxiety is characterized by excessive concern and distress which can manifest itself in symptoms such as checking and obsessing. The obstacles that are met along the research trail can send up red flags in the brain that lead researchers to check and recheck the same sources and obsess over the unknown. The processes of finding answers are, of course, tied to unknowing, and in that unknowing is a hotbed for apprehension. Some of the remedies for anxiety may be applied to research, probably not Xanax, but certainly a heavy dose of acceptance.

Often times we seek to find all articles on a particular topic. When writing an article, assisting a patron with research, or preparing for a presentation, librarians want to unearth the best information. The quest to harvest every authority can be maddening because one cannot know what he or she has missed.

This is particularly worrisome in preemption checking. Before undertaking a significant project, it is paramount to overturn every stone. At the same time, it is impossible to conclusively overturn every stone. This aspect of research is a twofold parallel to anxiety because there is the worry of what is missed and the urge to search obsessively.

At some point the researcher has to accept that the body of articles they have gathered is sufficient. Overcompensating for doubt with resource quantity can result in a disorganized product. An effective librarian has research tenacity and endurance, but knows when to call off the search without remorse.

There is not always a perfect resource. The research that we compile typically represents the results of numerous search terms and a variety of databases. However, there is often that nagging feeling that perhaps a database or print resource was overlooked. With the variety of databases and websites available, it is impossible to run keywords through each one. Yet something still shudders somewhere in the hippocampus, whispering, "But maybe . . ."

The point is to be satisfied all reasonable databases have been scoured, and not to focus on the mythical dot com that your insecurity insists is out there. A fine line is drawn between good research and obsession. Just as anxiety exists to keep us safe, concern over the research process can be positive. The physical manifestations of anxiety can actually result in more thorough research, but getting lost in the pitfalls of anxiety leads to ineffective, circular searches. Uncertainty causes repeat searching or unnecessary checking of resources. Worry

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should build search momentum and forward thinking without inciting backtracking and second-guessing.

Librarians encounter research anxiety in their scholarly projects, but they also face the challenge of quelling patron research anxiety. In that sense, librarians are counselors. This metaphor extends to other aspects of the profession, ahem chatty public patrons, but for the discussion at hand, librarians are the soothers of uneasy paper writers.

One of our greatest assets is our empathy. Having spent hours ourselves audibly frustrated with uncooperative databases or unsuccessful in seeking a proper citation style for an unusual document, we can relate. So often the answer to a reference question is a pep talk rather than an actual *answer*: Who better to treat research anxiety than those who are intimately familiar with its symptoms?

Although we have gotten librarianship down to a science, research is equal parts diligence as it is skill. It can be just as important to impart to our patrons that they need to invest time as it is to demonstrate specific resources. Unfortunately, librarians are frequently expected to have the answer, and expected to have it quickly. This expectation unto itself can be a source of anxiety.

Rather than feeling like a failure each time “the answer” turns out to be a discussion of various strategies instead of a distinct book or website, librarians can ease their own anxiety in knowing that the process is rarely simple. Experience bolsters the

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Settling in to that imperfect reality gracefully, with the unwavering resolve to search, is a learned skill. The library professional's determination to navigate a tangled research web with confidence is an anti-anxiety tool.

Uncertainty is uncomfortable, but it is also unavoidable. A popular technique to thwart anxiety is to learn to experience uncertainty without exaggerated regard, to allow it to exist without triggering the worry alarms. Let uncertainty take up residence in the brain without rent. There are natural inlets for anxiety in the research process: uncertainty in resources, in search results, and in the many permutations of an answer.

The trendy “keep calm and ask a librarian” t-shirt is wise beyond its novelty. The answer that a patron is seeking can be that calm.

We all need reassurance that the end goal is not necessarily a definitive answer. Research is a systematic tour through the information troves, ending with a confident conclusion that the best effort has been put forth. To quell research anxiety, one has to accept uncertainty. *zz*

(“Becoming a librarian BFF,” continues from page 513)

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