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7-5-2019

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Recommended Citation

Smith, S.M. (2019, July). Showing Up for Yourself: Mental Health and Your MLIS. Hack Library School. <https://hacklibraryschool.com/2019/07/05/30117/>.

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Showing Up for Yourself: Mental Health and Your MLIS

I have been reflecting on my experiences in graduate school and I want to share some of these thoughts, primarily related to survival. Since April, I have had conversations with fellow students and friends that reminded me how much a certain ease of life is portrayed on social media and how easy it is to gloss over or overlook the real work that happens. We curate the posts of our public digital lives much like we curate the information we have been trained to organize and access through library school. One friend in particular shared a confusion that no one talks about their rejections in the MLIS job search process. This struck me as so true and really unrealistic.

I began my MLIS job search in January and concluded it in May with a little more than a month to spare until graduation. This job search came with something I never could have anticipated in the full-brained focus of my graduate school work: it acted as a trigger for past trauma. Perspectives about myself, my skills and value (placed there by others a long time ago), and ideas I thought I had conquered came back into my mental space in full force. These types of battles cannot ever be predicted, nor should they be diminished. It is strange what gets buried deep sometimes and how those ideas can take over when we least expect it. Let me say this, it was actually easier for me to accept the various rejections I received than to accept invitations to interview. Yes, rejections happened and that is okay. Rejections are part of the reality of the process. Even the hours of cover letters, interview prep, and questions often forced me to face experiences that I would just as soon forget. Moving through these memories was something I had to figure out for myself. I forced myself to compartmentalize my head space (work, school, job search, trauma), to step outside more, and to start working out regularly. With time I began seeing my path in this profession like a topographical map of my own personal metadata, as explored in “Metadata” by Jeffrey Pomerantz (p. 11). In my daily world, only a couple of people had enough context into my past and present to see I was going through something. These people helped the most by just being there and having normal conversations without asking questions or expecting answers.

This is difficult for me to put out there, as surface level as it is, but I share this in hopes that it helps me stop giving these parts of my history power. I share this for others I know still trying to complete their graduate degrees while working full time to know that nothing about this process was easy. For me, completing my MLIS degree was about surviving and finding ways to keep moving. I want you to know that my Study Abroad experience, as amazing as it was, often involved 12-13 hour days, endless amounts of vanilla lattes to keep moving and bearing witness to some really ugly and beautiful parts of human nature at the same time. I want you to know that my Open Educational Resources (OER) Directed Fieldwork Experience – the one project that contributed to many job search conversations and I believe still makes a difference – was completed during and around the death of my grandmother. I want you to know that over the last three years I made constant choices about what school work not to complete, whether it was not contributing to a discussion board or not reading a weekly list of articles. I want you to know that I had to learn to be okay with massive amounts of stress-induced weight gain and accept a messy house more often than I would care to admit.

For those still on their MLIS journey, my advice is to surround yourself with people that make you laugh and bring you joy. Accept the need to consume more prepared food in the face of overwhelming to-do lists. Set aside your ego and ask for help when you need it. Trust me, the right people will understand. Also, unfortunately, know that at the end of your degree your body might be fully adapted to 4-5 hours of sleep a night.

I am so lucky to have a community of practice behind my growth as a librarian and parents who value education. My dad told me once in high school to never let bitterness enter my heart and, for some reason, this stuck. So, I choose to focus on having a grateful attitude about my life. This choice is often also a daily struggle – one that I sometimes win and sometimes lose. One thing I truly believe is that we all deserve to have the best intentions assumed until proven otherwise and to remember that everyone we see is fighting their own battles, most of which may be invisible to you. Remember, as Brené Brown says, “sometimes the bravest and most important thing you can do is just show up.” So show up. Show up for yourself, however that looks for you, and show up for others around you by reaching out when you have the capacity.

Special thanks to Joan Hua (@joanhua) for inspiring these reflections and to Elisa Rodrigues (@elisjr4) for teaching me a lot about LIS mental health and insisting these words were intended for a broader audience.

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