

# Are libraries a safe space for staff as well?

One of the most wonderful aspects of public libraries is that they are a public space, open to all people from our society. Everyone is welcome. And in the public space, just as there are wonderfully diverse people, there is also a small element of dysfunctional people that can be frightening and confronting. If someone had told me in 1989 upon starting my first library role that, after more than twenty years in public libraries, I would deal with newspaper fisticuffs, serial poopers, overdue fine rage, punches being thrown at me, public threats, heroin overdoses, sperm deposits, roller-skating arsonists, and bully standover tactics – I would have laughed at them and said, "But it is a library! We are a quiet, civilised, public workspace!" My list does not even include the many different stories that colleagues have shared with me of their confrontations.

How I dealt with these dilemmas differed greatly depending on my managers. Luckily, for the majority of the events, I had supportive workplaces and colleagues. Debriefing, risk assessments, and general support like a phone call to say, "Good grief! That is awful! What steps can the workplace take to ensure your safety and to try and ensure that this does not happen again?" go a long way toward feeling valued and secure in the workplace. Most workplaces that have staff dealing directly with the public run "Dealing with Difficult Customers" training. I would recommend attending these training workshops as they can empower you further. ALIA runs training courses in Managing Challenging Clients and you can visit the website ([www.alia.org.au/training](http://www.alia.org.au/training)) for more information.

You may ask, why would someone continue working in such an environment? The answer is that the disruptive library patron is very much in the minority. The majority of library patrons are fabulous, vibrant, community members. And even the disruptive patron has been known to come back and apologise for their actions. Often, the disruptive patron has been frustrated by a number of events in their own lives therefore leading them to a moment they may come to regret. The key is feeling able to stand your ground when you are being threatened without being confrontational. Your safety is key. I have often been grateful for having a circulation or reference desk creating a physical barrier between me and an agitated patron. It is also incredibly

important to feel assured by a manager's support, and I have gone out of my way to support and assure staff that I supervised.

And remember, though everyone is welcome in a library, if they are breaking the law, whether it is assault, harassment, theft, or arson, you need to call the police. Library staff have a right to a peaceful workplace, and along with library patrons, should feel safe and secure in a public space.

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