

Leading through Loneliness

Personal Reflections on Surviving Burnout

If you've spent any amount of time leading in an academic library, you already know: This work will stretch you, inspire you, break your heart, and—on the worst days—make you wonder why you ever signed up for it. And that is perfectly OK to say out loud.

Most leadership literature still treats exhaustion as a personal failing. But leadership itself can be emotionally draining.¹ When you layer on the realities of higher education today—shrinking budgets, workforce reductions, political tension, intensified scrutiny toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, relentless technological change, and sociopolitical polarization—library leaders are carrying burdens that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

Across two decades in leadership roles at multiple institutions, I've learned to stay optimistic by finding silver linings wherever I could. Still, the challenges academic libraries face today feel heavier and more continuous than at any point in my career. Many library leaders—often responsible for teaching support, research infrastructure, digital systems, community engagement, and crisis management—are emotionally depleted, chronically stressed, and profoundly alone.

Despite this reality, leadership burnout is rarely addressed with the candor it deserves. Institutions invest heavily in wellness programs for students, staff, and faculty, yet the emotional labor of leadership—particularly in libraries—often goes unnoticed. As Brett Farmiloe's collection of narratives reveals, even seasoned executives find themselves overwhelmed, quietly unraveling under pressure.² Without attention to self-care, the impact reaches far beyond the office, affecting health, well-being, and relationships with loved ones.

This article is my honest reflection on leadership fatigue and resilience. It's also a letter to myself—a reminder of the strategies that have helped me survive moments of frustration, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion. I offer these thoughts for library managers and leaders who feel overwhelmed or isolated, but the coping strategies apply to anyone experiencing work fatigue.

The Emotional Weight of Library Leadership

Let's be real. Library leaders operate at the crossroads of fiscal limits, service expectations, and rapid technological change. On any given day, we face:

- Budget cuts that require canceling resources faculty consider “essential”
- Personnel conflicts that escalate into grievances or union actions

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- Political tensions that turn libraries into symbolic battlegrounds
- Pressure to “do more with less” when “less” becomes even less
- Rapidly evolving technology that requires upskilling while teams shrink
- Crises like COVID-19 that rewrite your entire job overnight

These cumulative pressures shape an environment where leaders feel pressured to appear endlessly calm, empathic, and resilient, even while privately struggling.³ I’ve lived through moments when I felt like I was holding the institution’s fears, grief, and uncertainty on my back while trying to keep the library functioning. And that feeling of responsibility? It doesn’t go away. It accumulates.

Leadership Self-Care: Surviving the Work without Losing Yourself

Self-care for leaders is rarely recognized as essential leadership work, but it should be. It is the work of protecting yourself from collapse—emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Burned-out leaders make poorer decisions, react defensively, and struggle to maintain inclusive, psychologically safe environments for their teams.⁴ Below are strategies, grounded in research and lived experience, that have helped me.

Boundaries Are Not Selfish—They’re Necessary

Leaders often feel obligated to absorb everyone’s worry: student anxiety, faculty frustration, team conflicts, institutional mandates. But leaders cannot serve others without protecting their own emotional capacity. Healthy boundaries include:

- Saying “no” when your plate is full
- Protecting time for thinking and reflection
- Not internalizing every complaint or crisis

This aligns with Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic’s recommendation that “leaders should bring their best self—not their whole self—to work,” preserving parts of life that replenish identity and joy.⁵

Normalize Asking for Help

Leadership mythology says leaders are supposed to remain calm, steady, and all-knowing. However, reality says something different: Leaders who try to carry everything alone eventually break down quietly and painfully. Asking for help—from human resources (HR), mentors, your provost, or trusted colleagues—is a sign of strength and strategic awareness, not weakness.

Prioritize Health without Guilt

Untreated leadership stress manifests physically—neck pain, headaches, chronic fatigue, sleep disruption, and irritability. I’ve learned the hard way that ignoring these signs only makes everything worse. Taking care of your health isn’t indulgent—it is leadership stewardship. You cannot sustain others if you are crumbling. Protective practices include:

- Regular medical check-ins
- Sustainable exercise routine
- Mindfulness practice such as walking, journaling, or meditation

- Intentional unplugging for restoration
- Creative hobbies that restore joy and identity

Just remember that your health is part of your leadership toolkit.

Recognize When a Crisis Is Not Yours Alone

Library leaders often absorb the impact of universitywide crises—enrollment declines, political upheaval, shifting federal policies, or moments of collective trauma. There are days when it becomes painfully clear that the institution is wrestling with forces far bigger than you, bigger than your library, and far beyond your control.

Yet leadership culture conditions us to respond as if *everything* is ours to fix. A budget shortfall appears, and we immediately brace ourselves to solve it. A campus political conflict erupts, and we instinctively try to soothe it. A personnel issue escalates, and we absorb the emotional and procedural weight. A new technology arrives, and we quietly accept the expectation to implement it flawlessly and instantly.

But some crises belong to the institution, not to you. When enrollments tank, when senior leadership shifts, when political actors influence campus climate, or when federal policy changes cause chaos, these are structural realities, not personal failures. Let go of the immediate leadership impulse and ask: Who truly owns this issue? Where should accountability sit? What role should I play—and what emotional load must I release?

Leaders burn out when they try to solve crises no single person could ever fix. You cannot hold an entire institution—or even an entire library—on your shoulders. And you are not meant to.

Leadership as Community Work: Build the Network That Will Save You

Leadership is lonely. And the most powerful antidote to leadership loneliness is a genuine professional network—not performative connections but relationships grounded in trust and mutual care.

Early in my career, I learned that survival does not come from leadership books or strategy frameworks. It comes from people. I remember conversations with colleagues facing their own storms: a budget cliff, a hostile grievance, political pressure, a campus crisis, or the quiet heartbreak of a team in conflict. In those moments, something softened. We could finally say, “This is hard” without fear of judgment.

Building a network means finding the people who pick up the phone when you’re unraveling, who remind you that you’re not imagining the chaos, who share their failures so that you feel less alone in yours, and who tell you the truth when you’re too exhausted to see clearly. These relationships don’t just support leaders, they sustain them. When leaders isolate themselves, burnout accelerates. When leaders build networks, burnout loosens its grip.

Leading with Realism, Compassion, and Hope

Leadership is not sustained by vision alone. It requires endurance, perspective, and the willingness to acknowledge limits. Academic library leaders are asked to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and competing demands while remaining steady and responsive, often at great emotional cost.

Sustainable leadership depends on knowing when to pause, when to seek support, and when to let go of what cannot be carried alone. Library leaders support essential academic, democratic, and community functions. They deserve the same compassion and care they extend to others. By attending to our well-being and surrounding ourselves with trusted colleagues, we not only survive leadership, we make it possible to continue. And perhaps most importantly, we remind ourselves that we are human too. //

Notes

1. Dina Denham Smith, “Leading Is Emotionally Draining: Here’s How to Recover,” *Harvard Business Review* (2025), <https://hbr.org/2025/07/leading-is-emotionally-draining-heres-how-to-recover>.
2. Brett Farmiloe, “Beating Work Burnout: 8 Leaders Share Their Stories,” *Talent Culture* (2024), <https://talentculture.com/blog/beating-work-burnout-8-leaders-share-stories/>.
3. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, “Why Leaders Should Bring Their Best Self—Not Their Whole Self—to Work,” *Harvard Business Review* (2025), <https://hbr.org/2025/07/why-leaders-should-bring-their-best-self-not-their-whole-self-to-work>.
4. Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter, “Burnout,” in *Stress: Concepts, Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior*, ed. George Fink (Academic Press, 2016), 351–57.
5. Chamorro-Premuzic, “Why Leaders Should Bring Their Best Self.”