

# The Modern Day Sisyphus: #Libtech Burnout and You

Becky Yoose  
@yo\_bj  
b.yoose@gmail.com  
#c4116

Good morning, everyone.

Despite your best efforts, I'm back presenting this year, this time on burnout. Now, when I first proposed this topic, I had a general tone and structure in mind; however, after some reflection in last few months, this presentation took a different route than first anticipated. At least there'll be no "stick figure trying to roll a circle up an angled line" slide.

# Housekeeping

- My own views, not M(F)POW
- Advanced apologies to certain folks
- High level talk – detailed article (maybe) in the works
- Bibliography – <https://www.zotero.org/groups/c4116yoose>
- Heads up – abuse, various mental health issues

Before we start, I have a few housekeeping items:

This work does not represent the opinions of my current or previous employers.

Advanced apologies to certain folks.

This is going to be a high level talk. If you want the research behind this talk, the link to the bibliography is posted. An article might be forthcoming to get into more of the complexity of burnout in #libtech.

I'm going to touch on abuse and mental health issues, so practice self-care. Leave the room if necessary.

## Three numbers to remember

415

70

4000

In order for you to pay attention to the entire presentation, I ask that you memorize these three numbers.

415

70

4000

Got it? Good. Let's begin.

## Phases of Burnout

- The compulsion to prove oneself
- Working harder
- Neglecting their needs
- Displacement of conflicts
- Revision of values
- Denial of emerging problems
- Withdrawal
- Obvious behavioral changes
- Depersonalization
- Inner emptiness
- Depression
- Burnout syndrome

It would be a safe assumption that most of us encountered burnout in our professional and personal lives. A burnt out person is exhausted, cynical, frustrated – leading to subpar work performance. The wheel spins, but you're stuck in place.

A better way to approach what burnout is comes from Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North. They viewed burnout as a series of phases. The slide shows those 12 phases. Two things to note:

These phases are not sequential –you can experience any number of these phases at any time during burnout. For example, you could be withdrawn, which then drives you to work harder and change your behavior as a result, which then leads to depression.

Speaking of depression, burnout and depression are very similar, but are not the same.

Maria Accardi wrote on this very topic for #limentalhealth week earlier this year, where she found that her burnout was masking serious depression. How do you tell the difference between the two? It's almost impossible at times. In Maria's case, it took a lot of self-awareness, time, and trial and error.

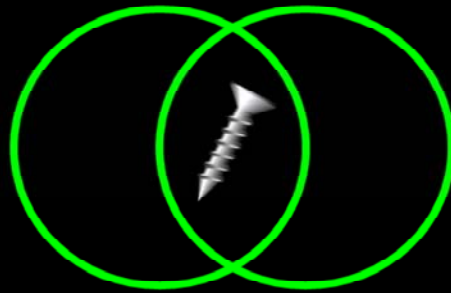
## We're Screwed, #libtech Edition

### Technology Fields

- Bootstrap Mentality
- Emotional Labor
- Higher burnout rates

### Library/IS Fields

- "Doing more with less"
- Emotional Labor
- Higher burnout rates



Why am I talking specifically about #libtech burnout? What is so special about us that warrants attention? #libtech straddles two fields that, though having their own cultures and ecosystems, share a good number of cultural traits, including traits that are markers for higher burnout rates.

Both fields deal with external and internal pressures to operate within tight resource constraints while at the same time expected to produce high quality products and services. Each field describes this reality using different terminology, but they are more or less the same reality.

And then we have the invisible, often unrecognized or under recognized, work done in both fields in the form of emotional labor. Emotional labor, first defined by Arlie Hochschild, is the act of regulating emotions to conform to certain rules and expectations while

interacting with customers or coworkers. Service professions, like librarianship, exhibit a higher level of emotional labor requirements, partially due to the feminine nature associated with these professions. One thing that might cause some of you to pause is that IT does indeed perform a high level of emotional labor. As the technology field evolved over the last few decades, the focus on service to both internal and external users grew, and technology workers are increasingly expected to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships in customer relations and in workplace collaborations.

Overall, both fields are more dispositioned for higher burnout rates compared to other fields due to the service aspects, high work expectations and workloads in each field. For those of you who want a visual representation of what we face in #libtech, here you go - apologies to Eli Neiburger.

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fd/Flathead\\_Screw.svg/2000px-Flathead\\_Screw.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fd/Flathead_Screw.svg/2000px-Flathead_Screw.svg.png)

## How to recover/prevent burnout

- Take time away from work
- Recalibrate work/life balance
- Prioritize projects
- Therapy
- Switch to working on projects that you care about
- Leave job or work community

Since we are in an unique position between these two fields, it would be wise for us to not only recognize the signs of burnout, but also ways to prevent and to recover from it. This slide provides some of the more effective ways in prevention and treatment, ranging from taking breaks from the office and reprioritizing projects to therapy and work/life balance.

But you know what?



THIS TALK IS NOT GOING TO REPEAT  
\$X TALKS ABOUT WHAT THE BURNT OUT  
INDIVIDUAL SHOULD DO.

THIS TALK IS FOR THE REST OF US.

We've all heard this before. There are a ton of talks, articles, and posts about what YOU can do in preventing and recovering from burnout for yourself. There are many in the bibliography for this talk.

Instead, this talk is for the rest of us. This talk takes into consideration one thing that many of these burnout talks do not.

Burnout is a social contagion. If one of us is burnt out, then there's a higher chance of burnout for those close to that one person. We are surrounded by burnout just by the nature of our jobs. You do the math.

How do we address this contagious factor? I've identified at least three groups in which we can take on burnout in an organized front. You might find yourself wondering where you fall

in a particular group – there will be overlaps, there will be things you cannot do due to circumstances outside your control; nonetheless this talk shifts some of the responsibility of burnout prevention and treatment onto the community, be it at work or in the profession.

## Coworkers – Do Something

- Competition vs Collaboration
- Crosstrain
- Document
- Build an escape route
- See something, say something

The first group is colleagues and coworkers. These are the people you work with closely on a daily basis. You are the front line and you are the most likely to notice when a coworker is struggling. What can we, given existing organizational structures and job autonomy, do to address burnout in coworkers?

One of the first things we can do is to assess our team's working style. Functional collaborative teams and departments provide better support for fellow coworkers and helps instill a team culture of shared responsibility and comradery. While some competition between coworkers is healthy and necessary, too much focus on competition leads into lack of social support and dysfunctional collaborations and teamwork.

Collaborative departments see the value in crosstraining and documentation and give priority to them. Crosstraining and documenting various duties and responsibilities

provides a way to lessen the stress of taking on another's tasks when the need arises. An additional way to make things easier for coworkers is to have the crosstraining workers work on the documentation with you – this way you build in user testing for your docs.

Even in collaborative environments we have trouble saying no to others from time to time. One way to help mitigate the need to say yes all the time is to build an escape route if we are asking someone to take on something that would be above and beyond their daily duties. Give that person the ability to say no, or the ability to suggest an alternative to address the request without having to choose all or nothing. Load balance responsibly.

Lastly, pay attention to your colleagues. Again, we work closely with them for the majority of our workday. If you start to see someone struggling, say something. Do not give unsolicited advice or try to solve their problem – just a sincere checkin, like “hey, is everything going ok?” or “You look stressed lately” always followed by “is there anything I can do?” Overall, be present for that person. They might brush you off and say everything is fine and that they don't need anything, but if they are still struggling, don't stop after the first brushoff, the second, or the third.



415

This is where the first number I asked you to memorize comes in. 415 refers to a date - April 2015. That was the date, after many brushoffs, I did not brushoff a checkin from a close colleague regarding my wellbeing.

So, coworkers and colleagues, I ask you to do something. The act of doing something, no matter how small you think the action is, is all it can take to start addressing a problem.

## Managers – Make It Safer

- Give explicit agency to staff
- Unicorns are mythical; stop trying to make them real
- Know when to step back & refer

Managers are the second group. We have power baked into the organizational structures of our workplaces to influence the culture and the tone of the team we oversee. Even if your formal role is not management, any time you are leading a group or responsible for guiding others in their work responsibilities, you inherit the power dynamics of the manager/employee relationship. Like it or not, you have that power. You might as well use that power to make the team environment safer for your staff.

The first way to do this is to give your staff clear and explicit agency. Give them what they need to do the job, and get the hell out of the way. Give them the power to say “No” without serious repercussions. Cultivate an environment where staff feel more comfortable sharing their emotions and stresses without fear of appearing weak or incompetent at their duties. Acknowledge that these emotions and stresses come from the emotional labor that is inherent in their jobs. Emotional labor is invisible labor to most folks. The simple

acknowledgment and recognition of the important role that emotional labor plays in staff's jobs can be very powerful in terms of starting to address burnout in your team.

Second – unicorns are not real. Why are we building positions that require them? Unicorn positions are structured on a unrealistic model of skillsets, responsibilities, and expectations that one person can handle in a healthy manner. We are mainstreaming positions built for those few outliers that have such a skill set and can take on such a workload. As a manager, you too also have the power of “No” – when asked to do more with less, exercise this power. Better yet, a more constructive way is to ask back what services should be dropped to make room for the new. Hold your ground. If you fall, then your team will fall.

Last, while making your team's environment safer for your staff to essentially be human at work, you need to recognize your limits. You are not a therapist. Or a lawyer. Or a doctor. You are a manager. Get to know the resources available through your workplace, including any employee assistance programs, and make these resources known to your staff. If nothing else, put this information in a place where staff can access them discreetly.



70

The second number is 70. Technically, it's an approximate number – the number of tickets opened within a three month period after migrating to a new ILS. There was only myself and my employee doing these tickets, and we were burnt out by the time we hit ticket #70. Staff were not happy (to say the least) and we were performing extremely high levels of emotional labor during this time. By acknowledging this emotional labor overload and creating spaces where we could talk about said overload, we created a vital coping strategy for the both of us to get us through the next few months.



# Community

## culture

### Technological Somnambulism Redux

[See Yoose, #c4115, link in bibliography]

The abuse you went through does not entitle you to force others through similar abuses.

The last group encompasses both coworkers and managers. As a community, #libtech has standards and expectations as well as a culture that is forever evolving based on what pieces of the technology and library fields we decide to incorporate into #libtech. But, as I presented on last year, there are unintended consequences in adopting such practices, values, and expectations into a community space.

To riff off of last year's talk, we need to be mindful of how we evolve our culture. More specifically, we must address the fact that many of us have gone through burnout and yet are part of a community that still produces burnouts at a fast pace.

"We have a great, supportive community in #libtech! Come join us – just go right through that long gauntlet. You see, you need to be initiated. We went through it, now you have to go through it. That is how you earn your place here. Don't worry, you'll have our full

support if you make it through!”

In the case of the charming alcoholic, the charming behavior does not negate the alcoholism. A supportive #libtech community does not negate the fact that we still expect others to go through the various abuses – emotional, mental, and physical – that are inherent in the practices and expectations of that community. There is a difference between just sustaining and healthy.

# Question Time

# 4000

And now a question related to the third number I had you memorize. Suppose you're burnt out and someone came to your office one day, saying that they can help you. This help, however, comes with two conditions: an initial down payment, and you have to pay that now or the opportunity for help goes away. You don't know when the next opportunity will come, if any. How many of you can write a check for \$4000 right now?

## Community Privilege



Burnout recovery and prevention are privileges held by those of us who are in secure employment and personal environments.

We keep putting the responsibility of burnout prevention and treatment solely on the individual. The asterisk from the slide of what individuals can do for themselves denotes the fact that only those who are in secure employment and personal environments can fully act on many of those strategies. This is why action both in our workplaces and as a community at large is so important.

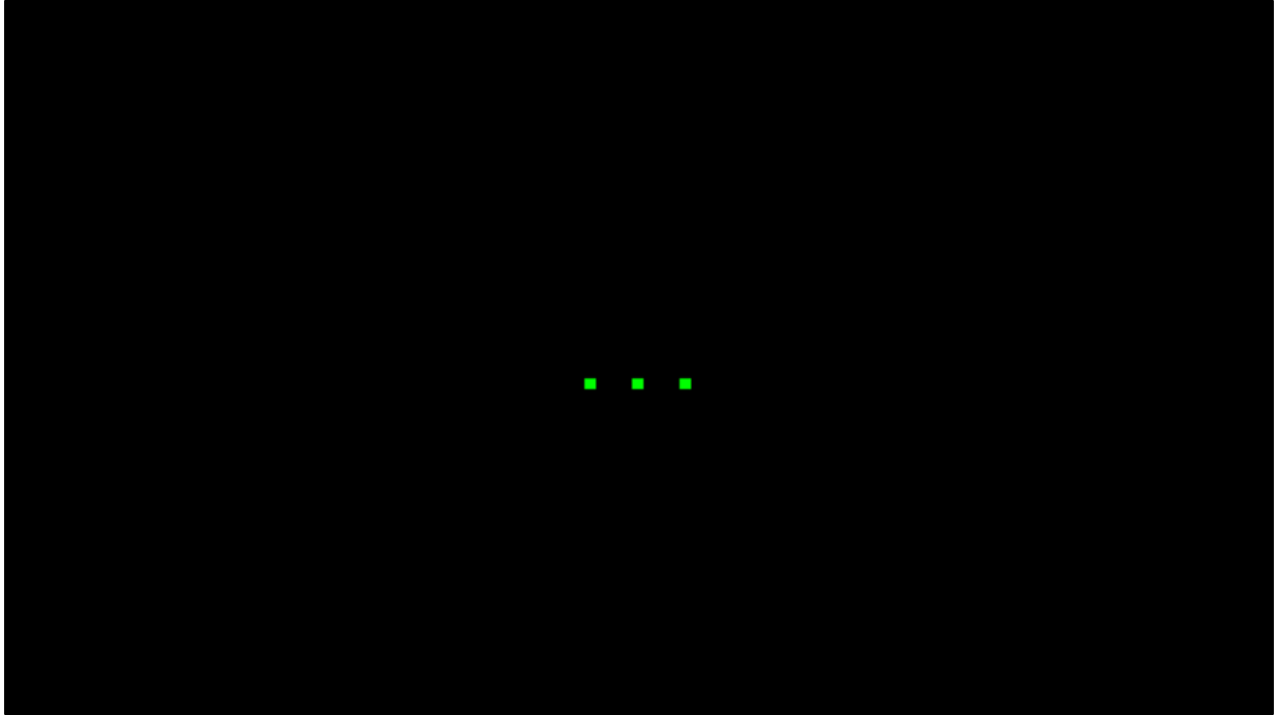
To keep the responsibility solely on the individual for burnout prevention and treatment completely ignores the fact that the person might not have:

- the vacation time to take a break,
- or the agency to take said vacation days at work,
- or a way to express their emotions at work without fear of their coworkers or employer seeing these true feelings as an inability to do their job,

- or the ability to see a professional because they do not have health benefits.

Or they might not have the ability to move or change jobs without major repercussions to relationships, to finances, and to family.

I had the privilege to have that amount in my checking account. I had the privilege of not having a family or partner to rehome when I moved to Seattle. I had the privilege of taking that opportunity for recovery. And I will do what I can to give that opportunity for those who need it the most in the #libtech community.



So you might have noticed that I had three groups with three numbers. The first two groups had two succinct action plans– do something, and make it safer. As a community we need to do those, but there’s one thing that the community must do.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this talk took a different path than first expected. For those of you who know me, there’s been the semi-regular humorous saying of “if you can’t be good example, then be the horrible warning” with me being the horrible warning – I have a habit of overworking. It’s been a running joke with some folks and with myself.

I can’t joke about it anymore. Being the horrible warning, in large part, broke me. What hurts me is that I see the exact same “horrible warning” scenario that I was in playing out in code4lib and in #libtech with the people I care about. That is all of you.

We still joke, we still expect people to go through what we did, we as a community still unconsciously and implicitly place value on horrible warnings not as actual warnings, but as thinly veiled admiration to the unhealthy and unsustainable amount of time and energy they pour into their work, to inspire us to go down that same path.

So, this talk was as much as for me as for you. A reminder of what we need to do as coworkers, as managers and leaders, and as community members. In short, if I have to internally drag myself kicking and screaming to not be the horrible warning anymore, I'm taking all of you with me.

With that, the action plan for us, the community, is -

No more horrible  
warnings.