

# Not an Emergency Room

**A Mindset for Encouraging Realistic  
Performance Expectations Among Employees**

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# GAME PLAN

- Identify and describe a mindset that helps library workers:
  - Coach team members towards healthier expectations regarding their own performance
  - Demonstrate healthy boundaries in a work environment
  - Put the stakes of a given situation into perspective
  - Adopt a more realistic outlook on what we can do for those we serve

*Please save questions for me until the end, but feel free to talk to each other in the chat as we go along.*

# About Me

- 2022 - present: Business & Social Sciences Librarian, Montgomery College (Takoma Park, MD)
- 2019 - 2022: Director of Public Services, Miller Library, Washington College (Chestertown, MD)
- 2017 - 2019: Access Services Supervisor, Gelman Library, The George Washington University (Washington, DC)
- Prior to 2017: assorted information management roles in federal government
- MS in Library & Information Science from Simmons College (now University); BA in English from Bryn Mawr College
- **Throughout career, public-facing leadership roles with supervisory responsibility**



# The Origin Story...

The background features a series of concentric, semi-circular lines in various shades of blue, ranging from light to dark. Small, solid blue dots are scattered across these lines, creating a pattern reminiscent of a fingerprint or a stylized galaxy. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

# Tell Us!

What's your version of this story? Think about a moment when a patron made a demand you couldn't reasonably meet, and use one word in the chat to indicate how it made you feel.

The background features a series of concentric, light blue circles that create a ripple effect. Each circle has a small, solid blue dot at its center. The circles are arranged in a way that they appear to emanate from a point on the right side of the frame, moving towards the left.

**In libraries, patrons often approach us with a need that they feel must be dealt with immediately or in a way that, to us, feels unreasonable.**

**To these patrons, the stakes seem very high.**

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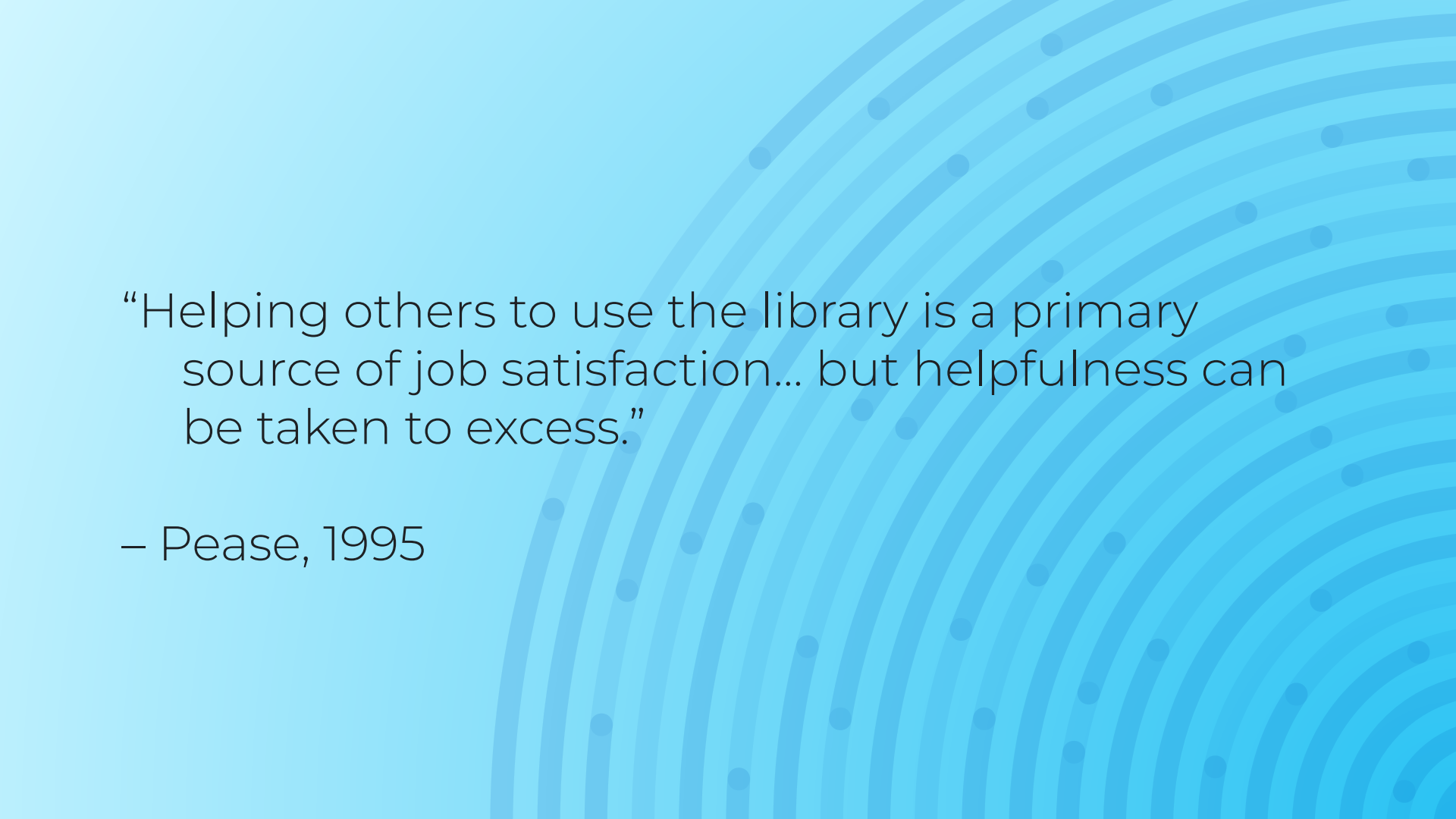
We are a library, not  
an emergency room.

# What does this mean?

- The stakes are not life or death.
- Nobody's life, health, or freedom depends on our actions.
- General emergencies ≠ emergencies specific to librarianship
- Caveats:
  - Workplace violence, substance misuse, etc.
  - Public libraries ≠ academic libraries

# Why all this pressure?

- Internal pressure & external pressure
- “The patron is always right” mindset
- Helping profession / vocational awe / emotional labor
- Librarian-as-superhero trope



“Helping others to use the library is a primary source of job satisfaction... but helpfulness can be taken to excess.”

– Pease, 1995

The background features a series of concentric, semi-circular blue lines that curve from the top right towards the bottom right. Small blue dots are scattered along these lines, creating a ripple effect. The overall color palette is various shades of blue, from light to dark.

**We can care deeply  
and still say no.**

# Keeping It in Perspective

**If you keep yourself grounded and remind yourself of the stakes, and actively model this for people around you, you will provide better service and demonstrate better leadership.**

**This is hard.**

**Who does  
this mindset  
help?**

**Everyone!**



# How does this help employees?

- Encourages them to be kinder to themselves in the workplace & remember the stakes
- Reminds employees that we are all just people, not superheroes or magicians
- Removes burden of overperformance
- Reduces burnout by reducing urgency
- Promotes good work-life balance
- Increases trust in supervisors/leaders

# And how does this help patrons?

- Demonstrates that librarians cannot always bend over backwards
- Helps set expectations for the next time they come in, or the next library they go to
- Helps with self-reliance & problem-solving skills
- Reduces the “magic” stereotype

# And how does this help leaders?

- Reduces employee anxiety and burnout that you would need to manage
- Promotes adoption of healthier outlook on what we can/cannot do
- Promotes your own work-life balance

**So how can I put  
this into practice?**

**Think of a recent difficult interaction you've had with a patron.**

**What would have changed if you had told yourself *"This isn't an emergency"*?**

# Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk

## As a Leader...

- Demonstrate this in your own interactions with patrons; don't be afraid to say "no" or "not completely." You are in a position to do so!
- Explicitly bring it up in conversation with employees and leadership team.

## As a Team Member...

- Talk to your leadership about this approach; ask questions about what's expected of you when a patron makes an unreasonable request.
- Explicitly bring it up in conversation with colleagues.

# Coaching Staff

- Say it often: we are not an emergency room!
- Discuss in one-on-ones, team meetings, and library-wide meetings
- Praise realistic judgments
- Back up your colleagues when they say no or offer alternatives to a patron
- Use example scenarios; use roleplay for teams that are receptive to this
- Provide space for debriefing after difficult interactions

# Is this an emergency?

- 1) A high school student is locked out of their laptop and has a paper due tomorrow.
- 2) A parent, who is also the chair of your Friends group, insists that storytime be delayed because their child is having a tantrum and needs time to calm down.
- 3) A patron asks “Are there any local food banks open right now?”

# Scenario

A patron who you know to be unhoused asks you to keep several suitcases of their belongings behind the circulation desk while they attend a job interview.

What do you say?

What are the alternatives you could offer?

**Do you feel as if you model healthy boundaries  
or realistic expectations for your team?**

**Type *yes, no, or sometimes* in the chat.**

# Modeling the Mindset

- Don't email after hours
- Respect your own time off
- Say no to patrons in front of staff
- Let them see you pause and reflect
- Show boundaries are allowed
- Provide positive reinforcement when team members do the above

# Final Takeaways

- Reframe the pressure by rethinking the stakes
- Recenter wellbeing
- Train and support your staff
- Practice what you preach; “let them catch you”

“

We are just people,  
and that's enough.

# What are your questions?

# Thank you!

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# Resources

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