

Reshaping Roles: Libraries in the Era of Mental Health Advocacy

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Abstract: This literature review examines the evolving role of libraries in supporting mental health and well-being. Traditionally, centers of learning, libraries are increasingly offering resources, programs, and safe spaces for mental health advocacy. As mental health concerns rise, libraries have expanded services, including providing literature, support groups, and connections to professionals. However, gaps remain in assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives and integrating digital health tools. This review emphasizes the positive impact libraries have on community well-being and individual mental health, highlighting the need for further development of inclusive, evidence-based practices in library-based mental health support.

Keywords: Libraries, mental Health, well-being, community support, mental health resources, social well-being

I. Introduction

Mental health is a vital aspect of overall well-being, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social factors that influence how individuals think, feel, and interact with others. The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines it as a state of well-being that enables individuals to cope with life's stresses, work productively, and contribute to their communities. Historically, mental health has been shaped by evolving perspectives—from ancient supernatural beliefs to modern psychological and biomedical approaches introduced by figures such as Philippe Pinel and Sigmund Freud (Morrison-Valfre, 2023). The 20th and 21st centuries have brought increased attention to mental health, with a growing focus on community-based care, digital health tools, and reducing stigma (Shahzad et al., 2023; Savenije, 2023).

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Libraries, once perceived solely as repositories of information, have also undergone a transformation in their mission and services. Increasingly, they are recognized as safe, inclusive, and neutral spaces that provide not only information but also emotional and social support (Heid, 2022; Iglesias & García-Sánchez, 2021). The rise in mental health concerns—particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic—has accelerated this shift. Many libraries have responded by offering wellness programs, bibliotherapy resources, peer support spaces, and partnerships with mental health professionals (Harris, 2020).

This evolution reflects a broader societal recognition of mental health as a community issue and highlights the potential of libraries to contribute to public well-being in unique and impactful ways. Academic libraries are hosting stress-relief workshops during exam seasons (Lenstra & Roberts, 2023), public libraries are offering meditation sessions and peer support groups (Markham Public Library, n.d.; Miller, 2023), and digital platforms are being adopted to provide virtual mental health services (Cao, Liu, & Wang, 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2021).

Despite these developments, gaps remain in understanding the overall impact and sustainability of these initiatives. Questions persist about user perceptions, collaboration effectiveness, and the long-term role of digital mental health tools in library settings. This study seeks to explore these issues by synthesizing findings from a wide range of recent literature on how libraries support mental health.

Research Questions

1. How have libraries evolved in their role in supporting mental health and well-being over the past 7 years?
2. What specific programs and services do libraries offer to address mental health challenges in their communities?
3. In what ways do libraries collaborate with mental health professionals or organizations to enhance their mental health initiatives?
4. How do library users perceive the mental health resources and support services provided by libraries?
5. What impact do libraries' mental health services have on community well-being and individuals' mental health outcomes?

Statement of the Problem

Mental health issues have become an increasingly recognized concern in communities, especially amid global health challenges and rising rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. Libraries, once primarily known as spaces for learning and information sharing, have broadened their roles to include supporting mental health and advocating for well-being. However, despite this shift, there is still a lack of research on how libraries are

addressing mental health challenges, how their services are perceived by users, and the impact these efforts have on the well-being of their communities.

As libraries take on a more active role in mental health, important questions arise about the specific services and resources they offer, the partnerships they are forming with mental health professionals, and how effective these services are in improving users' mental health. Libraries also face the challenge of balancing their educational mission with the increasing demand for mental health support, all while managing the complexities of stigma and privacy concerns.

Objectives

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore the evolving role of libraries in mental health promotion: This study will look at how libraries have transitioned from their traditional educational roles to active contributors in mental health care. While most studies focus on the current mental health services offered by libraries, this research will dig deeper into how libraries have evolved over time to better address the increasing mental health needs of their communities.
2. Examine the integration of digital health technologies in libraries: As libraries continue to incorporate technology, such as mental health apps, online workshops, and virtual counseling, this study will explore how these digital tools enhance access to mental health resources and extend library services beyond physical spaces. It will investigate how libraries are using these platforms in innovative ways to support mental health.
3. Highlight the advocacy role of libraries in mental health: Finally, this study will shed light on how libraries are increasingly acting as mental health advocates.

Scope and Limitations

This study explores how academic, school, public, and special libraries are increasingly playing vital roles in mental health support. It examines the historical shift from traditional educational functions to more active involvement in mental health care, including wellness programming, digital health tools, and community advocacy. The study also looks at the impact of

these services on users' well-being and highlights opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

However, the study is limited to existing literature and secondary sources, which may not fully capture first-hand experiences of library staff and users. It also focuses mainly on English-language publications and may not reflect the most recent developments in rapidly evolving mental health initiatives. Despite these constraints, the study aims to offer a well-rounded understanding of libraries' expanding roles in mental health support.

Significance of the Study

This study highlights the growing importance of libraries as vital contributors to mental health support. By examining the shift from traditional roles to active involvement in mental health advocacy, it emphasizes how libraries address service gaps, particularly in underserved communities.

By including academic, public, and special libraries, the study offers a comprehensive view of cross-sector collaboration and the potential for unified efforts in promoting mental well-being. It also underscores the need to evaluate the real-world impact of library-based mental health programs, providing evidence to support their continued development and funding.

Additionally, the study explores how digital tools—like mental health apps and online counseling—enhance access to care, and it sheds light on the role of librarians as advocates for mental health awareness. Overall, the research provides practical insights for library professionals, policymakers, and mental health advocates aiming to expand inclusive and accessible support services.

II. Literature Review

In recent years, libraries have begun to acknowledge their expanding role in addressing mental health, as public awareness of these issues continues to grow (Library Journal, n.d.). Once primarily seen as centers for education and information access, libraries are now taking a more active approach in promoting mental wellness. This evolution has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened issues such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation—prompting libraries, especially in public and academic settings, to adjust their services accordingly. Today, libraries not only provide study spaces and informational materials but also offer resources aimed at raising awareness and supporting emotional well-being.

This literature review examines how libraries are adapting to meet these emerging needs, focusing on their increasing involvement in mental health advocacy, the use of digital health tools, and the overall impact of these initiatives on community wellness. Rather than remaining passive service

providers, libraries have transformed into proactive contributors to public mental health through diverse programs, outreach efforts, and collaborative partnerships.

This review presents a comprehensive synthesis of literature on the subject, focusing on five key areas: (1) libraries as mental health advocates, (2) therapeutic services and inclusive programming, (3) digital mental health initiatives, (4) physical spaces and user well-being, and (5) staff development and structural challenges.

Libraries as Mental Health Advocates

Libraries have emerged as key advocates for mental health literacy and stigma reduction. According to the American Library Association (n.d.), libraries are uniquely positioned to serve as nonjudgmental, accessible spaces for mental health engagement. Adams (2023) emphasizes that librarians are often trusted community figures who can initiate conversations around mental wellness, particularly in environments where stigma remains a barrier to accessing help.

Jacobson (2023) argues that libraries are not only service providers but also influencers of social perception, noting that advocacy work includes programming, collections, and partnerships that promote mental health visibility. Advocacy also encompasses policy efforts, including lobbying for expanded wellness services and influencing how institutions integrate mental health into education and community development.

Libraries support these efforts through curated displays, public awareness campaigns, and information services that demystify mental health and help patrons navigate care systems (PressReader, n.d.; WebJunction, n.d.). These activities are critical in communities where mental health services are scarce or difficult to access.

Therapeutic Services and Inclusive Programming

Libraries are increasingly offering wellness programs that combine recreational, educational, and therapeutic interventions. These range from mindfulness sessions, bibliotherapy, and yoga classes to peer support groups and trauma-informed programming. Carson (2019) outlines how public libraries are now facilitating yoga and meditation sessions as tools to support community wellness. Similarly, Campbell and Gray (2018) provide a case study of a school library that implemented a holistic health program including stress management activities, self-help resources, and social connection programs.

Bibliotherapy, which involves the use of books and reading as therapeutic tools, is another prominent service offered by libraries. Hynes (2019) and De Vries et al. (2017) underscore its effectiveness, particularly for young people who have experienced trauma. Such initiatives allow patrons to process emotions through guided reading experiences, often in group settings facilitated by trained librarians or mental health professionals.

Brewster (2014) introduces the concept of the library as a “therapeutic landscape,” illustrating how public libraries serve as safe spaces for individuals navigating emotional distress. This therapeutic potential is further explored by Green (2019), who calls for more inclusive library services for patrons with mental illnesses, especially those who have historically been underserved or marginalized.

Academic libraries, too, have responded to the mental health needs of students. Programs such as de-stress weeks, therapy pet events, and quiet reflection zones are now common (Henrich, 2020; Holder & Lannon, 2020; Miller, 2021). These initiatives are designed to address the unique pressures faced by students in high-stress academic environments.

Digital Mental Health Initiatives

The pandemic accelerated the digitization of mental health resources in libraries. According to Cao, Liu, and Wang (2023), digital health tools such as mental health apps, online therapy platforms, and virtual mindfulness workshops have been integrated into library offerings to expand access and flexibility. These tools allow users to engage with wellness resources anonymously, asynchronously, and from the comfort of their homes—an important factor for users experiencing social anxiety, mobility issues, or limited transportation.

Bauman and Rivers (2023) frame this shift as part of the broader transition to mental health care in the digital age. They caution, however, that digital tools must be carefully curated to ensure evidence-based quality and user appropriateness. Libraries have responded by developing digital resource guides, launching telehealth partnerships, and embedding virtual care into their websites and catalogs (Harris, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2021; Grimes & Salvesen).

For example, Harris (2020) documented how U.S. public libraries acted as “health hubs” during COVID-19 by promoting digital wellness content. Libraries disseminated public health information, hosted webinars with mental health professionals, and offered virtual bibliotherapy services. These digital strategies not only filled a service gap during lockdowns but also demonstrated libraries’ adaptability and commitment to community care.

Library Space as a Site of Mental Wellness

Physical space plays a vital role in shaping users' emotional experiences within libraries. Brewster (2014) and Green (2019) argue that spatial design—such as access to natural light, quiet zones, and sensory-friendly features—can foster mental comfort and psychological safety. These spaces offer users refuge from external stressors, particularly in urban or institutional settings (Aykanian, et al, 2020).

Public libraries like Markham Public Library (n.d.) have implemented wellness-focused redesigns, including massage chairs, calming rooms, and board game corners to encourage leisure, connection, and self-care. Such initiatives have received strong community feedback, affirming the value of creating emotionally supportive environments.

Libraries have likewise adapted their spaces to support well-being. ProQuest (2024) highlights how universities are redesigning study areas to include wellness stations, flexible seating, and napping pods. These adjustments signal a shift toward user-centered design rooted in mental health needs.

Lenstra and Roberts (2023) emphasize that physical space can act as an equalizer in health promotion. Libraries offer free, public access to wellness infrastructure, unlike many other institutions, making them uniquely suited to democratize care.

Workforce Development and Institutional Challenges

While libraries are taking on more mental health responsibilities, challenges remain regarding staff readiness and institutional support. Cathcart (2008) warned of the "blurring line" between librarians and social workers, arguing that while librarians often encounter patrons in distress, they are not always trained to intervene effectively.

Grimes, Innes, and Salvesen (2023) document the emotional labor involved in supporting distressed patrons and call for structured mental health literacy training for library workers. EveryLibrary (n.d.) reinforces this concern, suggesting that many library staff feel unequipped to handle behavioral health needs, yet are often first responders to patron crises.

Training in mental health first aid, trauma-informed service, and de-escalation is increasingly recommended (Miller, 2023; Jacobson, 2023). However, there is little standardization across library systems, and many institutions lack funding or policy mandates to implement such training.

Importantly, librarians themselves are vulnerable to burnout and secondary trauma. As mental health work becomes embedded in library services, attention must also be given to staff well-being. Institutional safeguards—such as peer support, reflective practice, and access to counseling—are essential to sustain the library workforce (Grimes et al., 2023; Savenije et al., 2023).

III. Methodology

This study adopts a literature review approach to explore the evolving roles of libraries in promoting mental health.

Selection Criteria

Since this study is primarily based on secondary data, the literature review methodology involves the careful collection and analysis of published materials from a variety of sources. These sources include:

- Articles that Focus on library-based mental health services or programs;
- Relevance to academic, public, special, or school libraries;
- Published in English between 2015 and 2025;
- Peer-reviewed or credible institutional sources.

The initial search was 117 articles. After screening titles and abstracts, and applying inclusion/exclusion criteria, only 10 articles were selected for full-text review and analysis.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across several academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, to gather literature published between 2018 and 2025. Keywords and Boolean search terms included: “libraries and mental health” ; “library wellness programs” ; “digital mental health tools and libraries”; “ libraries and student well-being” .

Data Analysis

The data collected will be systematically analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and key insights. The analysis will focus on the following areas:

- **Historical Evolution:** How libraries' roles in mental health have changed over time, from passive spaces to proactive advocates for mental health awareness and support.
- **Diverse Library Roles:** An examination of how different types of libraries—school, academic, public, and special—are contributing to mental health initiatives .
- **Advocacy and Awareness:** The role of libraries in advocating for mental health and raising awareness within their communities, particularly the increasing importance of library staff as mental health advocates.
- **Digital Integration:** How digital health technologies are being incorporated into library services, including virtual counseling services, mental health apps, and online workshops.
- **Program Effectiveness:** Assessing the impact of library-based mental health initiatives on patrons' well-being, with an emphasis on understanding the real-world outcomes of these programs.

Each of these themes will be explored and analyzed through the lens of the literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of how libraries have adapted and evolved to meet the mental health needs of their communities.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study relies on secondary data, there will be no direct involvement of human subjects. However, ethical considerations remain important. This includes ensuring that all sources are accurately cited, avoiding any misrepresentation of findings, and adhering to principles of fair use and academic integrity when reporting on the literature. By following these ethical guidelines, the study aims to maintain transparency and uphold the standards of scholarly research.

IV. Findings

The findings from this literature review on how libraries' roles in mental health have evolved reveal several key themes, trends, and areas of growth. Over time, libraries have transformed from traditional educational spaces into active, inclusive centers for promoting mental well-being. Based on a careful analysis of existing studies, the review highlights the expanding roles libraries play in mental health initiatives, the impact of their programs, and the increasing use of digital health tools. These findings provide a deeper understanding of how libraries are stepping up to support mental health in their communities, showing just how much their role has broadened in response to the growing need for mental health resources and support.

The review of ten peer-reviewed sources revealed seven overarching themes that characterize the evolving roles of libraries in addressing mental health and well-being: (1) the integration of wellness into library missions, (2) the emergence of libraries as mental health support hubs, (3) the expansion of student-centered services (4) limitations in evaluation and impact assessment, (5) challenges in professional preparedness and institutional support (6) Barriers and Challenges in Implementing Mental Health Services in Libraries, and (7) Gaps in Literature.

1. Integrating Mental Health into the Library's Core Mission

Across academic and public contexts, libraries are increasingly embedding mental health into their institutional identities. Rather than treating mental wellness as a peripheral service, libraries are positioning it as part of their broader mission to serve the whole individual.

Donnelly (2022) emphasizes that libraries have transitioned from being neutral, information-centric spaces to becoming proactive community partners in promoting well-being. Libraries now develop wellness strategies, advocate for mental health inclusion in strategic plans, and host dedicated mental health programming. Grimes (2024) echoes this shift, noting that libraries are “no longer optional actors” but integral stakeholders in the community mental health ecosystem.

This realignment is especially visible in academic libraries, where well-being is now seen as part of educational support. Bladek (2021) argues that student success is not just academic but also emotional and psychological. Libraries contribute by offering spaces, resources, and services that support the student holistically.

2. Libraries as Community Mental Health Hubs

Libraries increasingly act as wellness “anchors” by offering nonclinical but impactful services that help address mental health challenges. These services range from stress-relief programs and bibliotherapy to informal counseling partnerships and wellness resource collections.

Hall and McAlister (2021) provide evidence of widespread implementation of mental health programs in both public and academic libraries, including wellness corners, relaxation rooms, and peer-led activities. Many libraries are adopting low-barrier models, ensuring that services are approachable and accessible to users regardless of insurance or diagnosis status.

Smith (2021) reinforces this finding, citing examples where libraries have launched mindfulness events, self-care kits, and wellness-focused displays to

engage patrons in non-stigmatizing ways. Grimes (2024) adds that many libraries now serve as “first contact” points for those experiencing distress—particularly in rural or underserved communities.

Moreover, these services are tailored to address emerging societal needs, such as rising anxiety, loneliness, and academic stress post-pandemic. As Hirsh (2024) notes, libraries are stepping into a care gap that many formal institutions struggle to meet, offering continuity, trust, and cultural relevance.

3. Prioritizing Student-Centered Mental Health in Academic Libraries

The academic library has become a crucial setting for mental health engagement, especially among university students facing stress, isolation, and burnout. Research shows that library-based mental health programs can mitigate these effects and foster resilience.

Shahzad et al., (2023) and Bladek (2021) emphasizes the role of academic libraries in providing structured, evidence-based programs such as guided meditation, bibliotherapy, stress-reduction workshops, and study break activities. These services are most commonly offered during high-stress periods such as exam weeks.

Liu, He, and Wang (2020) provide empirical data showing that students who access mental health services through libraries report improved concentration, academic motivation, and emotional regulation. Owolabi and Salawu (2022), in a Nigerian context, confirm similar outcomes, highlighting a direct correlation between library interventions and perceived student well-being.

Ramsey and Aagard (2018) describe academic libraries as “wellness collaborators,” working with student affairs and counseling centers to deliver wraparound services. Libraries host workshops, support mental health literacy, and provide referral pathways, strengthening the campus ecosystem of care.

Hirsh (2024) proposes a framework for sustainable student wellness support, recommending that libraries embed mental health into their service design, staff development, and space planning.

4. Lack of Robust Evaluation and Measurable Impact

Although library-led mental health services are widely implemented, studies consistently point to a lack of formal evaluation. Many libraries assess impact

through anecdotal evidence or short-term feedback, with little longitudinal data or outcome-based metrics.

Donnelly (2022) and Iglesias and García-Sánchez (2021) both identify this as a critical limitation. While programs such as mindfulness workshops and wellness corners are well-received, their long-term effects on user behavior, academic outcomes, or emotional stability remain unclear.

Grimes (2024) cautions that without rigorous evaluation frameworks, libraries may struggle to justify continued investment in wellness programming. Hall and McAlister (2021) similarly advocate for stronger internal assessment tools, suggesting pre- and post-program surveys, usage tracking, and cross-sector evaluations involving counselors or healthcare professionals.

Liu et al. (2020) present a rare example of empirical data linking library use and academic performance through stress-reduction programming, but more such research is needed globally.

5. Staff Capacity, Training, and Institutional Support

A recurring challenge across the literature is the readiness of library staff to take on mental health roles. While many librarians express willingness to support patrons in distress, they often lack formal training in mental health literacy, trauma-informed care, or crisis de-escalation.

Grimes (2024) and Donnelly (2022) identify staff preparedness as a key structural weakness. Librarians frequently serve on the front lines of emotional labor without adequate institutional policies, training modules, or referral systems.

Hirsh (2024) proposes a tiered approach: basic mental health training for all staff, specialized training for wellness liaisons, and clearly defined escalation protocols. This model balances empowerment with professional boundaries.

Bladek (2021) and Smith (2021) also stress the emotional toll on library workers who regularly support users in distress. Some institutions have begun implementing wellness check-ins and peer support groups to support staff, but these practices are far from widespread.

Ramsey and Aagard (2018) call for formal recognition of this emerging service area in library job descriptions, hiring, and professional development pathways. Without systemic support, the expansion of mental health roles may lead to burnout or unsustainable workloads.

6. Barriers and Challenges in Implementing Mental Health Services in Libraries

While the integration of mental health services into library settings has grown significantly, the literature also identifies several persistent barriers that limit the reach, consistency, and sustainability of these initiatives.

a. Lack of Staff Training and Role Clarity

One of the most frequently cited challenges is that librarians are often asked to assume mental health-related responsibilities without appropriate training or institutional guidance. Grimes (2024) and Shahzad et al., (2023) highlights how library workers are regularly confronted with emotionally complex situations—such as patrons experiencing distress, homelessness, or trauma—without having received formal instruction in mental health first aid or crisis response.

Similarly, Donnelly (2022) and Hirsh (2024) note a mismatch between expectations and capabilities: library staff may be eager to help but often feel unprepared or unsure of professional boundaries. This ambiguity can lead to role strain, ethical dilemmas, and emotional burnout.

b. Absence of Institutional Frameworks

Many libraries lack comprehensive wellness policies, interdepartmental coordination, or referral protocols. Without institutional backing, librarians are left to manage mental health needs in a reactive and unsystematic way (Smith, 2021). Even when programs are in place, there may be no designated mental health liaison, budget line, or assessment plan to support or scale the work (Hall & McAlister, 2021).

Bladek (2021) emphasizes that while student wellness has become a library priority in rhetoric, in practice, it is often deprioritized due to competing responsibilities, understaffing, or leadership gaps.

c. Evaluation Constraints

Despite widespread implementation of wellness programs, evaluation mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Donnelly (2022) observes that few libraries collect robust data on the outcomes of mental health

programming. Most assessments are limited to informal feedback or attendance figures, lacking qualitative or longitudinal insight.

Iglesias and García-Sánchez (2021) argue that this lack of evaluation not only hinders improvement but also makes it difficult to justify funding and sustain mental health initiatives in competitive institutional environments.

d. Resource and Infrastructure Limitations

Many libraries, particularly in public and underfunded academic institutions, lack the financial and spatial resources to develop dedicated wellness zones or staff positions. Owolabi and Salawu (2022) point out that in the Global South, economic constraints, limited digital infrastructure, and systemic stigma pose significant obstacles to service delivery.

Even in well-resourced settings, space constraints and high user demand may limit the availability of quiet zones or wellness corners (Hall & McAlister, 2021).

e. Emotional Toll on Library Staff

A subtle but significant barrier is the emotional burden placed on librarians. Grimes (2024) and Smith (2021) caution that library workers are at risk of compassion fatigue, especially when responding to crises without access to clinical supervision or mental health resources themselves. The emotional toll of consistently supporting vulnerable patrons can lead to stress, burnout, and attrition.

7. *Gaps in the Literature*

Despite growing scholarly and practical interest in libraries' roles in mental health, significant research gaps remain. First, few studies employ empirical or longitudinal methods to evaluate the outcomes of library-based mental health services. Most existing works are descriptive, lacking quantitative assessments of stress reduction, academic performance, or long-term behavioral change (Donnelly, 2022; Iglesias & García-Sánchez, 2021; Grimes, 2024).

Second, the lived experiences of librarians—particularly in managing emotional labor, role ambiguity, and stress—are underexplored. Although some literature acknowledges compassion fatigue and burnout (Grimes, 2024; Smith, 2021), in-depth qualitative research on staff support systems is sparse.

Third, research in the Global South remains limited. Except for Owolabi and Salawu (2022), most studies originate from North America or Europe, resulting in a lack of culturally and economically diverse perspectives on implementation, access, and service sustainability.

Fourth, while “inclusion” is often cited as a goal, few studies focus on how libraries tailor mental health services to the specific needs of marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ patrons, neurodivergent users, or people with disabilities.

Finally, there is a shortage of institutional models that outline how libraries can embed wellness into their strategic plans, budgets, policies, and staffing structures (Bladek, 2021; Hirsh, 2024). Without these frameworks, innovations remain isolated and potentially unsustainable.

V. Conclusion

This literature review examined the evolving role of libraries in promoting mental health and well-being, particularly within academic and public library contexts. Through the analysis of ten recent and relevant sources, the review identified a clear trend: libraries are increasingly stepping beyond their traditional roles to become accessible, inclusive spaces that support mental health.

Six key findings emerged from this review:

1. Mental health is becoming a core component of library missions and services.
2. Libraries function as accessible community hubs for mental wellness.
3. Academic libraries play a critical role in promoting student mental health and academic success.
4. Most mental health programs in libraries lack formal evaluation frameworks.
5. Library staff often operate without adequate training or clear role definitions in mental health support.
6. Systemic barriers—such as limited funding, infrastructure, and institutional support—undermine the long-term sustainability of mental health initiatives.

One significant insight is the shift in library missions to include emotional and psychological support. Academic libraries, in particular, are implementing

wellness programs like mindfulness sessions, therapy dog events, and bibliotherapy, signaling institutional recognition of the link between mental health and student success.

Libraries are also emerging as vital access points for mental health resources—particularly in underserved communities—by offering stigma-free environments through nonclinical programs like curated collections, wellness displays, and designated quiet zones. These efforts meet growing demands for mental health services in spaces that are familiar, approachable, and trusted.

Despite these advances, several challenges persist. A major concern is the lack of structured methods to assess the effectiveness of mental health services. Most programs rely on informal feedback or participation numbers, which limits evidence-based decision-making and future funding justification. In addition, librarians are increasingly expected to manage complex emotional needs without the necessary training, leading to role confusion, stress, and inconsistent service delivery.

Resource constraints—especially in underfunded or low-income areas—further complicate efforts to embed mental health services into everyday library operations. Many libraries lack the staff, budget, and infrastructure to fully implement and sustain wellness programs at scale.

Overall, the review confirms that libraries are well-positioned to support mental health through their adaptability, community trust, and combined physical and digital presence. However, for this role to be institutionalized, libraries require robust evaluation tools, professional development systems, and policies that formally recognize their contributions to mental health.

Future research should aim to measure the long-term outcomes of library-based mental health initiatives, capture the lived experiences of library staff, and develop inclusive models that serve diverse user populations. In particular, there's a need for studies beyond the Western context, as most existing literature centers on North America and Europe. Addressing these gaps will ensure that library-based mental health support is both compassionate and sustainable across different social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this literature review, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen and sustain the role of libraries in supporting mental health and well-being:

1. Develop Evidence-Based Evaluation Frameworks.

Libraries should implement standardized methods to assess the impact of mental health programs. This includes Pre- and post-program surveys, Usage tracking of wellness spaces and digital tools, and Qualitative feedback through focus groups or interviews.

Establishing clear metrics will allow libraries to demonstrate value, secure funding, and refine services based on user outcomes (Donnelly, 2022; Grimes, 2024; Iglesias & García-Sánchez, 2021).

2. Integrate Mental Health Training into Professional Development.

Librarians should be equipped with foundational skills in Mental health literacy, Trauma-informed service, and Crisis de-escalation and referral.

Workshops, certification programs (e.g., Mental Health First Aid), and partnerships with mental health professionals can enhance staff confidence and user safety (Grimes, 2024; Hirsh, 2024; Smith, 2021).

3. Institutionalize Mental Health Services in Library Policy and Planning.

Library administrations should Embed wellness in strategic plans, allocate designated budgets for mental health programming, and appoint wellness liaisons or establish interdisciplinary teams

This ensures consistency, accountability, and long-term commitment to mental health as part of library operations (Bladek, 2021; Hall & McAlister, 2021).

4. Promote Inclusive and Accessible Wellness Programming.

Libraries should design mental health services that are culturally responsive and accessible to students from marginalized groups, users with disabilities, non-native language speakers and patrons with limited digital access.

Flexibility in format (e.g., hybrid programs, self-help kits, multilingual resources) helps address varied needs (Donnelly, 2022; Owolabi & Salawu, 2022; Grimes, 2024).

5. Foster Strategic Partnerships with Mental Health Stakeholders.

Libraries should collaborate with campus counseling centers, local health organizations, and nonprofits and advocacy groups.

These partnerships can offer co-led workshops, referral systems, and staff consultation—extending service reach and professional support (Ramsey & Aagard, 2018; Hall & McAlister, 2021).

6. Address Staff Well-Being and Emotional Labor

As frontline service providers, librarians need support to manage the emotional toll of mental health-related work. Institutions should establish peer support groups, include emotional wellness in staff check-ins, offer mental health days or stress management training.

Supporting the staff sustains service quality and reduces burnout (Smith, 2021; Grimes, 2024).

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