Making Mental Health Awareness A Priority For Scholarly Publishing

**A conversation with
Randy Townsend, President
Society for Scholarly Publishing**

Podcast release date: Monday, March 11, 2024

KENNEALLY: Are you eating or sleeping too much or too little? Are you feeling helpless or hopeless? Do you find yourself unusually confused or forgetful or scared? Those feelings may be signs that you are living with a mental health condition.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

According to the US National Institute of Mental Health, nearly one in five adults live with a mental illness. Clearly, anyone with mental health concerns is not alone. If you see yourself in a list of signs and symptoms, then the next step is to reach out for help.

As president of the Society for Scholarly Publishing, Randy Townsend has led efforts to prioritize mental health awareness and support within the scholarly communications ecosystem. Randy Townsend joins me now from Washington, DC, to share the latest news on SSP's ongoing work to address mental health issues. Welcome to Velocity of Content, Randy.

TOWNSEND: Thanks, Chris. Happy to be here.

KENNEALLY: We're very glad to have you. Randy Townsend, you've made mental health awareness a focus of your term as SSP president. What inspired you to take up this cause?

TOWNSEND: I think there were three distinct events that really kept swirling around my mind as I was approaching my presidency. The first two predated my scholarly publishing career. I was in community banking in a small town where everybody knows everybody. It was a busy day, and the lobby was full of people. I kept hearing somebody shouting something, and the customer that I was helping at the time was cringing in front of me. When I looked up to see what the problem was, I saw this large man wearing nothing but his underwear holding a check and yelling for someone to cash his check. I knew this man. I knew his mother, I knew his grandmother, I knew his family. They were all regular customers. But on this particular day, he was behaving erratically, and he was a

threat to the customers. When I tried to calm him down, I looked in his eyes, and he just wasn't there, Chris. So being in a bank, I called the police when he refused to leave. They didn't arrest him. They took him home. Apparently, that morning, he didn't take his medication.

The second event was actually the last day I was in community banking, where I was personally held hostage with a gun pressed to the back of my head during a robbery. I suffered years of PTSD trying to reach some sort of normalcy and purpose and direction in my own personal life.

The third event – actually, I need to make a correction to a story I've shared several times. It's about a friend of mine who lost his brother and his son both to completed suicides. I've been saying that these suicides occurred six months from each other, but they were actually 30 days from each other. His brother took his life, and as people grieve – and this is my presumption and even discussions with him afterwards – everyone's grieving separately. He was a family man, but somehow he missed the signs first of his brother and then of his son. This occurred at the top of 2023, right before my term began.

But with these three events and realizing how many people may be dealing with something and trying their best to make it work, I really want SSP members to know that they're not alone. And it's easy to feel alone. It's never been easy for me to talk about my trauma, and I've heard some of my actions completely misinterpreted. I don't sit in the back of a room because I'm disinterested in the topic. I'm just nervous about having people behind me.

KENNEALLY: Well, Randy Townsend, I want to thank you for sharing those stories, and particularly, I want to thank you for transforming those experiences into the kind of action that we're seeing as you serve your presidency at SSP. Can you tell us about the conditions in the publishing workplace that can contribute negatively to mental health?

TOWNSEND: Yeah. Chris, one thing that I thought a lot about – the conversations around mental health aren't specific to scholarly publishing or the publishing industry. They overlap. Everyone's impacted in some way, shape, or form. I will add one caveat in my description. I believe that the pandemic accelerated existing issues. So in general, there's always been a stigma that says we have to be perfect at work. If somebody asks you how you're doing, you tend to say fine. You don't disclose the vulnerabilities. You don't disclose the challenges. You don't disclose things that could be used against you in the future, something that could disqualify you potentially from an advancement or other opportunities. Additionally, there's burnout. We're trying to do more without taking the time to properly care for ourselves, recharge our mental and emotional batteries.

Going back to the pandemic, we watched George Floyd murdered, and those things had lasting impacts. We watched it over and over again on the news – watched these things play out – and we were isolated. We couldn't connect to each other because of the pandemic. So we're watching these things, we're forming these opinions, and many of us are feeling more and more isolated and more and more alone.

And the pandemic abruptly altered the way in which we work. So the water cooler talks just weren't happening. The opportunity to be in each other's presence and connect in those ways just wasn't happening. And it amplified the isolation. I say this as a proponent of remote work. I've always been a big fan of remote work, saying that you can be productive. But it's the abrupt way that it happened – I think there were a lot of missed opportunities to reimagine the way we need to support one another in this remote environment.

KENNEALLY: How has SSP membership responded to your work, Randy?

TOWNSEND: I was nervous up front about making this a priority, because it's not something we traditionally talk about. When I first announced it at the annual meeting last year, it was quiet. I was on the stage and I was talking about it, and it was so quiet. And I was thinking, oh my goodness, this isn't going to go well. No one wants to have this conversation. But after I left the stage, I started receiving text messages from members, and they were thanking me for having this conversation and disclosing some of the challenges that they were dealing with that I would have never known and they were holding inside. Throughout the rest of the conference, I've had many people come up to me, stop me and pull me aside, and thank me for this.

Ever since then, there's been emails and just people reaching out and thanking me for these conversations.

KENNEALLY: You are an associate professor at George Washington University in the College of Professional Studies publishing program, Randy Townsend. In January, a GWU graduate student, Maribel Gomez, contributed a guest column to the SSP Scholarly Kitchen blog that described racial battle fatigue. Racism impacts people of color in every workplace. What have you heard from SSP members about the consequences of racism for people working in scholarly publishing?

TOWNSEND: I have to say I am so very proud of Maribel. She was an incredible student of mine, and I'm really happy to see the work that she's been doing with SSP. She contributed her post not because I directly asked her. She contributed because she felt inspired and motivated to do it. Her post right now has received more than 4,500 views at my last count, so her message is clearly resonating.

To answer your question, despite the grounds that we're making on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, really trying to make this a safe space for everybody, there are still aggressions – microaggressions and other kinds of aggressions – that people of color have to work through. Dianndra Roberts discussed the impact of stereotypes on mental well-being in a Scholarly Kitchen post. There is a lot of work that we have to do. I've seen self-proclaimed allies not speak up when they've had the opportunity to, and that creates a certain kind of environment for those that are looking for help or looking for someone to come to their rescue that may not feel empowered to do so.

Unfortunately, this exacerbates the pressures of mental health, because you don't know that you belong. You don't know that you feel welcome. Is all the talk around inclusive environments – is it all lip service, or as an organization or as an industry, do we really practice what we preach and really want to support each other? So the consequences of racism are very, very much at play, and those who are victims or targets of those kinds of aggressions – it's an additional weight they have to carry in addition to whatever else they may be dealing with that is not directly related to their racial makeup.

KENNEALLY: Randy Townsend, president of the Society for Scholarly Publishing, thank you for speaking with me today, and thank you for your work.

TOWNSEND: Thank you again, Chris, for having me.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me.

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