

Library Anxiety

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In the twenty-first century, information professionals often juggle increasing workloads and conflicting priorities in their day-to-day jobs. As a result, users' well-being and needs might slip from their primary focus. Library anxiety is not a new phenomenon, as researchers such as Mellon (1986), Onwuegbuzie et al. (2004), and Shelmerdine (2018) have shown in their important studies on students' anxiety. They document feelings and behaviours that surface when using a library or, worse, that actually prevent students from using it. Carlile (2007) states that library anxiety is more prevalent in stressful situations, places, or contexts, and, unsurprisingly, it also occurs among students in theological academic libraries. The level of anxiety can be extreme. It varies from feeling less confident to outright phobia. The argument is supported by other researchers (Shelmerdine 2018), who suggest that librarians often inadvertently create barriers that hinder library access and use. However, they are

also the ones who can change the mindset of users and address student anxiety.

With the proliferation of online social media and artificial intelligence, library users may still struggle to form genuine community connections, despite their efforts to do so (Dezuanni and Osman 2024). The lack of connection and relationship is unsurprising, as users come with various life experiences. They could be mature returning students who are not entirely fitting in among their younger peers, or they might differ culturally and consequently not have been treated with respect. As a result, social isolation and detachment can lead to nervousness when entering public spaces, using library resources, or asking for librarian assistance.

Information professionals are key collaborators. For decades, librarians have worked diligently to address social issues, promote inclusion, ensure equal access to information, and foster digital literacy (Dezuanni and Osman 2024). Although numerous studies have shown that the provision of information literacy skills and structured access pathways by information professionals can alleviate student anxiety (Carlile 2007), this intervention alone may be insufficient. A more holistic and culturally responsive approach necessitates the integration of processes that build meaningful relationships. We, therefore, have an important role in creating a welcoming environment for users, whether online or in person, to reduce or eliminate any barriers that might cause them anxiety when accessing information.

Evaluating who our clients are and understanding their needs is crucial in the process. This work is supported by Hayes (2013), who argues that developing strategies must consider the cultural embeddedness of library users. For example, New Zealand should consider the *Kaupapa Māori* (Māori-focused) approach rather than relying primarily on Western ideas. Based on the Māori holistic model *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (Durie 1998, 69), this chapter discusses how librarians can holistically address barriers and feelings of intimidation, understand different cultural values and practices (*tikanga*), advocate for user accessibility in services, and encourage building relationships between library staff and students. The model is based on the four pillars of a house and emphasizes the importance of integrating and connecting the pillars (Durie 1998). By embedding this relational framework into library practice, professionals can more effectively address the complex and often under-recognized dimensions of library anxiety experienced by diverse user groups.

TE WHARE TAPA WHĀ

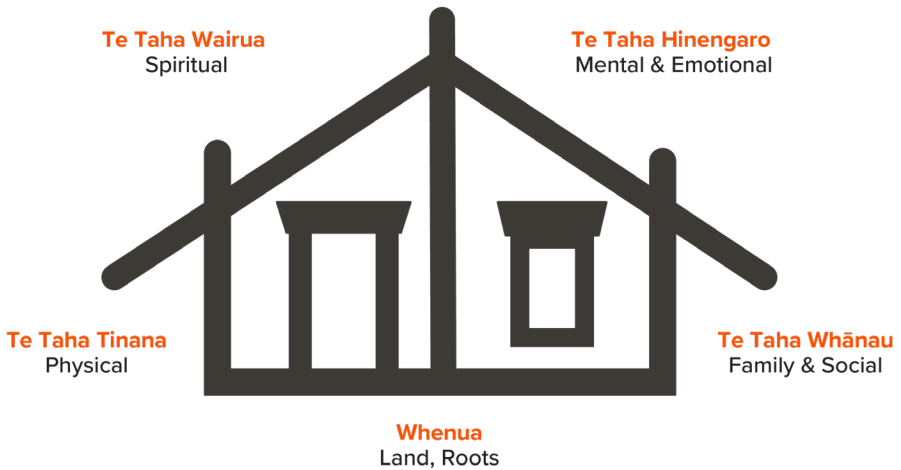


Fig. 1. Māori wellbeing model.

Taha Wairua (*Spiritual*)

As users come from diverse life experiences and have varying spiritual needs, providing a welcoming and respectful experience while meeting the user's library needs is therefore essential. For instance, in a physical library, is there a section where users can meditate or pray without interruption? Are users with different spiritual beliefs provided with the same level of support?

Ha and Verishagen (2015) state the importance of providing a space for “conversation learning, experimenting and reflecting” (189). This pillar includes not only a reflection of the person's spiritual stand but also the connection with the environment. It encourages connecting with the environment, such as “land, lakes, mountains, and reefs that have spiritual significance” (Durie 1998, 70). Do the physical and online library settings connect to the known and stimulating environment? The biophilic concept, which focuses on connecting users to the natural environment when designing spaces, has proven beneficial as it improves the mental health, well-being, and productivity of users in the library (Peters and D’Penna 2020). This concept is more crucial than ever in the post-COVID-19 era, when users might be anxious about entering indoor settings.

Taha Hinengaro (*Mental and Emotional*)

The next pillar focuses on “expressing thoughts and feelings” (Durie 1998, 70). Durie argues that communication goes beyond just words. Body expression can sometimes signal interest in communicating with the other party. Like many cultures, Māori emphasize building relationships (*whanaungatanga*). Such focus will help us understand our users’ thoughts and feelings. It requires time, energy, and *aroha* (love). To address the feeling of loss of community that can occur when users are reduced to accessing the library only remotely, creative efforts in building online connections are vital. They often have the advantages of enabling a more diverse spectrum of interactions and potentially reducing the fear of communicating face to face (Dezuanni and Osman 2024).

At the Carey Baptist College Library in Auckland, New Zealand, library staff created an asynchronous course, called First Steps, for distance students. The course covers an introduction to the college, library skills, academic integrity, referencing, and plagiarism. There are also sections on academic writing and learning skills. This course was developed six years ago to respond to the diversity among college students. Students experiencing limitations or those who are hesitant to ask for assistance due to cultural barriers can seek basic training through the course. In the course, students can express their concerns with one another using Padlets. There are also several recorded videos aimed at introducing key support staff to students and orienting them to study in the course. We believe this is one way we can connect to distance students.

Taha Tinana (*Physical*)

Taha tinana focuses on various issues that contribute to users’ physical well-being (Durie 1998) and, therefore, reduce library anxiety. Care and attentiveness in this area can be demonstrated by providing easy accessibility for users, such as ramps for wheelchair access to the building, or by supplying captions for recorded instructional videos to support users who have hearing difficulties. Moreover, the positive physical presence of a librarian or information professional can help alleviate anxiety, particularly in culturally inclusive

environments where foundational understanding is respected and access barriers have been removed.

Looking after the physical aspects of well-being involves not only librarians but also administrators, policymakers, and lecturers collaborating to develop support for users. The metaphor of *raranga* (weaving) illustrates this: it underlines that no single unit can be effective when standing alone; a collective effort is required. Many strings are needed to be suitably woven into a strong and usable item, such as a basket.

Taha Whānau (*Family and Social*)

Family, in a broad sense, and their beneficial influences can help overcome barriers, which will build confidence in addressing anxiety. A well-known Māori proverb states, “I come not with my own strengths but bring with me the gifts, talents, and strengths of my family, tribe, and ancestors” (*Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini*). Family is understood not only in biological terms but also in cultural and emotional (Durie 1998). Moreover, it also “relates to identity and a sense of purpose” (72).

One example is the Cartonera project initiated by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Special Interest Group, Religion: Libraries and Dialogue (RELINDIAL), which encourages the creation of handmade books from recycled materials (The Relindial Cartonera Project, n.d.). This inclusive and low-cost initiative fosters community engagement by bringing together individuals of diverse ages, backgrounds, and beliefs in a collaborative and creative process. By enabling participants to craft together and share their stories in an accessible and meaningful format, projects like Cartonera offer theological libraries a practical means of enhancing social inclusion and reducing anxiety associated with unfamiliar or unwelcoming spaces.

In the context of a theological library, several questions require reflection. Do we organize events that celebrate the family as a unit? For instance, we can invite family members to attend orientation. Does our collection take into account the languages and backgrounds of users? Do we welcome children in the library, and do the displays and signage in the library building reflect diversity? When the users’

mana (pride) has been respected, they will find their identity and purpose, and have confidence in asking for assistance.

Sometimes, the library is the *whānau* (family) for users. For example, international students with few friends or relatives in the country will find a library to be a social gathering space. When one user sees the library as a safe space, we are on the winning team, as they will likely promote it to their peers. However, we shall not overwhelm our users with knowledge, but rather connect and guide the information-seeking process, by which both parties can discover things together, and users feel they can contribute and learn something new in the process (Shelmerdine 2018). This is similar to a Māori concept of *ako* (learn), by which all parties can learn and discover things, and it is not solely based on a teacher-and-student way of learning.

Sadly, research has shown that theological libraries often do not welcome children, and this can cause anxiety during school holidays when parents need to juggle childcare and studies (Keyes 2017). In light of these challenges, it is essential to explore inclusive, community-centred strategies that foster connection across generations within library walls. A promising approach is to foster intergenerational storytelling, improving this way of expression and connection and contributing to users' mental health. Dezuanni and Osman (2024) suggest that shared storytelling across generations can help bridge social and cultural divides by creating spaces for mutual understanding and relationship-building.

Conclusion

Reducing library anxiety in the twenty-first century requires more than just addressing the physical or cognitive barriers users may face. A holistic approach, rooted in the Māori model of *Te Whare Tapa Whā*, provides a more inclusive and culturally sensitive framework that integrates the diverse needs of library users. Each of the four pillars plays a critical role in shaping a theological library's environment and fostering a welcoming space.

It is crucial that information professionals recognize library anxiety is not just an individual issue but a collective one that calls for a collaborative, relational approach. By building meaningful connections through *whanaungatanga* (relationships) and embracing the

richness of diverse cultural values and life experiences, librarians can alleviate the barriers that hinder users from fully engaging with library resources.

This requires more than attractive design and physical accessibility. It calls for a shift in mindset, one by which libraries become places of connection, reflection, and mutual learning. Whether through intergenerational storytelling initiatives, digital support systems like asynchronous courses, or creating spaces where users feel valued and respected in their own right, the library's role as a community hub can be a powerful tool for reducing anxiety.

Ultimately, by weaving these elements together in a supportive, inclusive, and culturally responsive manner, libraries can help transform the user experience and empower individuals to use library resources confidently and without fear. By embodying the principles of *ako*—by which learning is a shared process—libraries can stand as pillars of support and places where users not only gain knowledge but also experience a sense of belonging.

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