LIBRARIES PROMOTE WELL-BEING

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"I gain a little more faith in the world whenever I've visited this place."
– Woman, aged 67, Holstebro

PREFACE

It's been a pleasure and a privilege to spearhead the project "Libraries promote well-being" with a great team from the libraries at Holstebro, Randers and Viborg, and it's an even greater pleasure that we're now able to share our insights.

The Project originates from a simple but vital experience from our daily work as library staff, namely that the library is a cause of well-being. Patrons of the library find calm, joy, inspiration and community in their visits. In a time of increasing dissatisfaction, the library becomes an antidote, as a source of well-being.

This was the starting point of our curiosity. What actually happens when people encounter the library? What is the special quality that the library possesses, and how can we as a sector scientifically document this intuitive knowledge?

An unfortunate challenge for our sector is that much of our valuable knowledge and insight exists in localized clusters, often even localized to just specific staff and their practices. If we, as an institution, wish to strengthen our position as a societal actor, we must improve our ability to not only apply the scientific method to our practices, but also to maintain and share it.

This project serves a two-fold purpose: To address the role of the library in the creation of well-being, and to develop a more scientifically supported view of the functions of the library.

In cooperation with Hans Henrik Knoop, and based on his theory of well-being, we've undertaken several qualitative and quantitative surveys of how and why libraries create and promote well-being in society.

Our surveys cleary indicate that the library's promotion of well-being reaches deep into the lives of the individual patron and enhances a meaningful life. Libraries function as centers of culture and enlightenment freely accessible public spaces, and places where personal freedom and community exist side-by-side, providing access to stories that connect us as people.

One of the most important findings from our project is that well-being isn't a luxury, but a cornerstone. It is our sincere hope that the project "Libraries promote well-being" will inspire further reflection and action. How can the potential for the creation of well-being be further evolved?. How do we create even more opportunities for people to move forward mentally, socially, and culturally, and how can we, as a sector, continue the work to show the scientific evidence for what we do, so the library may remain a central component in the development of well-being in society?

This project is supported by experience, reflections and engagement of staff, managers and patrons of the three participating libraries and everyone involved deserves a giant high-five!

The same goes for you, HH, for your professional skill and curiosity, and for elevating our daily work into scientifically supported space. Finally, sincere thanks to the Agency for Culture and Palaces for their financial support for the project.

Mai Kordelin Paulsen
Project manager

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In 2023 associate professor Hans Henrik Knoop wrote the article "Contributions to a common theory on well-being", and it is from this work that Libraries promote well-being takes its foundation. We've based our study on this in order to achieve a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the promotion and creation of well-being in libraries. The word well-being can have multiple definitions, but in this context, we define it as follows:

- **It is synonymous with health**
- **An expression covering an individual who is both feeling and functioning well**
- **Something enhanced by common needs being met**

Well-being is, in this context, based on the fulfillment of our universal human needs. These needs are many and varied, and range from basic needs such as food, sleep and security to social and mental needs like community, love, recognition, creativity, meaningfulness and optimism.

If these needs are met in a suitable fashion, we experience positive emotions, engagement, and quality of life. There are, however, limitations. Too little, or too much, of something can be detrimental to well-being. Both too much, and too little food, for instance, are detrimental to your health. In a similar fashion, both extreme pessimism and excessive optimism create unhealthy results.

A crucial point is that well-being isn't limited to just a state. It is also a competence that can be trained. *Our well-being thus greatly depends on our ability to develop the competences to stay within boundaries.* As expressed in the foundational work, *"Well-being is a skill, not just a response."*

Satisfaction of a need is, in itself, a dimension of well-being, as the obtained satisfaction figures as a component in the experience of feeling and functioning well. **Figure 1** is an illustration of this theory.

The dimensions of well-being in the model are considered universal sources of well-being and are thus of general interest. Everyone benefits from being aware of the needs, everyone is motivated by them and experience quality of life such as positive feelings, engagement and meaning when they are sufficiently satisfied.

For this project, we are keeping this perspective in mind for our desire to qualify the assessment of why so many enjoy utilizing the library and participating in library hosted events. By examining the library patrons' experiences of having various needs satisfied in their interactions with the services and initiatives provided by the library we seek to accomplish just this.

> ❝*Well-being is not a luxury, it is necessity!*❞
>
> *- Hans Henrik Knoop*

WELL-BEING/HEALTH
(Feeling and functioning well)
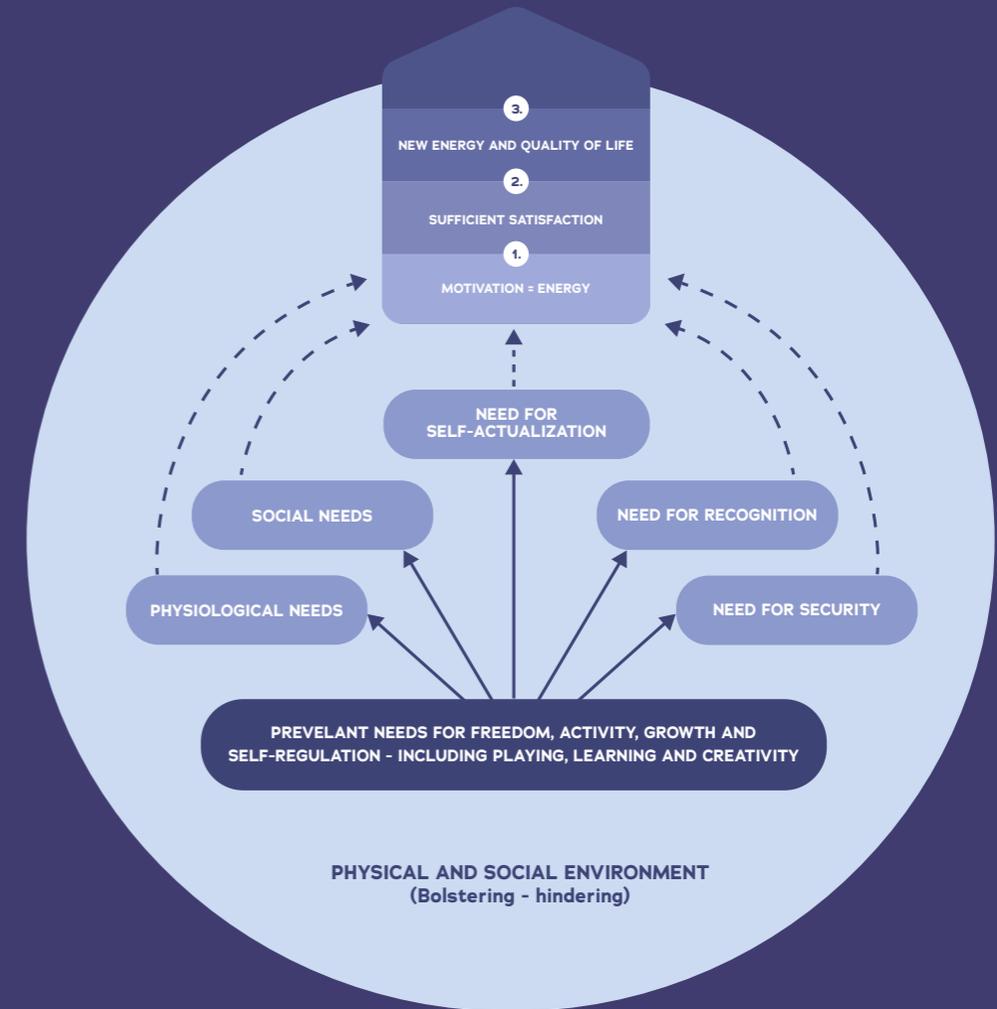
FIGURE 1. *The model of well-being illustrates the way in which universal, human needs can be seen as persistent sources of the individual's well-being and health. It illustrates the connection between prevalent and specific needs, as well as the manner in which these needs create motivation for satisfaction which, if obtained in a suitable fashion, will result in the release of energy and qualities of life, such as positive emotion, engagement, meaning, optimism and purpose, which collectively promotes and enhances well-being. Succeeding at satisfying needs is psychologically reinforcing, enhances further motivation (desire for more) and can thus be considered psychologically sound. The physical and social environment can enhance or hinder individual well-being through affecting any of the dimensions of the model either positively or negatively, which in turn opens a long list of personal, pedagogical and leadership-aligned opportunities to promote well-being and hinder the opposite.*

CONTEXT

METHOD:
Action-research/Action-education

RESULT

Praxis

Education

Research

Evaluation and reflection

Identification of problem case

CHANGES

Gathering and processing of empiri

Planning of action

Intervention

Praxis-development

Educational-development

Research

METHOD & APPROACH

This project has been completed as a combined development- and action-research project. Participants gained new and well-documented knowledge relating to well-being and employed it actively in their daily practices. Participants thus took on the role of "researchers of their own praxis" creating and sharing new insights internally. The intended goal was to strengthen the work of the libraries related to well-being, through both the upgrade of existing services and the development of new ones.

Figure 2. Illustrates Action-research.

From all three participating libraries approximately 10 employees (both staff and managers) took part in the study. The participants were responsible for both collection and partial processing of data, assisted by the experience and knowledge of Hans Henrik Knoop. Data was collected through hundreds of surveys, interviews and voxpops across the three libraries in order to secure a representational sample.

The results thus rest on a study conducted by the staff of the three participating libraries in close cooperation with Hans Henrik Knoop, who was also responsible for data processing, analysis, and the final conclusion. As such, the results are backed up by solidly documented well-being research and are focused on the experiences of library patrons in their interactions with the libraries and events hosted by them through surveys and interviews. The study thus follows both a quantitative and a qualitative path, equally supported by scientific data.

In the quantitative part of the survey, a simple and intuitive 5-point scale was employed, asking the participants to rate their experience from strong agreement to strong disagreement. This scale enabled the measurement of nuance in their replies, while at the same time making it easy for them to consider the question.

The five response categories were as follows:

- **Strong Agreement**
- **Agreement**
- **Neutral**
- **Disagreement**
- **Strong Disagreement**

The answers clearly reveal how the users experience the library and its events as well as how much various factors contribute to their well-being.

On the following pages, we will illustrate the central tendencies of the surveys. If you'd prefer a full view of the complete analysis, including all nuances and patterns revealed by the surveys, you can find the collected dataset **here** or alternately, you can scan the QR code. It will be in Danish though.

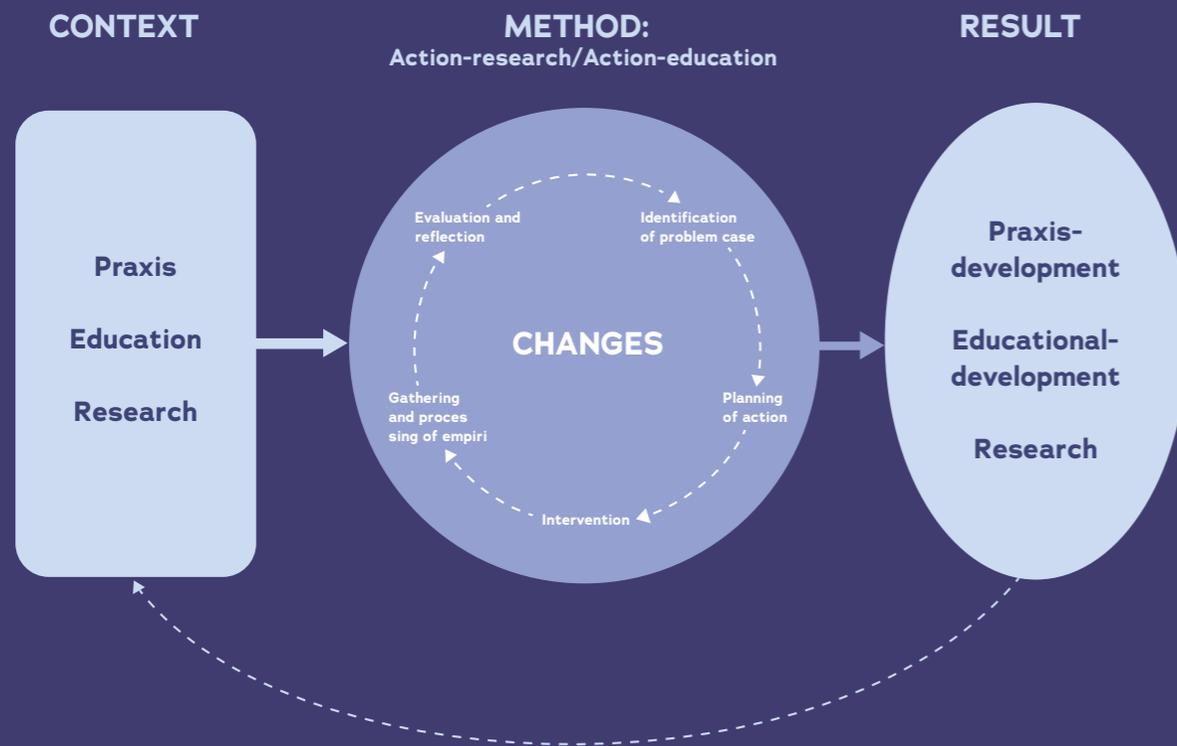# EXPERIENCE OF PATRONS AT LIBRARIES

The library as a high-stability space for well-being

"You encounter people here you'd otherwise never have met – and you realize what you have in common."

– Male, aged 61, Holstebro

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The quantitative data shows a remarkably steady and highly ranked level of well-being connected to library-related experiences across two survey rounds conducted six months apart.

Central figures:

- Overall average:
  4,15 → 4,16 (Likert 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest)
- Cronbach's Alpha (internal consistency): **0,94 – 0,95** (very high)
- No statistically significant discrepancy between the **1st** and **2nd** round

In other words: the patrons' experience of the library is consistently positive and steady. What little discrepancy is noted all falls within the standard margin of error. This points to an institution that isn't just well-functioning, but also robust.

The highest ranked factors:

1. Safety **(4,65 – 4,68)**
2. Orientation and navigation **(4,57 – 4,58)**
3. Experiencing the staff **(4,49 – 4,57)**

Room for improvement:

- The social aspect **(ca. 3,85 – 3,91)**
- Personal interests and opinions **(ca. 3,92 – 3,93)**

Even for the lowest scoring factors, the average still hovers around 4, which is a very high score for a public institution. It also bears mention, that a considerable subsection of library patrons prefer peace and quiet to social interactions, which helps explain the relatively low score for the social aspect.

> **"** *Upon entering, I feel the pace drop. I become a calmer person.* **"**
>
> *– Woman, aged 48, Holstebro*

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

1.
The library is experienced as one of the few places providing unconditional safety. The library isn't just a place of service, but also a psychological safe space.

2.
The library provides mental calm and cognitive relief. It is one of the few places where people can think and ponder undisturbed in a culture defined by constant interruption.

3.
The library supports identity, interests and small personal victories. The library becomes a kind of existential low-pressure zone, a place for development without pressure or expectations.

4.
The library is not a noisy community, but rather a quiet one. The social aspect is quiet, organic and valuable. To many patrons, the library works as a shield against social solitude and loneliness.

5.
The library staff is experienced as a key stabilizing factor. The staff functions as a warm and positive regulating influence.

6.
The library functions as a stable, low-key robust space for well-being, both for those who come with a specific need in mind, and for those who don't yet know what exactly they need.

7.
The library functions as one of the most accessible and stable spaces for well-being in modern society. A space with no transactional basis, social demands or performance requirements. It is a type of environment that modern theory of well-being classifies as particularly suited for the promotion of well-being. The library isn't just an institution; it is a key part in the ecosystem of wellbeing.

EVENTS HOSTED AT LIBRARIES

Events as micro-interventions in well-being

"*I always feel welcome here, even on days when I'm not doing so well. It means far more than people think.*"

– Woman, aged 72, Viborg

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The study of events hosted at the library paints a similarly conclusive picture, but here, the dimensions of well-being are more firmly paired with activity-based experiences.

Central figuresl:

- Overall average: **4,24**
- Safety: **4,73**
- Meeting the host: **4,48**
- Output of event: **4,25**
- Physical surroundings: **4,20**
- Socialization: **3,98**
- Personal meaning and immersion: **4,01**

"*It has been hard for me to be at peace elsewhere. But when I'm seated at event here, I forget myself, in a good way.*"

– Woman, aged 45, Holstebro

KVALITATIVE FUND

1.
Events are experienced as safe, friendly and unstressful. Safety appears as a core trait in library-hosted events. A particular combination of warmth, an informal tone and an absence of social and societal demands. Many describe the library as a place where they can be themselves.

2.
Events are intellectually stimulating and provide insight and perspective without feeling like schooling. This makes the events communities of learning, absent of performance-logic. This is very rare in a culture where learning is frequently goal-oriented and evaluated.

3.
Events provide positive emotional regulation. Participants particularly point out the absence of stress, evaluation, performance anxiety and commercial expectations as key to their well-being. The events thus function as micro-interventions in well-being, where even brief experiences provide a noticeable improvement in overall well-being.

4.
The social community is quiet, safe and makes no demands. The social dimension of the events can best be described as safe, social resonance. You feel others, without being overwhelmed by them.

5.
The host is a key component and integral to the positive experience of the events. Participants experience the host as a provider of presence, comprehension and meaning. The host creates the psychological framework that enables the participants to experience high value despite a low practical and mental load.

6.
Participants use words such as life-affirming, uplifting and meaningful, and describe the events as breathing spaces. The interviews thus indicate that library-hosted events not only offer cultural content, but also serve as small, stable sources of well-being in the daily lives of the attendants. The events serve as micro-spaces of well-being that combine learning, community, safety and inspiration in a well-balanced combination.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS ACROSS THE BOARD

The library as an eco-system of well-being

"You meet people here you wouldn't meet otherwise, and you discover how much you have in common."

– Male, aged 61, Holstebro

THEME 1: THE LIBRARY AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFE-SPACE

Interviewees describe the library as "the only public place where I'm never worried about being alone". Safety is experienced as:

- **Absence of judging looks**
- **Polite tone**
- **A feeling of social inclusion**
- **Predictable physical framework**
- **Respectful praxis from the staff**

Safety isn't just the absence of danger, but also the presence of a warm, controlled atmosphere which provides powerful elements of well-being.
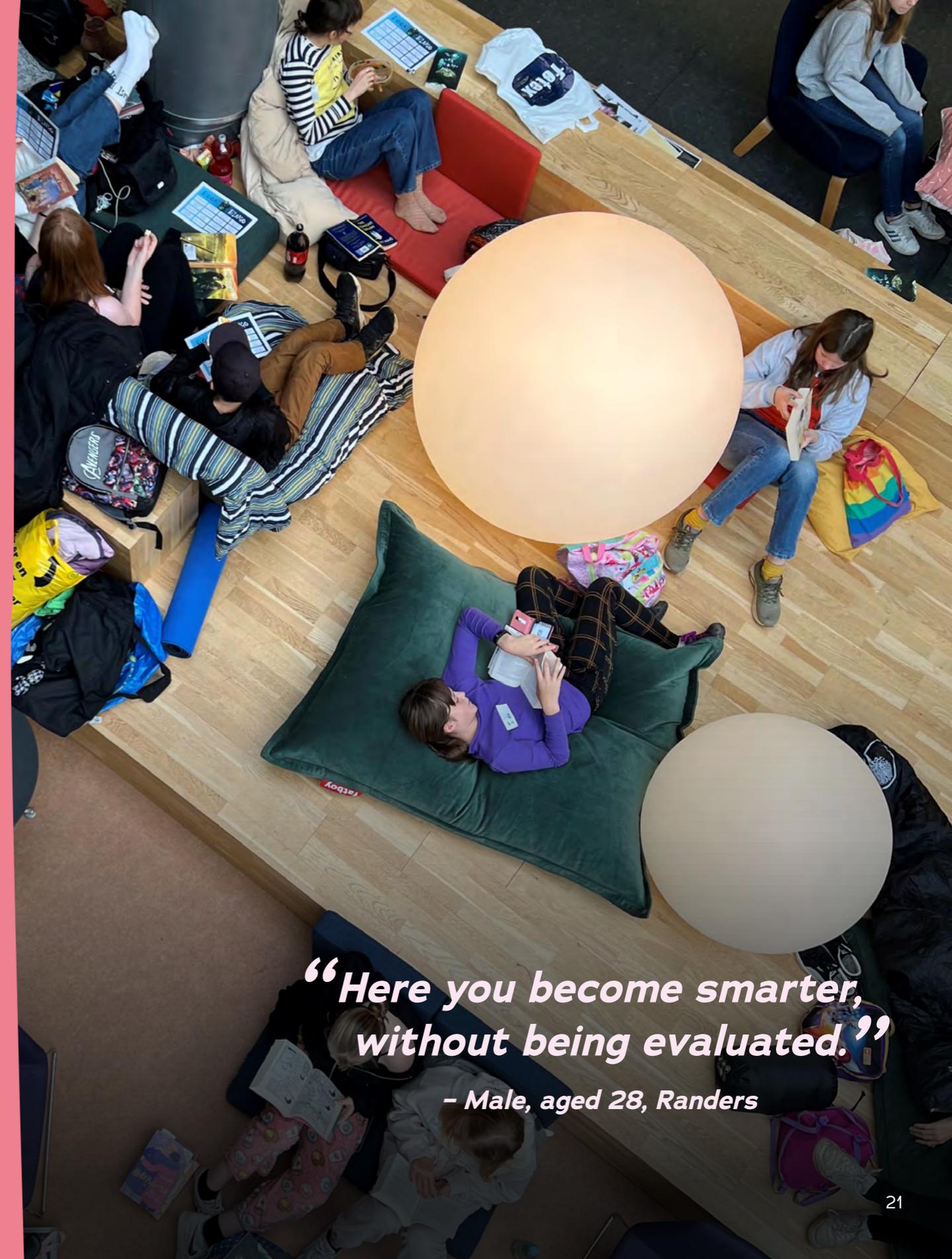
"Here you become smarter, without being evaluated."

– Male, aged 28, Randers

THEME 2: A UNIQUE SPACE FOR MENTAL CALM AND COGNITIVE RELIEF

Many describe the library as" the only place where my thoughts really click". The physical framework supports:

- **Immersion**
- **Concentration**
- **Mental restitution**
- **Sensory balance**

The library enhances calm and restitution.
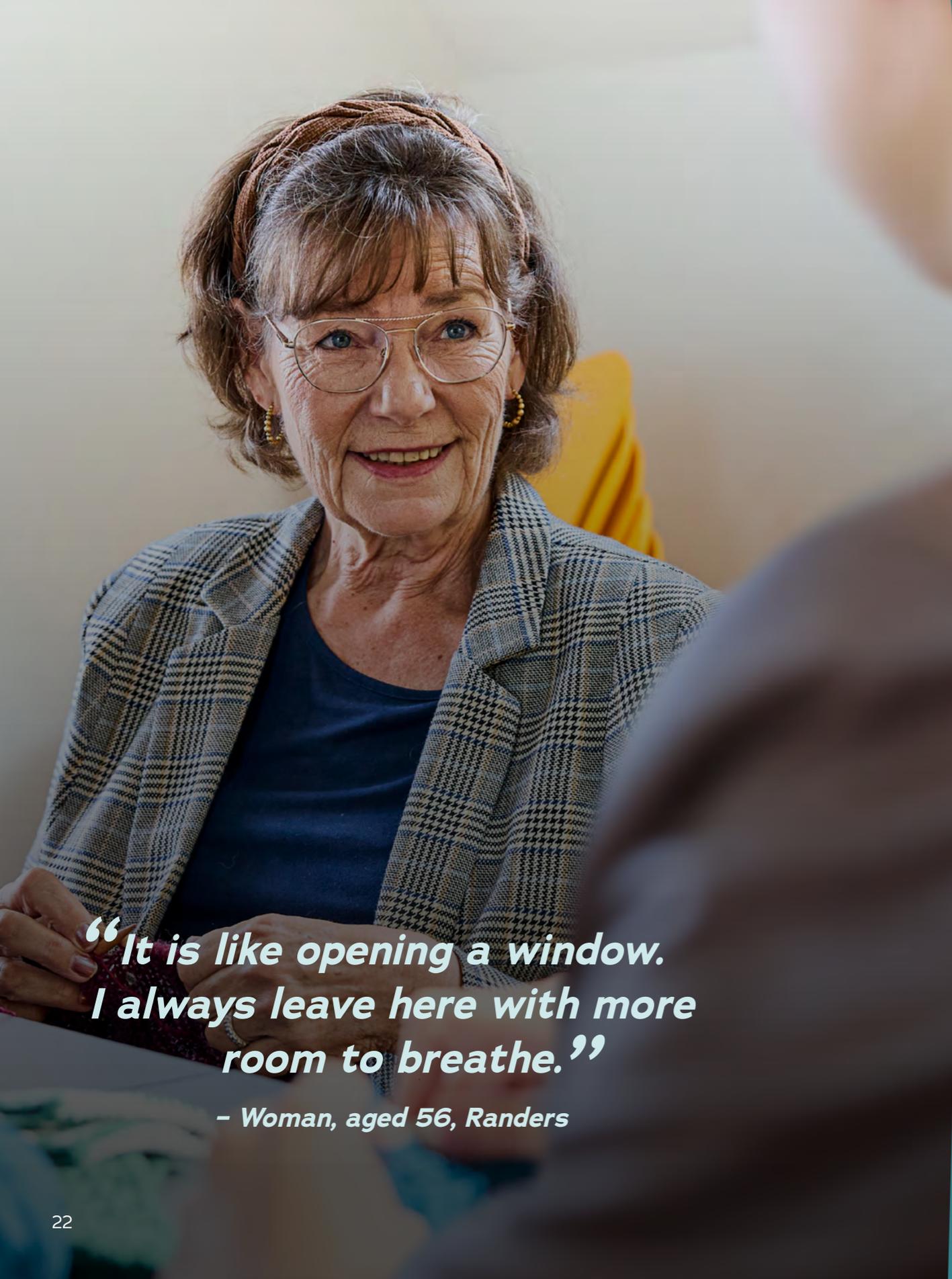
"*It is like opening a window. I always leave here with more room to breathe.*"

– Woman, aged 56, Randers

THEME 3: LOWKEY SOCIAL RESONANCE – COMMUNITY WITHOUT PRESSURE

The library offers a micro-social community that is completely different from that offered by clubs, events or cafes. Patrons can be:

- **Alone, but not lonely**
- **Together, without the need for performance**
- **In contact, without being exhausted**

Library-hosted events intensify this social resonance.

"I arrive by myself, but I leave with a sense of belonging."

Woman, aged 52, Viborg

> **"***It is the only place where I can both think, feel and laugh at the same time.***"**
>
> **– Woman, aged 47, Holstebro**

THEME 4: STAFF AS A WARM AND POSITIVE REGULATING INFLUENCE

Across all interviews, staff is described as:

- **Polite**
- **Present**
- **Factually competent**
- **Non-judgmental**
- **Warm and caring**

The staff is the most consistently positive factor in all qualitative statements. It is this that makes it possible for the patrons to:

- **Dare to ask questions**
- **Feel accepted**
- **Experience belonging**
- **Grow**
- **Feel acknowledged**

The ability of the staff to create emotional safety corresponds to what modern psychological theory calls positive regulating social contact.

THEME 5: THE LIBRARY AS AN IDENTITY- AND INTEREST-BOLSTERING SPACE

Patrons experience the library as a place where they:

- **Explore interests**
- **Discover new sides to themselves**
- **Experiment with new ways of being present in the world**
- **Experience "the flow of curiosity"**

This can also be understood through the theory of needs, particularly through the satisfaction of the needs for:

- **Autonomy**
- **Competence**
- **Social community**
- **Personal growth through learning and creativity**

The library offers an opportunity for well-being both through voluntary immersion and through informal communities of learning.

"Even the light and the smell have an effect. It's like the body knows that it's in a good place."

— Woman, aged 58, Viborg
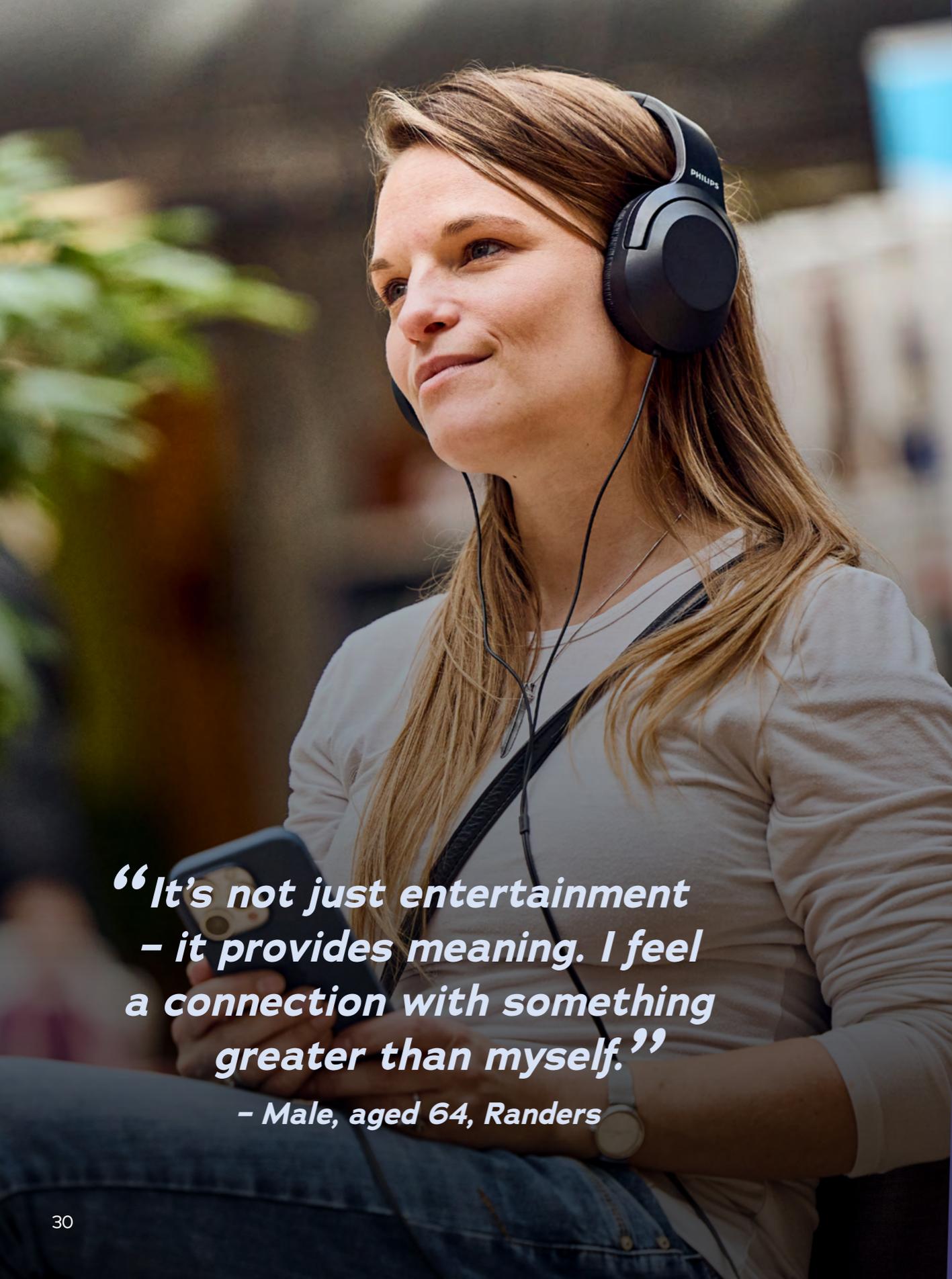
> **"It's not just entertainment – it provides meaning. I feel a connection with something greater than myself."**
>
> **– Male, aged 64, Randers**

THEME 6: HOSTED EVENTS AS INSPIRING MICRO-CATALYSTS

Hosted events serve as micro-catalysts for:

- **New perspectives**
- **Energy**
- **Personal opinions**
- **Creativity**
- **Engagement**

They are frequently described as a "small nudge" a "leg up" or a "spark". Even brief events can serve as micro-interventions for well-being.

THEME 7: LOW PRESSURE, HIGH VALUE

A striking finding of the interviews is how frequently patrons bring up the notion that "something gains importance exactly because of a lack of pre-requisites". The library offers a particularly rare combination of:

- **High well-being value**
- **Low mental load**
- **High reward**
- **Free access**

A space where you can be entirely yourself, without pre-requisites of competence, status or social performance.

"There's a special value to the fact that I can be here without having to account for myself. It's a place where you can just be."

– Male, aged 63, Randers

CONCLUSION: THE LIBRARY AS MODERN INFRASTRUCTURE OF WELL-BEING

Libraries today serve as low-intensity, high-value spaces promoting well-being, where patrons experience calm, safety, inspiration, belonging, meaning and personal development. This entirely absent of pressure of purchase, performance or social barriers. Libraries thus serve to promote well-being as institutions in a stressful daily life.

The library is a cultural counterweight to the pace and pressure of daily life. A place where patrons can self-regulate, grow and feel at home. A library isn't just a place where you check out a book, it is a place where patrons find well-being, meaning, community and a chance for personal growth. The quantitative data of this study clearly shows an expierience of high and consistent quality, while the qualitative data shows a deep human importance. Based on the project "libraries promote well-being" it thus becomes evident that Danish libraries are a vital part of modern well-being infrastructure, both on an individual and a communal level. They create opportunities for well-being that are hard to find elsewhere.

- Quiet in a loud world
- Community without demands for pre-requisites
- Inspiration without pressure to perform
- Learning without grades
- Meeting people without transactions
- Access to culture without financial barriers
- Warmth and recognition in a time of social insecurity

The study shows that the library in its current incarnation doesn't just fit the classical purpose of providing knowledge, education and accessible culture. It also serves as a psychological safe space that frequently functions as an emotional and cognitive regulating factor for patrons. In a culture defined by acceleration, disruption, information overload and personal pressure to perform the library stands out as one of the few remaining spaces absent of stress factors and with a presence of warmth and opportunities for positive personal growth. It is evident that the library is one of the most stable and reliably inclusive and personal growth-promoting spaces in modern society. In conclusion, libraries promote well-being by combining:

PSYCHOLOGIAL SAFETY

INNER CALM AND IMMERSION

ACCESSIBLE LEARNING AND INSPIRATION

LOW-INTENSITY INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

WARM AND COMPETENT STAFF

SMALL EXPERIENCE WITH SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

FREEDOM AND VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: ROADS TO WELL-BEING

Differentiated environments

Create clearly marked zones combining calm, communal and experimental activities. This increases accessibility and attracts new patrons, especially those lacking other free communal spaces.

Low threshold activities

Develop short, non-demanding formats for quick positive experiences: micro-events, brief sensory breaks and pop-up communities. This is especially effective for vulnerable patrons who are nervous about participating.

Differentiated approach to communities

Make a distinction between close, interactive communities and broader, less committed gatherings, and choose the best approach for each type.

Establish alliances of well-being and partnerships

Strengthen cooperation with the health sector, volunteers and other providers of culture. This increases range, creates broad-spectrum initiatives of well-being and reduces the strain on internal resources.

Listen audibly to patrons

Remain open and curious and adjust formats and praxis based on feedback from patrons. Expand patron participation as this creates insight and ownership and makes the patrons ambassadors for the library.

Make the library a space for learning, mastery and development of competence

Make a priority of AI, digital security, creativity, source criticism and joy of reading as psychological support structures. This increases quality of life and education across all age brackets.

Flexible presence

Expand opening hours and use mobile solutions: Pop-ups, library buses and partnerships with local hubs. Everyday visibility increases relevance.

A clear profile of well-being

Advertise the library as a safe space, a platform of community and an engine of learning. This strengthens identity and legitimacy and draws in additional patrons.

Retain existing qualities

Expand on local qualities and staff competence that already produces significant well-being. This is the forundation on which everything else rests.

❝ You're reminded that there's still curiosity in the world. That ideas spread. ❞

– Man, 43 aged, Randers

Establish a language of well-being

Create a joint understanding of the concept of well-being across professional and administrative practices. This makes it easier to cooperate and document target efforts at promoting well-being.

Improve evaluation and meta-learning in libraries

This study has shown that libraries contain a large amount of tacit knowledge, stored in hyperlocal networks. Create procedures for the externalization of this silent knowledge.

Initiate a conversation about library competences for 2026 and onwards

Examine which professional skills and competences are required to honor the level of trust and expectations patrons show towards library staff. Map out and strengthen the competences required to future-proof the profession and meet the expectations of the library in modern society.

Measure library value in new ways

Expand targets and goals as traditional KPI fail to capture the value of well-being that this study clearly proves the library creates. Measure and make this uncountable value visible.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITS

Strengths

The study clearly shows that public libraries serve as a central, and often underestimated infrastructure of well-being. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data documents four consistent effects: Mental calm, social belonging, meaningful participation and personal mastery. These effects are consistent across patron groupings, and particularly present with patrons lacking other safe and inclusive spaces.

The study further highlights that libraries deliver these effects with a very high cost-benefit ratio, without stigmatizing and with a high degree of organizational stability. The data also indicates that these effects are dependent on professional praxis: Clear communication, active use of zoning, flexible activities and strong partnerships. When these are all present, the promotion of well-being becomes both powerful and reliable.

Limits and reservations

The study is based on voluntary participation from library patrons, which can skew the representation. The study design is not experimental, so we can only observe systemic connections. We cannot draw conclusions about causality. All data is self-reported. Local differences between libraries reduce levels of direct transferability.

The study primarily measures short-term effects and thus cannot be used to draw conclusions on long-term and societal financial gains. These limitations do not alter the value of the results, but provide a necessary framework for professional assessment.

"*It feels a bit like going on a journey, without having to travel.*"
– Woman, aged 39, Viborg

INSPIRATION FOR FURTHER READING

The library as a promoter of well-being:

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" I came because the topic sounded interesting – but I left knowing I could still learn new things. "

– Woman, aged 72, Viborg