



PART

Revitalize Yourself

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CHAPTER 1

The Problem

Why Nonprofit Professionals Burn Out



He's saying "Grant... deadline... on Thursday."

WHEN WORK AND LIFE COLLIDE

Why does something extreme have to happen before nonprofit leaders change and start to take self-care seriously?

That was the question one nonprofit executive asked after a discussion about nonprofits, self-care practices, and well-being in the workplace during the Alliance for Nonprofit Management Conference in 2015. Someone shared the story of one nonprofit leader he knew who ignored the early warning signs of burnout, kept on going, and suffered an almost-fatal heart attack. That nonprofit leader was lucky. He left the hospital in a wheelchair not a hearse. He subsequently changed his attitude and behavior, prioritizing his well-being so he could continue to lead his organization's important work.

Sacrificing one's health in service of a cause is a common narrative in the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit consultant and blogger Joan Garry¹ spent eight years as a nonprofit executive director and worked herself and her staff hard. Like most nonprofit leaders, she was so driven by her organization's mission that every task took on urgency, and there was never any downtime.

While preparing for a board meeting, Garry's development director revealed that she was wearing a heart monitor due to stress. As the organization's leader, Garry admits that she should have told her development director to go home and rest, but instead she and everyone else kept prepping for the meeting. Looking back, Garry recognizes how toxic the combination of passion for one's work and Type A behavior can be.

Garry recently told this story to an executive director who quietly confessed that one of her staff members was currently on a heart monitor. Garry asked, "What are we doing to each other? How can we take care of others when we can't take care of ourselves?"

An organization's work may be mission-based, but its people are mission critical. The passion that social change activists feel for their work is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, that fervor helps them keep going in the face of difficult challenges, especially in the early stages of their careers. On the other hand, they can be so driven they don't stop to refuel or smell the proverbial roses or even notice they are experiencing symptoms of burnout.

Aisha Moore has worked for 15 years in social justice and health care fields. One day, when leaving the office for lunch, she began to feel dizzy and light-headed. The next thing she knew, she was being wheeled out of the office on a stretcher and taken to the hospital in an ambulance. After a battery of medical tests, Moore learned from her doctor that her symptoms were the result of chronic stress.

“Stress? But I love my work,” she told her doctor. Moore was so anxious at work that she did not even notice that stress was making her sick until she passed out. She recovered through a systematic program of self-care she created for herself. She then launched a wellness coaching practice to help other social changemakers avoid her mistakes.²

Cindy Leonard, who manages the consulting and technology programs at the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert Morris University, was driving home from work when her heart started to race. She thought she was having a heart attack, pulled over, and dialed 911 for help. The EMTs arrived on the scene and took her vitals. They determined she was having a panic attack, not a heart attack. Leonard learned that she was experiencing an early stage of burnout due to stress. She sought help and began practicing self-care techniques to improve her well-being.³

Laura Maloney, currently chief operating officer at Panthera, a global conservation organization, headed up animal rescue efforts at the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals during Hurricane Katrina. She remembers how the traumatic events affected her and her staff. Later, as the chief operating officer of The Humane Society of the United States, she oversaw the Animal Rescue Team. She noted that while staff at SPCA and The Humane Society are dedicated to their mission of saving animals from inhumane conditions, working long hours and witnessing horrible situations without any relief can be draining, even dangerous.

Maloney became a compassion fatigue educator to teach self-care practices to those in the field of animal protection who were showing early signs of burning out. Maloney recalls an exercise she facilitated at an organization where she invited staff to add ideas and suggestions to a bulletin board on self-care.

“Someone suggested that once a month, staff leave the office an hour early and do something fun as a group,” she says, adding that next to the suggestion, someone else wrote, “But the animals don’t leave their cages at 4 P.M. How can we take a break?”

These stories, and many more like them, illustrate how good people working in the nonprofit sector view self-care: as something that gets in the way of their work serving an important cause. Self-care is seen as a guilty pleasure, a one-time or once-in-a-while feel-good luxury instead of an individual and organizational necessity. It’s time to change the status quo.

Scarcity of Self-Care

In the face of the challenging work that nonprofits tackle every day, leaders and staff need to be unapologetic about self-care. Nonprofit staff and leaders are often driven to do more with less and to keep going no matter what. But what they need to remember is by practicing self-care, they are not only taking care of themselves but also taking care of the organization's mission and all of its stakeholders.

Michelle Gislason, MA, is a senior project director at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and well known for her leadership development and coaching work with nonprofit leaders. She often deals with leaders and organizations working to end domestic violence, work that puts nonprofit staff at risk of burnout because of potential secondary trauma. Gislason talks about radical self-care, channeling one of the leaders in the movement, Norma Wong, when she says, “We live in complex times. We need clarity of purpose and radical self-care to navigate. If our energy isn't swelling, how can we do the healing work that is needed? Lack of self-care is a form of repression. Radical self-care is an interruption of violence against ourselves.”

Aspen Baker, executive director of Exhale, talks about the need for nonprofit leaders, especially those who work in social justice movements, to be more disciplined about self-care—in service of both themselves and their organizations. She points out that it is critical to distinguish between the hard work that is needed for social change and the personal sacrifices that can trigger burnout.

Baker says she learned a hard lesson by not practicing self-care in a systematic way. Instead, she and others on her staff used self-care activities as a way to escape responsibility. As a result, her organization established a nasty cycle of burnout and recovery with individuals on staff taking care of either themselves or the organization, but never both at the same time. In other words, the staff pitted their personal needs against the needs of the organization. Here's Baker's story:

As a team, we took responsibility to redefine the meaning of “self-care.” From then on, the term signified the ways in which people cared for themselves and for Exhale. The change was a choice to honor the importance of our work and to sharpen the focus required to make a lasting social impact. Now, when I think of self-care, I don't think of just manicures and massages

or vacations and walks in the park. Self-care is not a simple feel-good activity. It's a much deeper and, ultimately, more meaningful tool. Self-care is a discipline that honors what is sacred, including the hard work that provides meaning in our lives.⁴

Baker's story demonstrates how her organization finally reframed self-care in a way that allowed staff to address personal and organizational needs simultaneously. Her story encapsulates the organizational version of self-care or "WE-care." But WE-care can't happen if all stakeholders aren't on board and engaged.

Lack of Belief, Lack of Buy-In

Nonprofit leaders, especially those who are involved in social change movements, are celebrated for giving up everything, even their health and well-being, for the cause. They work long hours, neglect their personal lives, ignore their physical and mental health, and even keep themselves from experiencing happiness and joy because of the emotionally tough work they're doing. Self-sacrifice becomes a cultural norm in organizations and movements. Leaders who give up their personal lives for the cause often evaluate staff members' value or commitment to the organization by how much they, too, deny themselves work-life separation and boundaries. These leaders perpetuate a culture that breeds a scarcity of self-care.

"I think we shouldn't be surprised by burnout in the sector," says Aria Finger, CEO at Do Something, a global organization for young people making social change. "I think it is something exacerbated by resource constraints. So when you add unbelievable passion to resource constraints, you get a situation where people are probably taking on more than they can and not caring for themselves appropriately."

What often happens to staff when carrying out the day-to-day tasks at a nonprofit—an environment with limited resources where they are often working with vulnerable clients—is that chronic stress gradually erodes their well-being, health, and relationships. In addition to an intimidating pile of work that nonprofit professionals undertake every day, there is a steady stream of clients whose lives often literally depend on the staff's efforts and the organization's programs. This kind of urgent dependency can contribute to a culture of scarcity and self-sacrifice.

“We are going to kill ourselves trying to change the world,” says Brian Reich, author, strategist, and director of The Hive, a special projects unit of USA for UNHCR. “That’s no good for anyone. Our work is hard, slow, messy, and stressful. We need to take care of ourselves if we expect to be successful. It’s that simple.”

Happy, Healthy Nonprofits are holistic entities. Your organization should examine and address stressors from all sources and set up internal programs and policies that prioritize and support self-care efforts on both individual and organizational levels. By attending to self-care in a holistic manner, your organization can go from contributing to burnout to alleviating it—or better yet, preventing it from happening in the first place.

WHAT IS BURNOUT, ANYWAY?

We keep talking about the importance of self-care for nonprofit professionals and WE-care for organizations to help reduce or prevent burnout, but what is burnout? Burnout can be defined as a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion that occurs when we feel overwhelmed by too many demands, too few resources, and too little recovery time. As stress builds up, our motivation wanes. Burnout is more than just feeling tired. Burnout saps our energy, breeds negativity, reduces productivity, and can lead to feeling hopeless and even resentful.

In a blog post⁵ on Idealist Careers, former Young Nonprofit Professionals Network Triangle North Carolina board member Mike Belmares shared this recipe for burnout—or what not to do—in the nonprofit sector:

- ☞ Say “yes” to everything.
- ☞ Don’t have a hobby.
- ☞ Spread yourself thin.
- ☞ Do everything yourself.
- ☞ Eat, sleep, and drink your job.
- ☞ Success = staying super busy.
- ☞ Complain lots.
- ☞ Don’t take vacations or personal days.
- ☞ Don’t take care of yourself.
- ☞ Work only on tasks that you don’t care about.

We know Belmares is being sarcastic, but he is making a powerful point. You can make good choices or bad choices in how you live and work. You can practice good habits or bad habits. Burnout doesn't happen in a day. Burnout sneaks up on you, seeping into your life little by little, making it hard to recognize and easy to ignore. If undetected and untreated, burnout can lead to an extreme situation where you are no longer able to function effectively on a personal or professional level. If you are able to read this book, you still have time to make better choices and changes in your habits and how you work to minimize your stress and avoid burnout altogether.

Kimberley MacKenzie, CFRE, a fundraising and management consultant and editor at Hilborn Charity eNEWS, recalls a time when she worked for a nonprofit where she was passionately committed despite recognizing its toxic environment. Believing in the organization's mission, she just kept working harder and harder and longer and longer, ignoring her health and personal life. Then she had a rude awakening:

While my hair dresser was shampooing my hair one day, she told me that my hair was coming out in giant clumps and to go see a doctor. I responded, "Really?" When we have that daily stress in our lives, we can't feel what it is doing to our bodies until one day your hair is falling out, and it is too late.

In the 2014 Work Stress Survey from the American Psychological Association, 8 in 10 people reported being stressed out by work. Forty-two percent of adults surveyed also said their stress levels increased over the past five years. The stress that leads to burnout in an individual can also be contagious in a workplace culture. According to Sigal Barsade, a professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, "One of the things that is so insidious about [stress] being contagious is that people almost never know it is going on. When they catch the emotion from the other person, they own it, and they really think they are stressed."⁶

Catching stress or carrying it can be bad for your health and the health of your organization. Chronic stress takes a toll on our physical health, our relationships, and our overall well-being. Over time, stress can lead directly to burnout.

The Stages of Burnout

Over the past several decades, researchers have identified and articulated distinct stages of burnout. German-born American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger⁷ is credited with coining the term “burnout” in 1980 and listing 12 phases of burnout including neglecting one’s own needs and denial of emerging problems. In 1981, Robert L. Veninga and James P. Spradley reduced the stages to five: (1) honeymoon, (2) fuel shortage, (3) chronic symptoms, (4) crises, and (5) hitting the wall.⁸ We’ve reworked the stages of stress based on nonprofit conditions and experiences.

The Four Steps to Nonprofit Burnout

Step 1: Passion Driven

At this early stage, you’re running on a passionate belief in the cause and your organization’s mission. You’re ready to tackle any obstacle and believe you can get the work done. You’re idealistic, energized, and hopeful.

Step 2: Passion Waning

The reality of limited resources and limiting thinking within your organization is wearing on you. You’re doing the job of several people because your organization is understaffed. You wear your late nights and unpaid overtime as a badge of honor. You use sleepless nights to get done what you haven’t been able to do during the day.

Step 3: Passion Challenged

You’ve had no relief from the stress of your work. You still believe in your organization’s mission but are often too exhausted to work effectively. Your passion is in jeopardy because you have no energy to sustain it. You’re making mistakes, missing deadlines, or submitting subpar work. Most likely, nobody else is noticing that you’re suffering because everyone is in the same condition.

Step 4: Passion Depleted

You’ve lost your drive and are ready to walk away from your organization and the cause you so passionately believed in before. Every aspect of your being is suffering—your body, your mind, even your spirit. Your stress may be showing up as a short temper, anxiety and panic attacks, insomnia, or chronic illness. You don’t want to admit it, but you just don’t care anymore.

Not everyone gets to the last phase of burnout or even beyond that phase which is a crisis, for example, a heart attack, stroke, or mental

breakdown. Some people recognize early warning signs of burnout and understand how to manage their stress and recharge their body, mind, and spirit, including using some of the techniques we describe later in this book. Which person are you?

Symptoms of Burnout

Before you think burnout comes out of nowhere, understand that burnout does give some early physical and mental warning signs even if you don't understand them or take them seriously. If you have a checklist of what to look for and can recognize it, you can do something about it before it takes its toll and moves from chronic to crisis. Psychologist Christina Maslach developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory⁹ (MBI), the most widely used method of measuring burnout that examines three scales:

1. Emotional exhaustion: how overextended individuals feel from their work
2. Depersonalization: cynicism and detachment, not caring
3. Personal accomplishment: how competent and successful individuals feel in their work

Following is a breakdown of symptoms of burnout as compiled by Dr. Sherrie Bourg Carter, author of *High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout*. These telltale symptoms are some of the things Aisha Moore, Laura Maloney, Cindy Leonard, Aspen Baker, and countless other nonprofit leaders have experienced:¹⁰

| Physical/Emotional Exhaustion | Signs of Cynicism/Detachment |
|--|--|
| Fatigue | Loss of enjoyment |
| Insomnia | Pessimism |
| Forgetfulness/impaired concentration and attention | Isolation |
| Physical symptoms | Detachment |
| Increased illness | Signs of Ineffectiveness and Lack of Accomplishment |
| Loss of appetite | Feelings of apathy and hopelessness |
| Anxiety | Increased irritability |
| Depression | Lack of productivity and poor performance |
| Anger | |

The first step to avoiding burnout is to recognize when you are on the path toward it before stress-related symptoms get out of control. Do you recognize any of the symptoms above? If you do, we urge you to take those signs seriously, drop this book, and make an appointment with your doctor *right now*. In Chapter 3, we will take you through assessments so you can better identify your burnout symptoms and start making changes in your mind-set, habits, and lifestyle.

CAUSES OF BURNOUT

There are many reasons why people who work for nonprofits struggle with burnout and often experience something extreme before they change their behavior. Much has to do with strongly ingrained mind-sets that have become cultural norms in workplaces throughout the nonprofit sector that reinforce unhappy and unhealthy ways of working. Let's examine these attitudes, conditions, and trends in more detail.

Societal and Generational Attitudes

The American work ethic goes something like this: "Work long hours, and you will be rewarded." We can trace this attitude back to the Protestant work ethic, the old Calvinist idea that being a hard worker meant that you'd be preselected for Heaven. To reach "social change heaven," nonprofits need a different approach—one that prioritizes self-care as part of "doing the right thing" and not just performing a lot of tasks and perpetuating habits of continuous work without relief.

Arianna Huffington, founder of the *Huffington Post* and author of the books *Thrive* and *Sleep Revolution*, offers some insights about our culture of overwork that leads to burnout.¹¹ She points out that professional success and a successful life are not one and the same. Defining success in terms of your work is limited and flawed. She emphasizes that we are more than our jobs and warns us against confusing quality versus quantity of work or buying into the myth that overwork is the secret sauce for professional achievement.

"Our world is full of the casualties of this confusion," says Huffington. "Hypersuccessful people are depressed, addicted, or suffering from stress-related diseases."

From a generational standpoint, while different generations may share work values, Baby Boomers, people born between 1946 and 1964, don't share the same views of work-life balance as Generation Xers, or Gen Xers, born between 1965 and 1983. According to a 2009 report put out by Fairfield University,¹² Boomers surveyed believed that “hard work and effort would lead to success,” and they were “willing to work long hours to obtain rewards.” Gen Xers, however, tend to “work to live” versus “live to work” as Boomers do. They place “a lesser emphasis on work as an important part of their lives,” giving rise to their nickname, “The Slacker Generation.” According to a 2014 report,¹³ Millennials (or Gen Y) “strive for work-life balance, but this tends to mean ‘work-me balance,’ not ‘work-family balance.’ They want time for themselves and space for their own self-expression.”

Maddie Grant, coauthor of *When Millennials Take Over: Preparing for the Ridiculously Optimistic Future of Business*, discovered through research for her book that Millennials are initially attracted to working at nonprofits because of the organization's values and mission. However, they care deeply about work-life balance. Grant says Millennials look at a work-life balance spectrum—education, work, and fun in the space of one day—compared to older generations that spread out their lives in terms of education, work, retire, then have fun. Grant says this means that Millennials want well-being baked into the workplace to support the way they practice work-life balance, and if it is missing, they will work elsewhere.

According to a report by the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (YNPN), *Stepping Up or Stepping Out: A Report on the Readiness of Next Generation Nonprofit Leaders*, more than 90 percent of leaders surveyed reported burnout as the main reason for leaving the sector and 69 percent pointed to job-related stress. These young leaders are not enthusiastic about taking on the role of executive director in a nonprofit organization, expressing concerns because of the high levels of stress and long hours.

As one young leader interviewed for the study said, “It's very important for me to be able to have a happy, healthy, and fulfilling personal life in addition to my career. The climate I have observed in many nonprofits does not support this. [There is an expectation] that leaders, especially EDs, will take on challenging, stressful schedules with relatively low pay because they believe in ‘the cause.’”

Nonprofit Sector Mind-Sets

We've touched on some societal and generational mind-sets regarding work, success, and work-life balance, all of which can factor in to why one nonprofit professional might burn out and another might not. Regardless of one's generation, there are mind-sets that could affect them that are firmly entrenched in the nonprofit sector in general. The following are a few of them.

The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle

One common nonprofit mind-set is the “Nonprofit Starvation Cycle”¹⁴ that makes nonprofits so hungry for adequate infrastructure that they can barely function as organizations—let alone serve others or deliver programs. The vicious cycle begins with funders' unrealistic expectations about how much money running a nonprofit takes and results in nonprofits misrepresenting their costs while skimping on vital systems.

Many nonprofits look at workplace wellness and well-being programs from a lens of doing without. Says Mark Horvath, founder of Invisible People, who worked on the frontlines at a homeless shelter in Los Angeles:

The tech start-up community has learned that employee benefits such as gym memberships or being allowed free time to work on your own projects help increase employee productivity and wellness. There is zero funding for employee wellness in the nonprofit sector. Funders could change that by adding a percentage of grants that have to go to making workplace environments better and thus increasing the outcomes of their grant funding. Nonprofits have to rely on unrestricted funds to do anything for employees. Those funds are precious and used for the gaps restricted funding doesn't cover.

Clayton Lord, vice president of Local Arts Advancement at Americans for the Arts, says that low wages and high workloads combined with personal passion and strong belief in the mission create the perfect storm to burn people out. He calls this an “alternative currency of personal passion.”

“This sets up a bad dynamic when it comes to self-care. At best, it means that staff aren't asking for the conditions and compensation they

deserve, and at worst, it morphs into a sort of martyrdom in which we compensate for our lack of money, time, support, and work-life balance by working so hard for so little,” says Lord.

Many nonprofits settle into a “low pay, make do, and do without”¹⁵ culture, according to the *Nonprofit Overhead Cost Study*. Every aspect of an organization feels the pinch of this culture that manifests in a number of ways including personal financial strain, not enough staff or systems in place, and lack of investment in professional and leadership development. Self-care measures are not even considered for implementation because they are perceived as unaffordable luxuries. A culture dominated by “do without” thinking accelerates staff burnout, and the cycle continues.

Funder-Driven Stress

According to an article in *The Foundation Review* titled “Talent Philanthropy: Investing in Nonprofit People to Advance Nonprofit Performance,” the lack of foundation funding for nonprofit talent infrastructure results in the social sector suffering from “poor recruitment, retention, and retirement, which could in turn be causing serious damage to performance and sustainability.”¹⁶ Ira Hirschfield, president of the Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund, puts it this way:

Foundations ask a great deal of the organizations we support—to strengthen community, meet urgent needs for services, solve complex environmental problems, influence public policy, and build and sustain movements for change. . . . So it’s striking how seldom we back that up with funds to help organizations develop and strengthen the ability of their leaders to meet those high expectations.¹⁷

Marissa M. Tirona, director of Blue Shield Against Violence, leads the foundation’s programmatic and grant-making efforts to address, prevent, and ultimately end domestic violence. She observed that when a nonprofit and its leader do not have a total clarity of purpose, they are unable to say no to funding that is outside of the scope of their mission and lack the ability to implement. This creates unmanageable workloads on top of already stressful work that leads to overworking and helps perpetuate the scarcity of self-care. Says Tirona, “Organizations need to operate from a position of strength.”¹⁸

At the highest level, funders can be catalysts for positive change by recognizing, acknowledging, and addressing problems that create unnecessary organizational stress. They can also identify stress factors in the sector which, left unchecked, could wreak havoc on organizations and social change movements. Funders can actively resource solutions to address problems before they lead to burnout. While funders should not be the only group identifying problems that should be addressed within the sector or within organizations, they are often the only ones with sufficient resources to put toward solving problems that are identified.

Scarcity Mind-Set

The scarcity mind-set is related to the Nonprofit Starvation Cycle. A scarcity mind-set is defined as the belief that everything is limited. The scarcity assumption is based on the thinking that *there's not enough of what our nonprofit needs to go around, and there's more out there that our organization needs, but we don't have it.*

Here is how the scarcity mind-set plays out in many nonprofit organizations and demotes the pressing need for self-care:

There's not enough time to get everything done with limited staff, so staff needs to work long hours and sacrifice self-care to get results.

When we function under a scarcity mind-set, we perceive, manage, and deal with problems differently and often poorly. Using self-care techniques, mindfulness practices, and attention to organizational well-being, you can shift thinking from scarcity to abundance.

Myth of Being Indispensable

In the study, “The Voices of Nonprofit Talent,” nonprofit employees were characterized as being “known for their dedication to their jobs, devotion to their organization’s missions, and passion for their careers.”¹⁹ According to the study, 84 percent of jobseekers didn’t look at nonprofit work as solely a way to make a living but as a part of their identities. Social change activists can be committed to their work with such intensity, but this absorption by one’s job can stand in the way of practicing self-care and result in burnout.

The correlation between work and one’s identity without boundaries is what Vu Le, executive director of Rainier Valley Corps and author of the *Nonprofit with Balls* blog, calls “The Myth of Indispensability.” Le

suggests that nonprofit workers are so busy dealing with pressing work, where often lives literally depend on what they do, that they begin to feel indispensable and that their organization will collapse if they are not working long hours with no time off. When nonprofit professionals buy into that myth, their personal lives and well-being suffers.

Le relates a story on his blog about a colleague and mentor of his who called him for some advice:

Her mother was showing signs of health problems. “Should I take a break from work and move down to take care of her?” she asked. I thought of the importance of my friend’s work and her integrity in always getting things done. And then I thought of my mother and the things I wish I had done, the words I could have said, the time I could have spent.

Le said that the very fact his friend had to think twice about choosing between work and family was a sign of attitudes in the nonprofit sector and the dedication of nonprofit professionals. Not all types of dedication are healthy.

Lack of Leadership Development

In 2013, the Meyer Foundation²⁰ surveyed nearly 100 executive directors of nonprofit organizations to learn how it could best support them. Executive directors mentioned challenges that affected their effectiveness including when working with boards, fundraising, and managing personnel. The survey showed that most executive directors saw strong links between their professional leadership development opportunities as well as personal well-being (physical and mental health, and work-life balance) and organizational effectiveness.

The nonprofit sector has historically underinvested in leadership development. According to a report from Foundation Center, the nonprofit sector spent \$400 million on leadership development in 2011, but that translated to only 0.03 percent of the sector’s \$1.5 trillion total annual spending. To drill down further, the nonprofit sector spent \$29 per person on leadership development compared with \$120 in the private sector. Foundation funding was also a factor, with only 1 percent going each year to leadership development initiatives for their grantee organizations over a 20-year period.²¹

The report also quotes a 2013 study, “Shaping the Future,” stating that 32 percent of nonprofit leaders identified balancing personal life and work as a skill they needed to develop. While nonprofits may have work-life policies in place such as comp time, those policies are not being implemented. The report suggests that nonprofit boards should hire “people-focused leaders” and establish “guiding principles and policies for a supportive work environment.”

Many nonprofit leaders sacrifice so much of their personal lives and make themselves sick in service of their communities. Nonprofit leaders often give up quality time with their families and friends, avoid the relief of downtime, and neglect their professional and personal development. Organizations need to implement leadership development programs that educate, encourage, and fund their leaders to incorporate self-care and mindfulness techniques for themselves so they can model happier and healthier behavior to their staff. Leaders should be rewarded with sabbaticals before they burn out, not as crisis triage after burnout occurs.

Developing more people-focused leaders can help transform toxic nonprofit cultures and greatly reduce organization-wide passion fatigue and burnout. When nonprofit leaders take time for leadership development and sabbatical programs to replenish their own energy, they come back refreshed and that benefits the organization.²²

THE STRESS OF WORK

There are many reasons why stress can stem from your work. In an article on the Mayo Clinic website titled “Job Burnout: How to Spot It and Take Action,” a number of factors that lead to job burnout were listed, any of which could adversely affect your health and well-being:

- ☛ Lack of control
- ☛ Unclear job expectations
- ☛ Dysfunctional workplace dynamics
- ☛ Mismatch in values
- ☛ Poor job fit
- ☛ Extremes of activity
- ☛ Lack of social support
- ☛ Work-life imbalance

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) report, *Stress in the Workplace*, a survey of 1,546 working adults found that 44 percent felt their stress levels have increased over the past five years.²³ More than a third said they felt tense or stressed out during their workday. Many cited low salaries, lack of opportunities for advancement, heavy workloads, unrealistic job expectations, and long hours as factors that increased stress.

Stressful Overwork

Long hours at work have been directly tied to health problems in workers. Researchers quoted in the article “The Impact of Overtime and Long Work Hours on Occupational Injuries and Illnesses,” published in *Occupational and Environment Medicine* stated, “studies have associated overtime and extended work schedules with an increased risk of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, fatigue, stress, depression, musculoskeletal disorders, chronic infections, diabetes, general health complaints,” leading to death.²⁴ Believe it or not, Japan has a term for the effects of this type of work: *karōshi* or “death by overwork.” If that isn’t a reason not to work overtime and long hours, we don’t know what is!

Research about working long hours suggests overwork does not help us be more productive. In a study of consultants by Erin Reid, a professor at Boston University’s Questrom School of Business, managers could not tell the difference between employees who actually worked 80 hours a week and those who pretended to.²⁵ Reid did not find that the employees who pretended to work accomplished less or that the overworking employees accomplished more. In fact, establishing required time off for employees can increase a team’s productivity.

Josh Bennett, growth manager at ActionSprout, worked at a large corporation on an internal study of employee burnout doing interviews and running surveys and then slicing data. According to Bennett, burnout occurs when an employee or volunteer has reached the limit of his or her physical and/or emotional strength. Often people associate this with stress and long hours, tight deadlines, and so on, but such things are often symptoms of a deeper organizational dysfunction.

“It is easy to focus on these problems and overlook the role of the manager or supervisor on the atmosphere, clarity of expectations and organization of workflows, and respect for personal time and space.

Inexperienced management and unclear expectations are often the most damaging. As it turns out, the two are not mutually exclusive, and in many cases, one begets the other,” says Bennett. With respect to personal time and space, employees or volunteers are often more than happy to work the long hours for and with people they trust, says Bennett.

“Trust is a completely different discussion that touches on transparency, team dynamics, and so much more. The manager and organization need to be aware of the physical and emotional state of the team and when the employee or volunteer has gone home or is on vacation, or even just stepping out of the office for a walk, they must be left alone—barring any emergencies. The manager and the team should ask themselves, before picking up the phone or texting the person, ‘Can it wait?’ More often than not, it can,” Bennett explains.

Bennett warns against managers seeing employees or volunteers as tools or as a means to an end rather than as people. Managers should focus on the progress made and things learned rather than strictly on the results of the task. Even though the bottom line for nonprofits is their mission and not their financial performance, overwork does affect an organization’s budget with higher health insurance costs and higher employee turnover.²⁶ As we mentioned before, research shows that when staff members log long hours, specifically more than 40 hours a week, it actually costs the organization more because they are less productive.²⁷ With all of this evidence of the negative results of working long hours, it doesn’t make any sense that any organization still allows—even encourages, rewards, or at the very least turns a blind eye to—staff who put in long hours.

Stressful Work

The way nonprofit professionals work or overwork can cause stress, but in some cases, stress can manifest in an organization due to the nature of the work itself. When left unchecked, these unavoidable stressors can result in compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress (STS). SaraKay Smullens defines compassion fatigue in her book, *Burnout and Self-Care in Social Work*, as “the overall experience of emotional and physical fatigue that social service professionals experience due to chronic use of empathy when working with clients who are suffering in some way.”

STS is common among nurses and urgent care professionals, relief workers in war-torn regions, and workers dealing with other emotionally charged situations such as the Syrian Refugee crisis. In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released “Staff Well-Being and Mental Health in UNHCR Survey,”²⁸ the first-ever comprehensive research on the UNHCR staff’s mental health. The survey found that the risk for secondary traumatic stress was identified in 38 percent of the respondents who worked directly with clients.

The symptoms of STS or compassion fatigue are similar to the burnout symptoms we discussed earlier. Invisible People’s Horvath²⁹ shared this story:

While temping at a shelter front desk answering phones one day, I was getting emotionally burnt saying “no” far more than I was saying “yes.” I remember turning away a mother with five children. It messed me up and got me thinking about the emotional stress frontline workers go through on a daily basis.

When you compound stressful work with bad habits like sleep deprivation, no exercise, poor nutrition, toxic relationships, and the inability to set boundaries, you create a recipe for something to go terribly wrong. Even when you can’t change the nature of stressful work, you can strengthen yourself to resist compassion fatigue and other more serious physical and mental effects of stress and burnout.

Physical Work Environments

Walk into any nonprofit workplace and what do you see? Like most office settings, you see desks and chairs—lots of chairs. You can practically feel the malaise and energy drain when you are in an office filled with people sitting—sitting at their desks all day long, sitting in meetings in the conference room, sitting on their breaks. In most offices, people sit more than they stand, stretch, or walk. Scientists in Australia published an article in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* that stated, on average, people sit for 9.3 hours a day compared to 7.7 hours a day of sleeping.³⁰

Dr. James A. Levine, obesity researcher at the Mayo Clinic and author of the book *Get Up: Why Your Chair Is Killing You and What You Can Do About It*, explains that our bodies were not designed for sitting, but over the past 200 years, there has been a slow and insidious shift

in our workplaces. The Industrial Revolution of the early 1800s led to building of factories followed by the Second Industrial or Technological Revolution that led to the ability to construct office buildings to accommodate the growing population of office workers. The office chair—a public health enemy—became a staple of the office environment and began to contribute to a more sedentary culture. Sitting became an indicator of productivity in an office. If you were not sitting at your desk all day long, you were not working. Walking around equaled goofing off.

Sitting is now so embedded in our work-obsessed culture that we don't even question why we do it. And, because everyone in the office is doing it, we experience a subtle peer pressure to sit still. As Nilofer Merchant points out in her popular Ted Talk, "sitting is the smoking of our generation."³¹

Scientific and medical communities agree that there are serious health risks to a sedentary work style. If you are sitting throughout the day, you are not burning calories. Obesity can be the consequence and that can lead to diabetes, high cholesterol, swollen ankles, and many other physical problems. The health burden of sitting also affects your mind. Sitting makes you "stale," according to Levine, and that can have a direct impact on your desire to do good things in the world. Levine invented the treadmill desk to try to address the issue of sitting too much. Later in this book, we will share tips and stories from nonprofits that have busted the culture of sitting and made movement a part of work and integrated self-care.

Technology Ubiquity

Our "always on" digital lifestyle challenges our ability to find solitude or to contemplate quietly. We have all become such experts at being hyperconnected, always in touch and informed, that we have forgotten how to embrace time away from digital devices, screens, and electronic communications. This lack of stillness time can accelerate the symptoms of burnout. We need to practice self-care around our use of technology and strive for tech wellness.

You know the scenario. A nonprofit executive director sends out an e-mail during the weekend to staff asking for a work task to be done, and the expectation is that the staff will not only check their e-mail over the weekend but also do the work. Or perhaps a nonprofit staff person is

on vacation but still checks work e-mail or social media. Mobile devices provide us with instant connection and constant distraction. Our continuous use of these devices blurs the line between work and downtime.

While technology is not completely to blame for burning us out, the fact that we are so readily connected to our work through our mobile devices can lead to the overworking we've already described. Stewart Friedman, Wharton practice professor of management and director of the Wharton Work/Life Integration Project, says, "If you look at the span of the last 50 years, we know people are working more, that more of their waking attention is devoted to work and work-related decisions, and it's a challenge because the ubiquity of technology has enabled 24/7 communication."³² Friedman goes on to say that most of us didn't grow up with the tech tools of today. We haven't established boundaries between work and other parts of our lives caused by this new connectivity. Monitoring and controlling the impacts of using our connected devices on our lives are new skills we need to acquire.

Pew Research Center conducted a survey on mobile device usage in 2015.³³ The report actually stated that people "often treat [their mobile devices] like body appendages." Ninety-four percent of smartphone owners said they carry their phone with them frequently, and 82 percent said they never or rarely turn their phones off. Having a mobile phone in your pocket during your downtime makes checking or reading work e-mail only one tap away, a distracting temptation during your time away from work.

Brandon T. McDaniel, a doctoral candidate in human development and family studies at Penn State, coined the term *technoference*³⁴ to express the interference from technology on couples' relationships. We believe technoference is present in all of our interactions with others, whether the person we're with is half-listening to us during a conversation because of a smartphone notification or we're the ones stealing a peek at our own devices.

Being able to unplug and disconnect can lead to improved relationships with others as well as less physical and emotional stress, better sleep, increased focus and memory, and increased workplace productivity. Digital health both in the workplace and at home is integral to self-care activities, but often tech wellness is left out of wellness and well-being conversations and programs. We cover tech wellness practices later in this book.

Information Overload

We often hear complaints from nonprofit professionals about being “content fried.”³⁵ We all have so much content in our professional lives, and it comes rushing at us from our e-mail inboxes and social networks through our mobile devices, compounding the deluge of work-related information we already get through paper and snail mail. We scan, we browse, and we try to thoughtfully read the best information and carry out online conversations all day long and into the night.

Having to process so much information on a daily basis can lead to difficulty concentrating, shortened attention spans, or feeling overwhelmed, all symptoms of burnout. “Attention span” is the amount of time we concentrate on a task without becoming distracted. Most educators and psychologists agree that the ability to focus attention on a task is crucial for the achievement of one’s goals. According to the Statistic Brain website’s list of attention span statistics, in 2000, humans had a 12-second attention span; in 2013, it was down to 8 seconds.³⁶ To put our attention span deficit into context, a goldfish has an attention span of 9 seconds! It’s no surprise our attention spans have been decreasing over the past decade with the increase of social media, mobile phones, and the flood of online information.

The common act of checking your e-mail has a physical affect on your body, creating a flight or fight response—what writer Linda Stone calls “e-mail apnea.” Next time you check your e-mail—and don’t do that before you finish reading this chapter—notice if you are intermittently holding your breath. You may be depriving your body and brain of a steady stream of oxygen and putting yourself on a roller coaster of physiological changes resulting in stress.

Stone also came up with the term *continuous partial attention*³⁷, or CPA, to explain the process of trying to pay attention to a number of sources of incoming information at the same time but at a superficial level. If you are toggling in short bursts between trying to accomplish a task that requires concentration and checking your e-mail or social networks, you are doing yourself and your organization a disservice.

Training your attention and engaging in more mindful consumption of information online are essential nonprofit self-care skills. Later in this book, we tell you how to use brain science to reduce information overload as well as share mindfulness techniques to help you develop better focus habits and avoid being like a goldfish with ADHD!

MOVING OUT OF BURNOUT

Contrary to a lot of things we've shared with you in this chapter, your situation is not all doom and gloom. You can positively affect your work and life when you make a conscious commitment to, and form an intentional practice of, self-care. Your goal is not to simply start scheduling isolated activities for yourself like taking a spa day or getting a massage. Your goal should be to make happy and healthy an overall framework for your life and work. Your self-care must be inseparable from your personal passion for social change as well as be an integral part of your organization's strategy and values.

Are you ready to move from a chronic state of stress to a chronic state of self-care? Are you ready to become happy and healthy? Read on!

