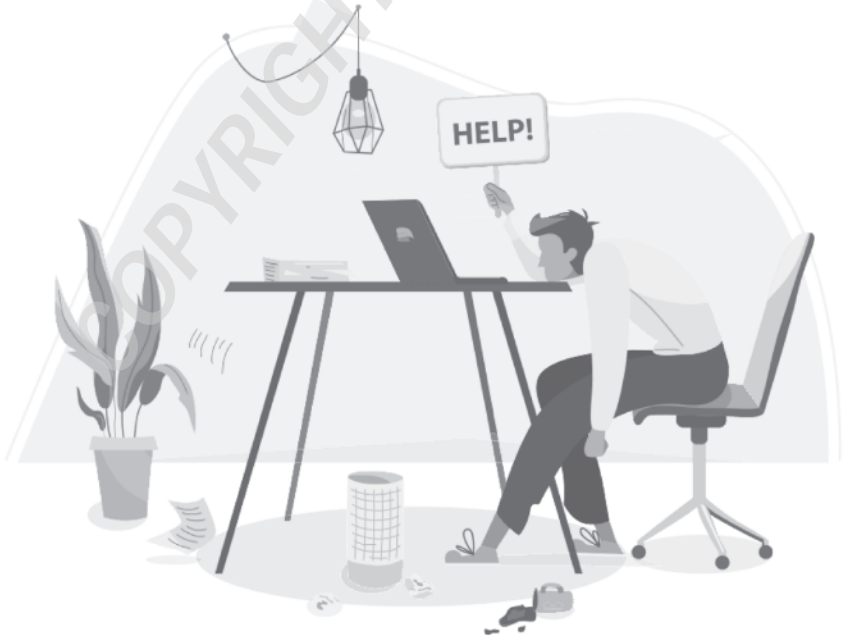


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## The Constant Crazienss of Nonprofit Life



HOW ON EDGE are we from the 24/7 nature of nonprofit life?

How real is the constant craziness in nonprofits?

At large universities, hospital systems, internationally focused nonprofits, and small local organizations, we hear edginess from everyone we interview. Consider your daily interactions. What do you hear when you ask a colleague how they are? What do they answer?

Crazy.

Crazy busy.

Crazy has become normal. Flat out. Running. Insane. These are the answers we hear every day.

Crazy can feel good. A pioneer of mindfulness-based stress reduction recognized the thrill of craziness of modern life. Jon Kabat-Zinn used the phrase “full catastrophe living” from *Zorba the Greek* to describe the all-in, all-out nature of a meaningful life. When you are doing important work, you want in on the action. A top annual giving leader we know is like an Energizer® bunny, always revving up her team. A volunteer fundraiser on a small neighborhood youth organization inspires her fellow Board members with her energy every day. This energy fuels meaning, buoyed by cause-related work.

Mindfulness, though, makes the cost of craziness evident. The inspired team leader runs into slower-moving parts of the organization. “Why can’t they move faster? Why don’t they care? They just don’t get it!” Hard-charging volunteers love the action, until they encounter an underresourced staff member just trying to keep the lights on. “Why can’t we get going around here?!” We hear the same frustration from individuals trying to get to their priorities. One day they are checking things off the list, feeling good, and the next day the list is 10 times longer. All that running and yet they now feel further behind. These frustrations then intersect with the nonprofit industry’s well-documented difficulties with staff retention and pretty soon crazy busy becomes burned out.

## Slowing Down Is Not the Answer

The answer to constant craziness is not to slow down. Why would you want to slow down on things that really matter? Your mission deserves and demands urgency. Slowing down is a passion-killer. Slowing down

supports the dark-but-sometimes-accurate meme that life is simply repeating “next week things will slow down” every week until you die.

The instinct to slow down is not misplaced, however. Because when busyness slips into overload, burnout is around the corner. Having juggled for too long, we become even more worried that balls will start dropping, and those balls will be the priority ones. If the image of juggling is not anxiety-inducing enough, some nonprofit professionals describe their lives as a house of cards. One bump and it all tumbles. And, of course, there is multi-tasking. Multi-tasking is perhaps the most common dilemma of the modern era. Over time the busyness and multi-tasking leads too many to describe the hassles of nonprofit life—the many irritations of volunteer and team meetings—as “death by a thousand cuts.”

Though this may sound bleak, there are alternatives.

In their *Harvard Business Review* article “Stress Can Be a Good Thing If You Know How to Use It,” Alia and Thomas Crum draw on their research to explain that acknowledging and understanding stress is essential to avoid being trapped in it. To enjoy work amidst constant crazyiness is to understand it, and use it. We need to acknowledge mental load.

Thankfully there is growing awareness of mental load. Mental load came to the forefront in 2017 from the feminist cartoon *Emma*. In the cartoon it points out that the majority of a couple or family’s mental load often rests with a woman. Who thinks of the medical forms for the kids? Who plans the meals? Who remembers the family commitments? The burden of mental load is not the task itself. It is one thing to take a kid to the doctor because you are asked to do so, it is another thing to schedule the appointment, remember the prep work, get the forms together, write out a list, and ask your spouse to go. Going to the doctor is the task, the planning and remembering is the mental load. And many of us are overloaded by it.

Without acknowledging mental load, the tendency is to strive harder to slow down. Common recommendations are exercise, relaxation, productivity trainings, and so on. All of these can reduce stress and alleviate mental load. However, what if slowing down is not an option you have? What if you do not have the time to exercise? What if sleep does not come easily to you? What if you are a parent,

primary caretaker, *and* full-time fundraiser? What if there is a new deadline for a grant proposal that represents 10% of your organization's budget? The mental load from these realities cannot simply be wished away.

To enjoy work amid constant craziness means learning new ways to handle mental load, not necessarily slowing down. What we have discovered in our research and our experience is that there are ways to *think* differently that reduce mental load and uplift energy. Over the past three years we have been conducting interviews, testing techniques, and researching the heavy workload and mental load that affect nonprofit professionals across the country. To share what we have learned from working with wonderful professionals at Yale and hundreds of other nonprofit institutions, we landed on *Focused Fundraising*. Our aim is to help you overcome overload and focus without forcing it.