

Sustaining the Mission: Preventing Burnout in Nonprofit Work

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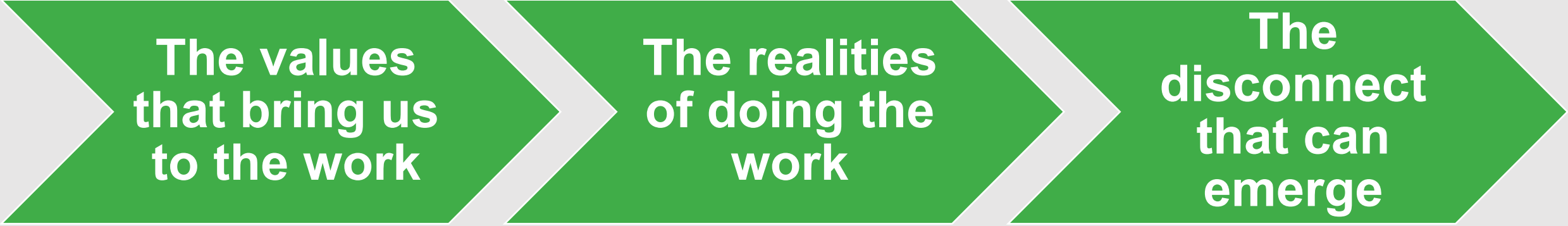


What Brought You To Non-Profit Work?

help empathy
growth heart service equity
mission-driven giving collaboration
advocacy purpose fulfillment progress
shared-values community altruism solutions
connections impact meaningful-change
social-justice compassion passion
activism leadership



When Purpose Becomes Pressure



**The values
that bring us
to the work**

**The realities
of doing the
work**

**The
disconnect
that can
emerge**



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76% of surveyed nonprofit leaders indicate burnout impacting their organization's ability to achieve its mission: Center for Effective Philanthropy, "State of Nonprofits 2024"

“Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- Reduced professional efficacy.”



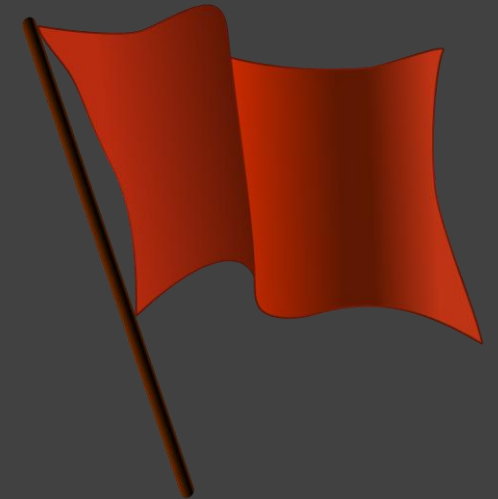
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For many nonprofit professionals, burnout is not simply feeling tired or having too much on their plate. It can involve a painful disconnect between why they do the work and what it feels like to do the work every day.

Have you ever...

- Felt overwhelmed by your workload - multiple days or weeks in a row?
- Felt disconnected from your co-workers or the mission of your organization?
- Felt undervalued or overlooked by leadership?
- Felt pessimistic or cynical about your work?



“You are not too broken to be healed. You are just exhausted from trying to fix yourself in environments that keep wounding you.”

- Jay Jay Douglas



The Warning Signs



Area	Potential signs
Emotional and cognitive	Irritability, dread, difficulty concentrating, feeling ineffective, increased cynicism
Physical and behavioral	Persistent fatigue, disrupted sleep, working longer hours, withdrawing from others, difficulty recovering
Connection to the work	Losing a sense of purpose, feeling numb toward situations that once mattered, questioning one's impact, feeling resentful about responsibilities

What We Tell Ourselves

**I'm not overwhelmed
because I can't handle it.
I'm overwhelmed
because I do handle it.
ALL THE TIME.**

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When Values Don't Align

- An organization values dignity and respect, but employees feel their concerns are routinely dismissed.
- An organization promotes wellness, but workloads make it difficult to take breaks or use leave.
- An organization values collaboration, but staff compete for scarce resources and support.
- An organization advocates for people in crisis, but employees feel they have no support when they themselves are struggling.



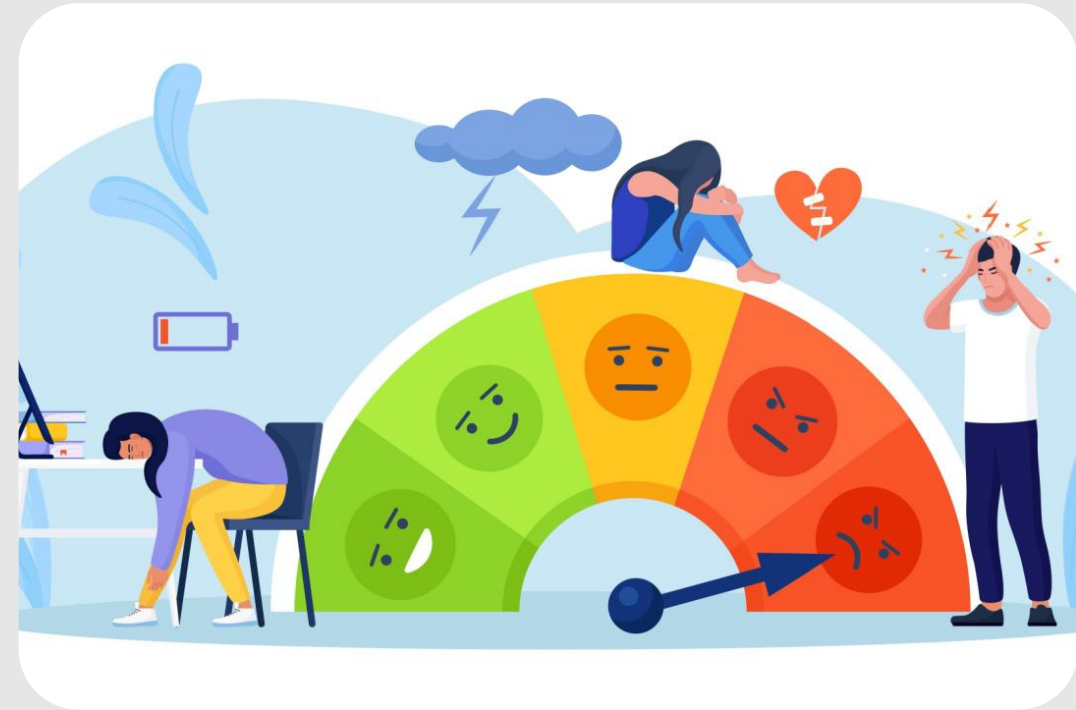
Burnout is Not Always Visible

- You can meet deadlines while struggling
- High performers may take more on to compensate for team shortages
- Team may accept “overworked and underpaid” nature of nonprofit work
- Dedication, long hours, availability can be mistaken for engagement



Different Stages, Different Needs

- 1) Desired Level of High Achievement
- 2) Neglect
- 3) Denial
- 4) Withdrawal
- 5) Emptiness and Depersonalization
- 6) Depression and Numbness
- 7) Exhaustion and Collapse



Individual Strategies

- Pause and check in
- Name the stressor
- Set and communicate boundaries
- Seek connection and support
- Contribute to a healthy work environment
- Give yourself grace (and credit!)
- Define your personal mission/purpose



Organizational Strategies

- Invest in Mental Health Literacy
- Leadership Training & Support
- Check in on more than performance
- Foster Psychological Safety
- Policy & Procedure Audit
- Fair recognition practices
- Realistic staffing & workload expectations



Evaluate The Employee Experience

- Can employees say they are overwhelmed without fear of being judged?
- Do we respond to workload concerns by reviewing priorities, or by asking people to work harder?
- Are breaks and leave genuinely supported, or merely permitted in policy?
- Do we recognize when our most dedicated employees are taking on too much?
- Do our internal practices reflect the same respect, dignity, and care we want to extend to the people we serve?



Sustaining the Mission = Sustaining the People

- Burnout is not a failure of commitment. It can emerge when chronic demands exceed the resources and support available to meet them.
- Nonprofit professionals may experience a distinctive strain when their daily work conflicts with the values and purpose that brought them to the field.
- Prevention, coping, and recovery require individual strategies, but those strategies are most effective when supported by healthy working conditions.
- Organizations that want to sustain their mission must pay attention to the well-being of the people responsible for carrying it forward.



Takeaways

For myself: One sign I want to pay closer attention to is...

For my work: One change that would help me maintain a healthier relationship with the mission is...

For my organization: One practice or expectation we should strengthen or reconsider is...



Good people are
like candles.
They burn themselves
up to give others
light.

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Questions?
Comments?
Thoughts?
Concerns?
Let's discuss!



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