



# STOP THE BURNOUT

## 20 Tips to Help You Fundraise for the Long Haul

By Manish Vaidya

“My previous patterns were to give my total self (150%) all the time, no matter what. ... I spent six months working with my doctor to figure out what was wrong with me. We did every test he could make sense to do. Finally, he looked at me one day and said something like, ‘Perhaps you’re simply exhausted.’”

–Jennifer Pelton, *Public Justice Center*

“In our experience, while resources are a real problem, the deeper problem is a culture within social justice movements (and the larger culture) that puts everything else ahead of sustaining the people doing the work.”

–Holly Fincke, *Windcall Institute*

**SOUND FAMILIAR?** Anecdotal evidence suggests that burnout is very common in our field.

Fundraisers, the grassroots organizations we work for, and the social justice movements we’re a part of can’t be truly sustainable unless we’re financially, physically, and

emotionally sustainable. When we’re out of balance in taking care of ourselves and each other in these ways, we contradict the other goals of our social justice work. According to the Spirit in Motion project of the Movement Strategy Center, “Burnout is ... about not having the other supports in place for us to work in healthy and sustainable ways.”

In our March/April issue, Jennifer Pelton’s article, “A Healthy Workplace + Positive Fundraising Culture = Retention of Fundraising Staff,” reminded us of some of the structural supports that help keep a fundraiser in the job: passionate involvement in the cause, reasonable expectations for the work, participation of program staff in fundraising, and the chance for the fundraising staff person to grow in her job.

In this issue, we feature self-care and sustainability because, in this economic moment, the need for fundraisers to take care of ourselves is getting lost as organizations operate in 24/7 crisis mode. This is a counterintuitive way to address the need to build a movement that can thrive for the long haul.

## Burnout is a Real Problem

Burnout is a problem for most people working in nonprofits, particularly small nonprofits. It is a particular challenge for fundraisers because of the special stresses of raising money. We are often expected to raise the entire budget of an organization by ourselves, with little to no training, support, or infrastructure for fundraising. Our work often goes unrecognized by co-workers, who may see it as a necessary evil but not as the “real work” of the organization. Boards and executive directors often don’t understand that

or what comes next (Do you take a job at another organization? Change your career? Retire?)

- Getting lost in the work and not making enough time to have fun
- Trying to cope with the trauma, violence and other suffering that we, and the people our organizations serve, face every day.

Kim Fellner, former head of the National Organizers Alliance (NOA), writes about a phenomenon that GIFT often sees in *Hearts on Fire: How Do We Keep Them from Burning*

## “ALL THE FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES IN THE WORLD WON’T HELP IF YOU’RE TOO TIRED TO IMPLEMENT THEM.”

it is everyone’s job to help raise the funds to keep the group’s programs going. Moreover, fundraisers have to challenge deeply entrenched fears (their own and those of board members and staff) of asking for money. In the off-chance that we are able to accomplish everything on our massive to-do lists, we are rewarded with...more work.

With the current economic turmoil and its financial and emotional toll on the people our groups serve (and on us), our high-stress jobs are going to get even harder. We’ll have to raise much more money than we did before, which causes some of us to work well past quitting time and drives others to quit our jobs.

In a desire to learn how activists can sustain themselves, the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights (UAF) interviewed more than a hundred activists from around the world, resulting in the publication, *What’s the Point of Revolution If We Can’t Dance?* UAF writes, “During the interviews, activists were clear that they didn’t see that how what they felt about themselves—how exhaustion, or sadness, or worry about making ends meet—how they keep themselves safe—had anything to do with their ‘real’ work. For them, it was completely separate.”

Many of the themes that appeared in UAF’s report are the same ones that we have heard fundraisers express:

- “The endless cycle and stress of fundraising”
- Trying to earn a living and still do the work you love
- Working without rest or break as work “seeps into every aspect of your life”
- Feeling that whatever you do is never enough
- Having difficult, unaddressed power dynamics in your relationships with co-workers
- Not knowing how long you’ll be at your current job

*Out?* Often, she says, “staffers of color are promoted without training or support and then held accountable for failing to meet unrealistic organizational expectations. Not surprisingly, women of color experience burnout disproportionately. Mid-career women of color are in high demand on the job market, but are frequently burning out from being over-displayed and under-valued, without enough colleague-ship, support and/or real power to define organizational agendas.”

Many of us are “accidental fundraisers”—we took on fundraising roles because of our passion for the mission of our organizations. Having passion for the work is a key requirement for being a good fundraiser. But following passion without stopping to make space for rest and reflection is a dangerous path that can lead to burnout.

Please use these tips to take care of yourself, because all the fundraising strategies in the world won’t help if you’re too tired to implement them.

## How to Begin

Addressing burnout has to be seen as a necessity on an organizational level. But there are things you can do to support yourself as a fundraiser even if your organization is not supportive yet. Susan Wells, author of *Changing Course: Windcall and the Art of Renewal* and co-founder of the Windcall Residency Program for long-time activists, writes, “To prevent burnout, identify the things in your life that relax, nurture, and refresh you: things as small as doing crossword puzzles or listening to music, or as large as spending regular periods of time in nature. Write them down. Keep them in your routine and do not let them be eroded or replaced by a growing workload....The trick is to identify the activities that are your particular counter-weights to the pressure of work,

understand their importance, and keep them in your life.”

Another key is to start small and stay focused on your sustainability goals. It takes some work to re-wire our minds to slow down and relax. Commit to making one or more changes for 40 days and see how it goes. Don't try to change everything at once—that will only generate a different kind of burnout!

### ***For Yourself:***

Here are a few ideas to get you started. For more tips and tools, go to our website: [www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive](http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive)

1. Every time you think of a task, write it down. Keeping such a list can ease your mind that you might be forgetting something. Keeping all tasks on a central list will cut both mind and organizational clutter and free you up to concentrate on the task at hand.
2. Say no. The more you practice saying no, the easier it will be to respond realistically when someone asks you to take on more work than you can manage.
3. Make an agreement with yourself—and stick to it—about what time you'll stop working each day (including checking work-related e-mail from home).
4. Work a maximum of 8 hours per day and 40 hours per week to give you time to cultivate real relationships with people outside of your paid work (and to honor the laborers who came before us who fought and died for these rights).
5. Fundraising consultant Kim Klein suggests that fundraisers keep their daily plans at half as much time as they'll be at work, because things come up (phone calls, e-mails, trying to fix the broken printer, etc.). So, if you work 8 hours a day at your organization, only schedule 4 hours of work per day. These 4 hours should include 30 to 45 minutes of thinking, planning, and filing per day.
6. Eat a social lunch every once in a while. Don't make a habit of working through lunch and eating at your desk—you're robbing yourself of the break that your mind and body need.
7. Build a support network for yourself. Meet regularly with other fundraisers to share frustrations, challenges, successes, and tips. Some fundraisers have established monthly lunchtime skill-sharing discussions with their peers; others meet for a regular happy hour at a local bar or a walk after work. Jennifer Pelton set up two “balance buddy” relationships—one with a colleague and the other with a close friend. “We check in with each other often, reminding ourselves and the other to keep a balanced perspective.”
8. Spend time outdoors. Take a brief walk twice a day. If

## **SELF-CARE AND SUSTAINABILITY RESOURCES:**

### **Capacitar International**

<http://www.capacitar.org/>

### **Center for Contemplative Mind in Society**

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/>

### **Seasons Fund for Social Transformation**

<http://seasonsfund.org/index.html>

### **Spirit In Motion program of Movement Strategy Center**

<http://www.movementstrategy.org>

### **stone circles**

<http://www.stonecircles.org>

### **The Center for Nonviolent Communication**

<http://www.cnvc.org/>

### **Windcall Institute**

<http://commoncounsel.org/Windcall%20Institute>

More resources at [www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive](http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive)

you're used to being in front of a computer, this switch will get some fresh air into your lungs, sun on your skin, and rest for your eyes. Outside of work hours, suggests Claudia Horwitz of stone circles, an activist retreat center, “Find some way to connect with the rhythms of the natural world....This might mean a real attention to the changing of seasons, planting a small garden or finding new open green space.”

### ***For Your Organization:***

Again, find more tools and tips for supporting your organization at [www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive](http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive).

1. Challenge your organization to truly integrate fundraising into the rest of the work. Work with allies in your organization—perhaps an organizer/program coordinator or a new board member—to build this culture of fundraising. To start building that team, try a tip from Sabba Syal, graduate of GIFT's fundraising internship program, “Do team-building events, games, or a lunch-in with co-workers.”
2. Build a strong volunteer fundraising team, thank them often, and commit to giving them increasing levels of responsibility. The camaraderie will be enjoyable, and sharing the work will reduce your stress.
3. Make sure prospective board members know what the fundraising expectations are and give them training and support to fulfill them. This means no more luring prospective board members with the promise of free pizza!
4. During meetings, include space for people to share appreciations for work that their colleagues are doing.

In addition, make a bulletin board or poster displaying accomplishments, adding to it throughout the year. You can include personal as well as work-related congratulations: “Natalia called 5 donors this week!” honors their work, while “Chauniqua ran a marathon!” helps co-workers support each other’s lives outside of work.

- Practice active listening and non-violent communication skills. So many organizational tensions occur from miscommunication. Invest time and energy into learning these skills.

**“JUST GETTING SOME REGULAR CONVERSATION GOING ABOUT THIS TOPIC MAKES IT LEGITIMATE AND NORMAL, WHICH IS A FIRST STEP TO MAKING LASTING CHANGES AT YOUR ORGANIZATION.”**

- Insist on a detailed fundraising planning and evaluation process every year and before and after each major fundraising activity. Then you can use what works, not just what’s always been done. Claudia Horwitz notes, “Make sure your fundraising strategies—at least some of them—match up with who you are....Are you doing anything you don’t really believe in, or worse, that feels like a contradiction of your value system? This can take a big toll over time.”
- Make sure your fundraising calendar gives you a break between heavy fundraising activities. Don’t schedule a major special event to occur right after a hectic fall fundraising season. Holly Fincke of Windcall suggests, “Ask yourself, ‘What can a body and a brain sustain?’”
- Advocate for healthy policies and practices at your organization. NOA’s guide, *Practicing What We Preach*, lists some best practices, including comp time, vacation time, staff development and training, healthcare, parental leave, a pension plan and salary structure, among others. There are some cost-effective options even for organizations with very lean budgets.
- Ask others at your organization what sustains them. Just getting some regular conversation going about this topic makes it legitimate and normal, which is a first step to making lasting change at your organization.

**For the Movement:**

- Work in coalition with other groups. Movements for social justice are so much bigger than any one organization. Our field is notorious for competition, which runs counter to progressive goals. Work towards putting turf wars aside and get to know others who care about the issues you’re

passionate about and those who care about issues that you might be passionate about if you made space to learn more about them.

- Let go of the little things and focus on the big picture. Although our fundraising must be driven by a belief in the mission of our organization, working against injustice is bigger than any one group. If another organization can serve our constituencies better than ours can, or if our organizations shut down due to a lack of funding or for other reasons, it won’t be the end of the world. Let’s do the

best we can with the strategies and organizations that we have. If they don’t work, let’s try more sustainable ones.

- Challenge the status quo with institutional funders. Many fundraisers say that their biggest stressor is the number of hoops they have to jump through to get and comply with grants from government and foundations. They mention that funders are fickle, that grants come with many strings that discourage the use of innovative long-term strategies, that funders’ policies fuel competition among organizations, and that groups that are honest about their challenges risk losing grants because funders favor things they view as short-term successes.

We need to work with foundations to expand their understanding of the funding we need for our work. And we need to fight for tax policies that not only stop favoring the rich but that redistribute wealth fairly and that make tax funds available for social justice and social change work. Foundation and government money is our money; it was created from the labor of working people. Let’s work together to encourage an increase in the percentage of funds foundations pay out to social justice groups. Let’s push for an end to unfair tax policies that make the rich even richer. Let’s organize our communities to take larger, sustained action to demand that the government stop cutting basic services to our communities.

These are not unreasonable demands—they are strategies for survival. ■

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Manish Vaidya is program & development coordinator for GIFT. Read in-depth interviews with Claudia Horwitz and Jennifer Pelton and share your self-care tips at [www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive](http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org/thrive). Thanks to Sabba Syal for research assistance with this article.