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## 10 Ways to Definitely Burn Out as a Nonprofit Employee



As a nonprofit employee, feelings of impending burnout are probably as familiar to you as the trenta coffee you throw back each morning like it's going out of style.

Add the impacts of a global pandemic to the mix and you've got a recipe for disaster.

Faced with limited budgets, small staff teams and often stagnant salaries, nonprofit employees [face unique challenges](#) when it comes to finding (and maintaining) work-life balance and avoiding burnout.

With COVID-19 putting even greater pressure on already stretched resources, you might be feeling just about ready to run for the hills.

You probably already know the [signs of burnout](#), and you may even have read a few [articles](#) sharing tips and tricks for avoiding it.

But if you're tired of hearing about what you should do to prevent burnout, keep reading for our best advice on what to do if you definitely want to burn out as a nonprofit employee.

### 1. Never Take a Vacation. Ever.

Just because [psychologists](#) say vacations are important to reducing stress and improving overall well-being, it doesn't mean taking one is necessary – right?

Wrong. By giving us much-needed space and time away from the pressures of work, [vacations](#) can reduce our risk of heart disease and other chronic illnesses, improve our mental health and strengthen our relationships with family and friends.

They've also been proven to – you got it – reduce feelings of burnout.

So if you're really intent on burning out at work, don't take a vacation. Ever.

### 2. Never Mind Vacations. Never Even Take a Break.

When's the last time you gave yourself permission to take a break?

Taking breaks during the day can work wonders for reducing stress, gaining perspective and feeling more in control of your time. But actually stepping away from your ever-growing workload for even a few minutes can seem next to impossible at times.

Sadly, you're not alone. [A recent survey](#) found that 20% of North American workers are concerned taking regular lunch breaks will make them seem less hardworking, and 38% of employees are not being encouraged by their managers to take breaks.

On the flip side, a whopping 90% of employees report that taking lunch breaks helps them feel refreshed and ready to take on the rest of their workday.

But it doesn't have to be all about lunch. Here are a few ideas for squeezing more breaks into your day:

- Whether you're in the office or [working from home](#), **schedule 20 minutes into your calendar each day**. Take that time to completely step away from your desk and even (gasp!) leave your phone behind. Go for a walk, grab a coffee, read a book or just stare out the window if that's your thing. That brief moment of respite each day will clear your mind and help you tackle the rest of your day feeling refreshed.
- If you're working from home while looking after your kids, or even attempting to homeschool them while working full-time, finding time for breaks can seem almost laughable. But it is possible! Find time to relax with your kids during the morning. Go for a quick walk or bike ride, have a picnic lunch or read a book together.
- Try a little [desk yoga](#) to unwind in the middle of your day. Or, if you're not comfortable getting zen at your desk, where you may be in full view of your colleagues, [check out these tips](#) for connecting with your inner yogi in the office restroom.

But anyway, if you are really intent on burning out, don't follow this advice.

### 3. Make "Yes" Your Favourite Word.

Nonprofit employees are [notoriously overworked](#). When you combine limited staff with big missions, long hours managing a seemingly endless stream of projects and demands can seem inevitable.

But there's something you can do about it. Just say no.

You're probably laughing a little maniacally right now. "No" is a word not often heard in the halls of nonprofit workplaces.

But regardless of your role at your organization, you have every right to let your manager know when you're at your limit and simply can't take on additional projects. [Check out this great resource](#) for tips on how to tell your boss you're at your max.

And if those projects simply must get done, there are people out there willing to help. But if you for sure want to burn out, definitely follow our next tip...

### 4. Never Outsource Anything.

Freelancers and consultants are a nonprofit's best friend. Not only are these individuals pros at what they do, outsourcing work to independent contractors can be highly cost effective for nonprofits running on shoestring budgets.

Here are a few examples of freelancers you could hire to help ease your workload and produce high-quality results:

- **Writers, editors and marketing professionals** who can help build your blog, write your annual report, bring your strategic plan to life, lead an ad campaign or manage your social media. The possibilities are endless.
- **Fundraising consultants** who can help you plan your entire pipeline or help manage a single major gift ask.
- **Project managers** who can help you navigate complex projects you just don't have the bandwidth for.

Try asking friends and colleagues for referrals or search on LinkedIn to start identifying freelancers able and willing to help you take on more while doing less.

### 5. Buy a Fancy Soap and Call It Self-Care.

Self-care is more than a buzzword.

In a world where we're working more hours than ever, technology is blurring the lines between our work and personal lives and commutes are getting ever-longer (COVID-19 commutes from bedroom to kitchen table notwithstanding), taking the time to develop sustainable self-care habits can mean the difference between putting your best self forward or running off into the sunset, screaming.

But practicing good self-care habits doesn't mean just buying a fancy soap and calling it a day. Here are a few of our favourite examples of solid and sustainable self-care routines:

- **Squeeze in just 10 or 15 minutes of yoga every morning (or most mornings)**. The benefits of yoga are [vast and well-documented](#), ranging from improved mental health to better sleep, not to mention increased strength and flexibility. And a [10-year study](#) found that just 12 minutes of yoga each day was enough to see improvements. Check out YouTube superstars [Sarah Beth Yoga](#) or [Yoga with Adriene](#) for great short yoga routines you can build into your daily self-care routine. If you're not into yoga, try another type of exercise you can do from home or even go for a quick walk before starting your day.
- **Get outdoors**. Make time every day to get outside for fresh air, even in bad weather. If you have a kid, bring them with you – they'll love splashing in puddles or playing in the snow. [Research shows](#) that being outdoors has wide-ranging mental and physical health benefits, and communing with nature – whether you live next to a national park or have a small urban green space close by – is both fun and free.
- **Make a point to schedule in social time**. Long hours at the office, often combined with a busy family life, can make socializing seem downright exhausting. But [science tells us](#) that spending time with friends is critical to our well-being. Setting up regular dates with your closest friends – even if you can only get together once every month or two – will give you something to look forward to and make you happier in the long run.

But you don't need to practice self-care, right? Nah, me neither.

### 6. Never Ask for or Expect a Raise.

As a nonprofit employee, you might feel that your relatively [low or stagnant salary](#) is just something you have to accept.

Even though your salary is making you feel underpaid and overworked – contributing to your pending burnout – you almost feel a bit guilty thinking about asking for a raise.

That's the wrong attitude. You deserve to make a liveable wage – one that at least keeps up with inflation and reflects your hard work, commitment and contributions.

If you haven't received a raise in a while – or ever – it may be time to have a conversation with your manager. [Check out these tips](#) for negotiating a raise at your nonprofit.

### 7. Make Your Colleagues Your Friends... Your Only Friends.

If you work so much that you wake up one day and realize your colleagues are your only friends, you've got a work-life balance issue.

It's not that it's bad to develop friendships with your colleagues; you do spend the majority of your waking hours with them, after all.

But if your social life is limited to your co-workers, work will always have a way of creeping into your conversations – leaving little opportunity to fully disengage and even [creating some awkward situations](#).

Getting close with your co-workers is also a sign that you're not making enough space for other people or interests in your life.

Take time to re-connect with friends from other parts of your life to get some much-needed perspective on what's happening outside of your work bubble and leave the water cooler chat behind for a little while.

### 8. Assume Chronic Exhaustion Is Normal.

Feeling tired for a day or two because of an early day, late night or busy schedule is normal. Feeling tired for weeks on end is not.

If you're struggling with chronic tiredness, you may be experiencing work-related fatigue – defined by the [Mayo Clinic](#) as "a nearly constant state of weariness that develops over time and reduces your energy, motivation and concentration."

If this is you, take a moment to acknowledge your current approach to work isn't, well, working for you anymore – and then take steps to re-balance and re-prioritize.

### 9. Be a Martyr for Your Cause.

Many nonprofit employees are willing to accept long hours and lower wages because they believe the cause they're working for is greater than their own personal well-being.

That may be admirable, but remember: you can't continue advancing your cause if you're out of commission.

Taking care of yourself will help you achieve more over a longer period of time. If you're worried that stepping away from your cause for even a moment will wreak havoc on your mission, [check out this article](#) from *The Atlantic* revealing that regular breaks and vacation days actually increase employee productivity.

Need more convincing? [Read this great piece](#) encouraging nonprofit employees to set an example for the rest of the organization by "cutting the workaholic martyr crap."

### 10. Never Tell Anyone How You're Feeling. Especially Not Your Manager.

When you're on the brink of burnout, the worst thing you can do is nothing at all.

Before things get too out of control – before you start to miss deadlines or develop [signs of serious mental health concerns](#) – speak with your manager about how you've been feeling.

Share the toll your workload is taking on your health and well-being and ask if he or she can help you re-prioritize your projects (see number three for tips on how to approach this conversation).

It's your manager's job to keep your best interests at heart and make sure you feel equipped to complete your work well and on time. You may be surprised to learn your boss had no idea you've been feeling stressed out and is eager to help you find some balance.

Megan Skyvington, Director of Philanthropy, Corporate Giving and Partnerships at Women's College Hospital Foundation in Toronto, says that managers have a responsibility to create environments in which staff members feel comfortable sharing their stress.

"As managers, we should be making it clear that we're all human, and we all experience a range of emotions at work – and that's okay," she says. "We know the to-do lists are long and the work can be hard. Diminishing how challenging the day-to-day experience can be for staff only breaks trust and forces unhealthy silences. Employees should be able to speak to their managers with confidence and feel supported when they do so."

If your manager is unwilling to help, well, that's a bad sign. In that case, consider whether any of your other colleagues could help you strategize a plan to better manage your workload, or talk to your HR representative if you have concerns about how your manager is responding (or not responding) to your challenges.

### But Seriously: Take Care of Yourself!

Nothing is more important than your mental health and well-being.

If you've tried (or, erm, not tried?) everything in this list and you're still feeling exhausted, anxious, irritable or even apathetic about your work – the classic signs of burnout – it may be time to consider a job change.

But if you're looking for more immediate mental health support, check out these resources.

If you're in the U.S., visit the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) website for a list of resources you can access right away, or text HOME to 741741 to connect with [Crisis Text Line's](#) counsellors.

If you're in Canada, visit [Wellness Together Canada](#) for free, 24/7 support for a range of mental health needs. [Kids Help Phone](#) also recently launched a dedicated texting service exclusively for adults; reach out to their volunteer Crisis Responders day or night by texting WELLNESS to 741741.

How are you working on preventing burnout during these challenging times? Let us know in the comments.

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