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It's stressful out there - Take care of yourself!

By: Jennifer Chandler

Last week I had the pleasure of listening to Beth Kanter and Aliza Sherman, co-authors of [*The Happy, Healthy Nonprofit*](#), address a room filled with nonprofit people who took time away from their work and the news cycle to discuss ways we can all continue to “do good” without burning ourselves out. Through Kanter and Sherman’s guidance you too will see how a culture of well-being is essential for sustainable organizations, and for there to be happy, healthy *communities* as envisioned by so many nonprofits’ missions. Kanter and Sherman use the phrase, “we-care” to expand self-care far beyond self to embrace the well-being of the very mission of a nonprofit. As it turns out, YOU and your self-care, as well as your team and its collective “we-care,” are key to your nonprofit’s sustainability. Sounds obvious and straightforward, right? Except it’s not.

Don’t tell me you haven’t used your keyboard as a lunch tray... Maybe you’ve even slept in your office (overnight, not as a scheduled nap), and I guarantee at some point you’ve worked 4 straight ninety-hour weeks with no weekends off because there is never enough time, or people, or funding, to “get it all done.” Gently but persuasively, with their solid science and sensitive anecdotes shared by the nonprofit professionals whose stories fill the book, Kanter and Sherman help us see

the noxious stress we are placing on ourselves, and those we work with, and how we are exposing our nonprofits and those it serves to similar risks.

Did you know that after working 50 hours a week [any hour after that is wasted](#)? Or that after 90 minutes of working our human [brains stop concentrating](#)? Or that when we get a solid [7-9 hours of sleep](#) we make better decisions? Of course you do – but you may not have connected the dots between aspiration, and actually making changes in your life. This is why the insights [The Happy, Healthy Nonprofit](#) offers, as well as the straightforward steps it describes, are so important and so needed.

Whenever priorities are swirling, we are losing focus, or our “in-box” is more important than getting some fresh air to our brain, the self-care habits that [The Happy, Healthy Nonprofit](#) champion will come in handy. Oh, and by the way, the fact that *you are too busy to read the book*, it is NOT an excuse. On the contrary, that means you actually are duty-bound to read this book and to consider how you are modeling leadership for newer colleagues who are just taking stock of the nonprofit workplace culture and their possibilities for work-life balance. The book is less than 200 pages, contains hilarious (and poignant) cartoons, includes lots of tips in the form of charts and checklists that serve as self-assessment tools, and personal stories that keep the focus on real-life challenges and practical next steps. The book’s [website](#) is rich in resources, including apps and printable assessments. The [Nonprofit Burnout Assessment](#) is not to be missed.

Some of the author’s tips are familiar (walk more!) and some are quite personal; some will show you how technology is both your friend and foe, and some will remind you that culture eats strategy for breakfast. *“A nonprofit’s culture is the sum of the collective mind-sets and behaviors of all its employees, even the board,”* remind the authors. Don’t forget that volunteer board members are no less susceptible to burn-out than strung out executive directors. So why not take the book’s message to your next board retreat? Strategies for setting the tone from the top – so that *everyone* recognizes his or her obligation and feels supported in a self-care practice - may be the most difficult, but also among the most important take-aways in the book.

With humility and humor the authors help us see the fallacy of common assumptions, such as the conclusion that a state-of-the-art and comfortable office space is suspect as wasteful, instead of a signal that the nonprofit values its people as important resources. Kanter and Sherman also gently remind us how our

electronic devices can both boost productivity and sink it, and point out all the extremely practical outcomes of a culture of well-being, from significant cost savings (fewer sick days and wellness discounts on group health insurance, less staff turnover, and a more productive workforce) to an expanded number of “true-believers” – current as well as alumni staff who will always be ambassadors and advocates for the mission. While it’s obvious that attracting and retaining talent rather than burn-and-churn is optimal, there is no question that changing a workplace culture from “we work HARD” to “we-care” will take intention, time, and leadership. *“If a leader is happy, the staff feels it. If a leader is stressed out, the staff feels it. Staff members not only feel what a leader is feeling, but internalize the attitude and pay it forward in their behavior, whether good or bad.”* (Kanter and Sherman quoting [Contagious Culture](#) by Anese Cavanaugh).

We should ALL heed the book’s clarion call to prioritize a sustainable future by listening to our bodies, examining our workplace culture, and putting in place simple, but serious, strategies that immediately – and ultimately – are a wise investment in our nonprofit’s mission.

As Vu Le writes in the forward to [The Happy, Healthy Nonprofit](#), *“It comes down to this: our work matters, but it is ongoing and we must sustain ourselves for the long run.”* The contribution to the nonprofit community that Kanter and Sherman make with their book is significant. Not only does the book provide clear justification, inspiration, and explanations to help each reader set his or her own course towards self-care, but the book makes the convincing case that every nonprofit has the organizational responsibility to intentionally acknowledge the critical role that self-care – and indeed we-care – plays in the nonprofit’s ability to be high-performing and sustain its results.

Practice Pointers

In [The Happy Healthy Nonprofit](#), the authors introduce us to the “five F’s” as a way to evaluate the culture of a nonprofit. Idea: Introduce these five factors in a team meeting and discuss how your nonprofit’s culture supports this vision of well-being, and what you can do to promote these five factors in the workplace. The same process can be adapted for a happy, healthy discussion at a board meeting about the culture of the board of directors.

- **Function** (Does the organization/board have what it needs to function?)

- **Feelings** (Do the nonprofit's staff/board members feel appreciated and respected?)
- **Friendship** (Do they feel connected to one another? part of a community?)
- **Forward** (Do staff and board members/volunteers have opportunities for growth and/or leadership paths?)
- **Fulfillment** (Does everyone feel inspired - working towards a higher purpose)?

For more practical ideas we encourage you to read [The Happy, Healthy Nonprofit: Strategies for Impact Without Burnout](#) and explore these resources below.

Resources

- [Apps for mindfulness and gratitude](#)
- [Apps for movement and walking](#)
- [Assessments and checklists](#) (Kanter and Sherman)
- [Contagious Culture: Show up, Set the Tone, and Intentionally Create an Organization that Thrives](#) (Anese Cavanaugh)
- [Happy Brain Science blog](#) + [Get your happiness score](#) (Scott Crabtree)
- [The Way We're Working Isn't Working: The Four Forgotten Needs that Energize Great Performance](#) (Tony Schwartz)
- [Strategies for Changing your Organization's Culture](#) (Bridgespan)