

STRATEGIES FOR IMPACT WITHOUT BURNOUT

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THE  
**HAPPY,**  
**HEALTHY**  
NONPROFIT



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WILEY

"The Happy Healthy Nonprofit is an essential guide for leaders and organizations looking to make a positive social impact on their communities and all around the world. Beth Kanter and Aliza Sherman lay out a clear and compelling case for building sustainable lives while changing the world."

- Arianna Huffington, Huffington Post

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# Foreword

When I got the email from Beth and Aliza asking me to write this foreword, I nearly spit up a mouthful of tequila all over my keyboard. Stop judging; it had been a rough week, and that was my self-care tequila. I keep it under my desk, along with several bars of dark chocolate, and pull it out after getting grant rejections, receiving unfair criticisms from my board, or any time the phrase “annual gala” comes up at any meeting.

Honestly, asking me to write the foreword to a book on self-care is like asking my toddler to write the intro to “The Joys of Sharing Your Toys” or “No More Tantrums: Effective Communication with Your Parents.” Having been an executive director for over a decade, I have picked up some horrible habits, such as eating lunch at my desk while reading emails, staying up late working every night, and saying yes to every request of my time. I developed this one weird twitch in my left eye and started scaring staff and volunteers. The concept of self-care came along, and I scoffed, deciding that I would rather juggle mason jars full of live scorpions than do Yoga or chug a green smoothie every morning or “bathe every day,” or whatever this hippie philosophy entails.

But reading this book, the book in your hands, made me realize self-care is way more than the Downward-Facing Dog and kale smoothies. Beth and Aliza, with their signature humor, piercing insight, and concrete advice, present a compelling argument for why we burn out and why it is important for all of us to take care of ourselves and each other and create happy, healthy, supportive environments in which to do our work.

A while ago, in a period of overwhelming stress, I wrote the Nonprofit Unicorn’s Mantra:

*“I am a nonprofit unicorn. I try each day to make the world better. I am good at some stuff, and I suck at some stuff, and that’s OK. There’s way more crap than I can possibly do on any given day. On some days I am more productive than on other days, and that’s OK. I know sometimes there are things that I certainly could have done better. I know that I can’t make everyone happy or spend as much time as I could on everyone. I know there’s a bunch of crap I don’t know. Sometimes I make mistakes, and that’s OK. I will try my best to learn and to improve, but I’ll also give myself a break. I will be as thoughtful and understanding with myself as I am with my coworkers and community members. I am an awesome and sexy nonprofit unicorn.”*

That mantra has carried me through some tough days as a nonprofit professional doing work I love. Beth and Aliza, though, made me realize self-care is not just about individuals, but also about organizational culture and combatting sector-level philosophies such as scarcity and martyrdom, about changing unrealistic expectations and restrictions from funders and from society. The shift from self-care to WE-care, as discussed in this book, is a critical shift our sector must make if we want to effectively address the injustice and inequity facing our community every day.

It comes down to this: Our work matters, but it is ongoing and we must sustain ourselves for the long run. Self-care is no longer just about us as individuals. Unlike many other professions that will likely be taken over by robots, human nonprofit professionals will always be needed due to the complexity of our work. We lift up families; we build communities. If we burn out, the cost to our world is high.

Thank you for all that you do. If you are reading this book, you are probably a nonprofit professional contributing to making the world a better, safer, happier place for me and my tantrum-throwing toddler. I am very grateful. I know our field is not easy, and in fact, it can be maddening. But our work is vital, and it cannot be done without the amazing professionals dedicating untold hours every day to it. Please take care of yourself as you take care of others, and let’s make every nonprofit happy and healthy,

where our eyes don't twitch, and where we can take swigs of Jose Cuervo simply for its exquisite flavor.

Vu Le

[Nonprofitwithballs.com](http://Nonprofitwithballs.com)

# Introduction

## [A] The Vision

Cue up the Pharrell Williams song, “Happy.”

*It might seem crazy what we’re about to say, but work/life balance is good when you can take a break. Clap along if you want to know what happy and healthy is to you. Clap along if you feel “happy and healthy nonprofits achieve results” is the truth.*

Let’s face it: your health and happiness directly impact how you feel at work and affect your productivity. Attending to your wellbeing can be the antidote to stress and prevention of burnout, and those are great reasons to start practicing “self-care.” According to the World Health Organization, “self-care” is “what people do for themselves to establish and maintain health, and to prevent and deal with illness.”

Working for a nonprofit that has limited resources can be a pressure cooker, but what if your organization’s culture encouraged you, and everyone who worked there, to embrace self-care without guilt? What if you could feel the vibrancy of your organization when you stepped into the physical office or hear it in the voices of staff when they talked about what it is like to work at your organization? What if every time your organization advertised a position, you were flooded with exceptional applicants because of your nonprofit’s reputation for a culture of wellbeing with policies and benefits to support it? Imagine the increase in results your organization would experience because of high talent retention rates instead of high turnover, eliminating cracks in your institutional memory.

What if this was YOUR organization?

We've just described the *Happy, Healthy Nonprofit*. This book provides you and your organization with a roadmap to getting there – from creating a Self-Care Plan for yourself to weaving wellbeing into the DNA of your nonprofit by developing and implementing a Happy, Healthy Strategy.

In this book, we define “wellness” as traditional physical and mental health versus “wellbeing,” a state of being comfortable, happy and healthy that contributes to wellness. Workplace wellbeing goes beyond the typical “lip service” toward self-care such as distributing brochures about burnout or bringing in an occasional speaker to an all-staff meeting to talk about stress relief or nutrition. Offering the occasional massage on-site or giving staff a rare few paid hours off as a “reward” isn't a sustainable Happy, Healthy Strategy.

When self-care initiatives are treated as “extras” instead of being built right into the fabric of your organization's processes and policies for worker wellbeing, they are nothing more than a Band-Aid, barely disguising the underlying chronic stress and dysfunction eroding your organization's ability to meet its mission. This book is about creating harmony between the individual practice of self-care and an organization's culture. Authentic self-care is a learned habit for individuals, and it needs to be embedded into organizational culture to prevent staff members from pitting their own needs against the organization's mission.

Treating self-care and wellbeing as an organizational *strategy* helps create a Happy, Healthy Nonprofit, and that is what we advocate in this book. Your efforts toward self-care should be supported by your organization – something we call “WE-care.” WE-care does the following:

- Recognizes self-care as an inextricable part of work.
- Acknowledges an organizational responsibility for self-care.
- Builds healthy work/life boundaries into workdays and workweeks.
- Ties passion for personal wellbeing to passion for organizational mission.

- Goes beyond a focus on physical health.
- Helps the nonprofit become a high performance organization and sustain results.

As part of writing this book, we interviewed scores of nonprofit leaders, staff and board members. What we discovered is nonprofits that practice Happy, Healthy ways of working are also high performance organizations. What does that mean? According to “The Performance Imperative: A Framework for Social-Sector Excellence,” from the Leap of Reason Ambassadors Community, high performance is the ability to deliver—over a prolonged period of time—meaningful, measurable, and financially sustainable results for the people or causes an organization is in existence to serve.

Says Mario Morino, Chairman of the Morino Institute and co-founder of Venture Philanthropy Partners, “The Performance Imperative is a North Star guiding board, management, and staff on a journey of continuous learning and improvement. As part of the journey, a happy, healthy organization nurtures a culture that encourages curiosity, reflection, and an environment where it’s safe to acknowledge challenges. Individuals in the organization are fulfilled when they see they are making a material, lasting difference for the people or causes they serve.”

In an interview, Nancy Lublin, CEO of Crisis Text Line, told us “burnout is bullshit.” We were taken aback. Certainly staff at a nonprofit such as Crisis Text Line, which provides counseling and intervention to people in crisis, might experience high levels of stress and burnout. But Lublin, who also founded Dress for Success and Do Something, believes that “burnout” equals being “out of love” with one’s job, and if that’s the case, she says, either that person should get another job or be asked to leave.

Lublin’s zero tolerance for bad attitudes and for people who don’t take care of themselves means she is willing to let someone go if they aren’t happy at their job. As a nonprofit leader, Lublin fosters an organizational culture that encourages staff to leave the office on time and have a life outside of work, builds fun into work and the workplace,

and supports written and unwritten rules that prioritize self-care. Not surprisingly, Crisis Text Line is a high performance organization.

Happy, Healthy Nonprofits engage their external stakeholders and deploy their skills internally to involve staff in the design and stewarding of wellbeing workplace initiatives. Happy, Healthy Nonprofits cultivate a culture of kindness, compassion and respect as a cultural norm for how staff members work together. Author Allison Fine defines this behavior as nonprofits “working *with* rather than *at* people to create a powerful force of mutual interest,” something she calls “Matterness” which is also the title of her recent book on the topic.

Imagine what it would be like if all nonprofits nurtured their staffs’ wellbeing with the same care and attention they give to external stakeholders. What if nonprofits looked internally to their staff to get feedback and used it to continuously improve their workplace environment, culture, and work flow? What if staff felt part of a supportive community at the office with everyone working towards the greater good, tapping into a never-ending supply of creativity and energy? If all nonprofits were Happy, Healthy Nonprofits, think how much more effective we would be in solving some of the big social change problems of today’s world.

## **[A] Why We Wrote This Book**

Writing this book together was probably inevitable given our individual interests in wellbeing and self-care after each of our experiences with the effects of stress and burnout. We’ll talk about that in a moment, but first, a little bit of our history. We are both known for our pioneering work helping individuals, organizations, and communities leverage the power of technology and online communications for work, and we were both early adopters of the Internet and the Web. In the early 1990s, Aliza blazed a path for women to embrace and benefit from technology through the company and organization she founded, Cybergrrl, Inc. and Webgrrls International. At the same time, Beth had a front row seat at the creation of a field – how nonprofits and social change activists can

leverage the Internet for good, starting as a trainer and online networking evangelist for Arts Wire. We worked on nearly parallel paths over the next decade.

Then in 2013, shortly after the publication of her book, *Networked Nonprofit*, Beth lost her father, Dr. Earl Kanter, after a battle with Parkinson's Disease. In the months leading up to his death, Beth crisscrossed the country on a book tour and flew home to spend time with him and tend to her own family, including two growing teens. In the process, she stopped taking care of herself.

Beth didn't notice the toll stress was taking on her until she went in for her annual physical with her doctor. Her cholesterol numbers were over 300. If you know anything about cholesterol, 150 or below is normal. Her doctor suggested that she try improving her diet, exercise habits, and sleep for six months to see if she could bring down her health numbers before resorting to medications. Even walking for 30 minutes a day would help, she said.

Beth strapped on a Fitbit to get a baseline of her activity level: about 2,000 steps a day. Seeing this data forced her to evaluate how much time she spent on her rear end in front of the computer and on the phone. Beth realized she was not only sitting all day but was even using her computer keyboard as a lunch tray. Starting off with modest step goals, she added steps incrementally each week, 1,000 at a time, all the while monitoring her progress on Fitbit. She began to ask herself questions like, "What if I walked for part of my lunch hour instead of sitting? Wow, that added 2,000 steps!"

Each week, Beth upped her goal by just 1,000 steps until she got to 10,000 and beyond. Beth not only dropped 35 pounds and lowered her cholesterol, but she discovered that walking helped her manage stress and improved her ability to think clearly. She continues to walk 15,000 steps a day, gets enough sleep, and eats healthy foods as well as practices many of the techniques we outline in Chapters 4 and 5.



Aliza also experienced severe stress that began after her father’s sudden and unexpected death following a botched outpatient treatment. She felt a choking feeling in her throat and tightness in her chest that led her to a cardiologist. All the tests came back “normal,” but she continued to experience physical symptoms that expanded to include dizziness and a pain in her gut. She finally realized that her body was exhibiting physical symptoms of stress.

Looking for relief, Aliza turned to creative practices to try to “rewire” her brain to respond differently to her stress and gain a sense of peace and calm. She took up painting even though she had no background in art. She only knew how good she felt when she colored or drew or dabbled in arts and crafts with her young daughter. Her instinct was that creating art would be helpful to her wellbeing.

Aliza bought cheap acrylic paints, paintbrushes, and canvas paper and started painting. She admits painting was really hard at first because she couldn’t let go of her self-critical thinking. She found herself censoring and editing herself as she painted, trying to make things “look right.” She soon realized she was using her “Computer Brain” when painting. She began making swirls and curlicues with her paintbrush, and started letting go of the need to make perfect art. She shifted her brain from a narrow, linear way of thinking to a more open, expansive one, immersing herself in the meditative process of putting paint on paper and reducing her stress.

Being Happy and Healthy isn’t just something we, as authors, write about and speak about. We try to practice Happy and Healthy every day in our work and personal lives. This book is just one part of our combined efforts to make Happy and Healthy an integral part of work and life for professionals in the nonprofit sector and within the organizations where they do important work.

## **[A] What You’ll Learn In This Book**

We've packed a lot of stories and advice from nonprofit leaders and staff in this book to help guide you and your organization along the path toward creating sustainable organizational change to avoid burnout. This book is different from typical nonprofit management books that address strategic planning, evaluation, financial matters, and all the hard skills for leading a nonprofit organization. This book gives credence to the softer skills that are the underpinning of every organization's culture and that directly affect staff members' focus and energy levels critical to achieving missions. We provide a practical roadmap for getting better results from mission-based, social change work by paying closer attention to individual and organizational wellbeing.

Part 1 of this book zeroes in on how you, as an individual, can personally move from stressed out and overwhelmed to calmer, energized and productive and how to bring Happy, Healthy practices to your workplace. Part 2 lays out steps toward becoming a Happy, Healthy Nonprofit and includes examples from the field that illustrate how organizations are shifting their culture to a greater focus on wellbeing with positive results.

In order to be sustainable, "Happy" and "Healthy" must align with your organization's values and be part of your organization's culture and work processes, hand-in-hand with the hard skills. We hope this book marks the start of an exciting new movement in the nonprofit sector: championing Happy and Healthy as essential parts of our work and workplace and every day lives to give us the sustainable energy, focus and fortitude we need to help make our world a better place.

*How do you infuse your life, work and organization with Happy and Healthy? Share your stories with us, and we will continue to chronicle them on our blogs!*

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