

PACING YOURSELF FOR THE JOURNEY: How to Avoid Burnout and Thrive while Working to Change the World

Chapter 15 of GRASSROOTS AND NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP (1995) Berit Lakey; George Lakey, Rod Napier, and Janice Robinson, New Society Publishers.

Stress comes with the territory of working for social change. It's not all bad. The right amount of stress feels stimulating or like a challenging lifestyle. With too much stress, on the other hand, we risk burnout. One common cause for burnout is a malfunctioning organization. Since most of this book focuses on shaping up organizational structure and function, the major part of this last chapter is directed to individuals. A more relaxed you will be an important first step in repairing or improving your organization.

Some of us function year after year with too much stress. We may find ourselves being relatively unhappy and unfulfilled, judgmental of others, overeating, losing weight, or developing addictive behaviors. We may handle conflict poorly by avoiding it, being defensive or aggressive, or allowing unresolved conflicts to disrupt our work.

In this chapter you won't learn a quick fix for chronic overwork. Just as we don't expect social transformation from a few demonstrations, we can't expect to discover our optimal challenge level through a couple of tricks. Instead we encourage looking at the big picture of your life and building a holistic strategy for change with the techniques that work for you.

Don't Let Work Take Over

Review a typical month in your datebook and notice what it says about balance: How many evenings and weekends did you work without taking off compensatory time to do other things that renew and refresh you? Move toward balancing your activism with something else that reminds you how good it is to be alive. If you draw all your social life from your work situation or your volunteer work, consider making new friends based on hobbies or recreation. This also relieves the tunnel vision which activists can get from hanging out only with each other.

Overwork often has the effect of reinforcing low self-esteem. When we choose to work too long, we are in effect telling ourselves we aren't worthy unless we do that. We also leave family members, friends, and lovers feeling undervalued and unappreciated. They may have trouble objecting because, after all, the cause is obviously more important than they are. We get a cycle of unworthiness.

The fundament of our work is that we as black women are tremendously oppressed in many ways and a large part of that oppression has been internalized and we act it out on ourselves even if there isn't an active external oppression. So, within the Black Women's Health Project we are faithful

to the principle that women need to heal themselves and so we never do work without play. We just finished doing a conference in Barbados and the first three days in Barbados we spent at their local carnival. That was no accident. We made sure that we had three days of play before we got into the work. After my staff works real hard I hire a masseuse for them so that they can get full body massages. We did an organizing conference that was futile so afterward we treated ourselves to a cruise.

- African American leader who was formerly a staff member of the project

Break the cycle by taking vacations-long, short, spontaneous, planned, alone, together. A little rest and recreation can go a long way toward dispelling fatigue and burnout. Hard to schedule and justify a good vacation in the middle of the crises that continually pop up? Think of it this way: if you had an accident and were disabled for two weeks, the job would certainly survive your absence. If you suddenly had an attack of the flu and were bedridden for a week, the job would survive.

If you are genuinely indispensable to the daily work of your organization, then your organization may not be very healthy. Even if you think that you are indispensable, try planning a vacation well ahead of time, publicizing it so that everyone expects you to be gone and letting them know how critical tasks will be taken care of in your absence.

A spontaneous day or two off can be terrific, and those around you may be relieved to find you returning with more energy and a renewed sense of humor. Why wait until you are sick to take a day off-take the day when you can enjoy it, and you may not need to get sick.

Most activists say they don't have time to read, yet reading is one of the simplest ways of getting away from the stress of our work. "I take time every day to trash my mind, to take myself away from what it is that bothers me, and fill my mind instead with a good mystery or story," says one experienced activist. "I find I can't do this at night because I fall asleep, so I personally cut a little bit of time from work every day and make it a regular part of my diet."

Physical fitness pays off in every area of your life including the amount of stress you can gracefully carry. That means sleep enough for you (different people need different amounts), eat well and regularly, and exercise.

One grassroots leader says that three times a week (two times at lunch and once at 3:30 on Thursdays) he plays racquetball at the local Y.

Everyone at the office knows and expects this routine. It is built in as a disciplined part of his life. "I simply never think of work when I'm hitting a ball at sixty miles an hour in a small, four-walled court." He sees social, emotional, and physical benefits to this routine, which takes three hours out of a typical sixty- to seventy-hour week. Others in the office appreciate that he does this for himself, because they see the benefits for him and for themselves.

-consultant to the organization

Don't go it alone.

Psychologist Stephanie Simonton, in reviewing the research on the relation of stress to cancer, says that the more individuals from whom we draw intimate support, the more stress we can handle well. Family members, lovers, and close friends provide important support, but depending only on these sources runs the risk of overloading them. A romantic relationship, for example, can wear out under continual use for work-related support.

A board member of one social action group made an unusual offer to the executive director. "I have peer counseling skills and want to make part of my volunteer board work giving you a listening ear once a week." The director took her up on it, and for several years spent a half hour once a week, on his way to work, using her quality attention to "think out loud" about the job. What he said was totally in confidence. He could talk, complain, be angry, and even express his fears and sadness. He found this chance to vent his feelings in a safe place gave him more clarity and strength in leading the staff.

-a consultant to the organization

Consider starting a support group. The group might start with a core of three and extend to as many as eight. Regular attendance and regularly scheduled meetings make a strong support group. The key is a mutual willingness by the members to be open and candid about the critical issues that affect their lives. Usually the group begins with work- or cause-related problems; when trust grows, personal issues may also show up because of the close relationship between the personal and the political. A support group can be fairly informal, but will require some regularity and agreement on how it will operate.¹

In our society women usually find it easier to maintain support groups than men, who traditionally don't share feelings, inadequacies, and vulnerabilities with each other. Men starting a support group may need to give it extra attention to compensate for this difficulty, which comes with men's socialization. Look for local resources: there may be a sympathetic professional or someone with experience in the men's antisexist movement who could facilitate initial meetings or be a resource in some other way

From the Quaker tradition comes a means of providing structured feedback for activists: the clearness committee. A person who wants this support asks three to seven people she or he trusts to come together to help sort out difficult issues or directions for the future. People who are asked to participate generally have different points of view and a variety of experiences, so the group represents as wide a range of perspectives as possible. A clearness session of several hours enables the focus person to receive supportive and critical feedback which leaves her or him in much better shape to solve a problem or make a decision about next steps in their activist work.²

Leaders in particular have a tendency to feel isolated. A support group for leaders can make a difference, providing an opportunity for solving mutual problems or getting feedback and guidance on individual issues. Often our judgment is hampered by the lack of input from others we respect, and to whom we have little normal access. One barrier to leader support groups is that leaders often like to appear as though they have everything under control and don't need help. Another barrier to leaders from related organizations being in the same support group is the competition that may exist between their organizations.

A great leader is an individual who can generate the most choices concerning a given problem or situation, and has the wisdom to see the difference between them. A support group can generate more choices, and therefore support the greatness of each of the persons within it. This is good enough reason to surmount the barriers and create a support group, not to mention the stress reduction inherent in the comradeship of the group.

Define Attainable Goals

One way to increase stress is to have vague and far-reaching goals for your work: "peace," "liberation," "ecological balance," etc. You then can never do enough to deserve a rest, a slower pace. Create goals that are attainable, not only for the organization, but for you in the organization. The goals can be tough and demanding, just make them achievable.

If you do choose a goal that is a real stretch for you-say, fundraising to increase the budget by twenty-five percent in a year then it pays to set a goal in your personal life which is easily achieved, like making your bed every day or flossing your teeth. Making progress on your personal goal builds confidence so it is less stressful to reach for your work goal.

I've done a lot of projects in my 30+ years, and I choose them very carefully. I look around to see what isn't getting a lot of attention maybe an issue that's neglected, or a method of work the movement isn't developing very well, for example cross-class organizing. There are a lot of gaps at any given time, so I have lots of choices! Then I

ask myself what I would find personally challenging and would get a kick out of taking on. That narrows down the choices. Then I think about what is doable in terms of fundraising, location, other people to work with closely. (Sometimes I go to conferences to check people out that I might be working with, to see if I could get along with them with mutual respect.) Toward the end of the process something 'clicks' and I know what I want to do next. I realize other activists have other ways of going about making choices, which is fine. What I like about my way is that I always know why I'm doing what I'm doing-when the going gets tough- and how I personally am growing through it even if the project is floundering. So I never think of myself as a martyr, even if other people think I live a sacrificing type of life. Really, I love to do activism this way. My projects always connect with my heart.

-a veteran working-class activist

Find a Balance of Competence and Challenge

One way people burn themselves out is to take on tasks that are too easy or too hard for them. In the first case, people get bored; in the second, they get overwhelmed. What works best is finding a balance between areas of mastery and areas of challenge.³

Balance is an individual question. Some people enjoy work that has relatively little challenge; others enjoy work that pushes beyond their limits. In order to find the right balance for your group, feel free to shake up the existing distribution of responsibilities. If leaders have trouble delegating, push them to delegate. If someone is sinking under the weight of too many difficult tasks, shift the tasks around. Don't be rigid about job descriptions; remember that people are most productive when they have the right balance of competence and stretch.

What if you want to take on a task which may overwhelm you? Train for it. Go to workshops, call in a consultant, or get coaching from someone in your constituency who has those fundraising skills, that computer expertise, that mass media polish, or whatever you are wanting. Training can be the most efficient way to increase your competency, and therefore reduce your stress.

Don't let your concern for political correctness get in the way of learning and gaining resources. Someone with the expertise you want may also have attitudes or behaviors that you don't like or agree with. Keep perspective: life is not about perfection, it is about learning and growing. If you show that you know how to use available resources to learn and grow, others may follow your example.

Another training technique is to visit an expert. One activist spent two weeks as a shadow-intern to a chief executive officer who was known as an efficient,

well-organized manager. The experience proved to be invaluable and gave the individual a handful of much needed tools for operating her organization. An AIDS activist spent a week in another state with a program director who was an excellent coalition builder. An additional advantage of such visits is that they build networks that are useful in a variety of ways over time.

Increase Structure, Supervision, and Feedback

Because changing society is a never-ending struggle, it's easy to be confused about when you are doing enough. A source of stress, therefore, is insufficient feedback, inadequate supervision, not having a structure which gives us permission to go home with the feeling of a job well done. Too often we are left to our own, often biased, perceptions of how we are doing, and so we are limited in how we can grow and change.

Structures can reduce anxiety. Supervision can make sure people get the feedback they deserve for their work, so they can watch themselves grow over time and become more effective. Volunteers, staff, and leaders all need accountability structures and feedback.

A feedback system which works well in activist groups is estimation/self-estimation. The focus person presents to the group her or his view of strengths and areas where his or her work needs improvement. Then the group responds, commenting both on what the focus person said and also pointing out strengths and areas of growth which were not mentioned in the presentation. Usually the group also thinks about what kind of support is needed in order to grow in those areas.

This method can be used -by everyone in turn, including the director. Estimation/self-estimation reduces stress, because in a supportive atmosphere people can find out how others see them and their work rather than wonder and worry.⁴

Delegate, Delegate, Delegate!

Whether you are an executive director or a field organizer, the board chair or a volunteer fundraiser, there is almost certainly more to delegate than is your current practice. The pressures not to delegate are probably linked to what is burning you out-like perfectionism, distrust of others, feeling isolated, and not knowing other people who would like to participate in the project. Deciding to delegate is one sure way to discover and confront what pulls you down. Even the smallest steps of delegation are steps toward your own well-being. Realize that delegation is a win-win: a leader who does not effectively delegate tasks (and follow up on their status) smothers the growth of staff and volunteers, stifles their creativity and initiative, and contributes to program bottlenecks.

If you think: "But they don't know how to do this well," then remember that empowerment means expecting things to take longer when people are learning and that it is a fine use of time. Support the learner through

training sessions and a mentoring program. If you feel impatient that it takes the time it takes, that impatience is another internal pressure for you to confront and work through in order to be effective for the long run in working for your cause.

In short, go on a campaign to delegate your work, and welcome the obstacles that get in your way; the obstacles have their own juicy potential for your empowerment and the effectiveness of the organization.

Enjoy the Work and Have Fun

Humor may be necessary for survival; consider the rich traditions of humor among African Americans, Jews, gays, and other survivors. Take a chance on being bizarre or corny. The worst that will happen is that you're the only one laughing-and that's one more than was laughing before. According to psychologist David Abramis, bringing fun into the office increases creativity and productivity.⁵

Activists commonly have "To Do" lists they carry around. Here's an idea: add a "To Be" heading, and when you write your list of tasks, also write how you want to be while you do your tasks.

People thrive on ritual, celebration, and play. Singing and storytelling has been a hallmark of the black freedom movement and other groups as well. Some groups build playful ritual right into their meetings. One way is starting a meeting with "news and goods," in which each person briefly tells of something good that happened for them in the past week or two. Some of the anecdotes are bound to be funny, and the atmosphere lightens up immediately. Another quick way to lighten up meetings is to play brief games, sometimes called "Light 'n' Livelihoods." A couple people usually groan at the thought ("How corny!"), and a few minutes later smiles appear and energy returns.⁶

The potluck is a ritual feature of many groups. Celebrations are opportunities for affirmations and appreciation, and can be seen as rewards for holding on to and pursuing the right values in a society which is still oppressive. One organization we know holds numerous fundraising dance parties: they don't always raise much money, but the members love to dance. Fortunately, resources for ritual and celebration are increasing. Along with play they ease stress because they speak deeply to our need for community and for release.⁷

In the Piedmont Peace Project much of the organizing is itself celebratory: in a voter registration drive, admission to a big picnic is your voter registration form. The Project has a choir, which means lots of music and special celebrations as well as building the Project. Look for opportunities to give awards, recognition.

-a leader in the project

My first time in jail was during a civil rights campaign in a small industrial city where race relations were really terrible. There was a lot of police violence against us, and I was scared to be sent to the county prison where it seemed they'd have us at their mercy. I was completely surprised by the attitude of our movement folks. Instead of being tense and depressed, our group was active and full of spirit. We marched together up and down the cell block lustily singing movement songs, and most anytime except "lights out" there'd be some of us singing or telling stories

- a European American activist

Use Time Well

The sense of scarcity about time is a huge source of stress for all of us living in a modern industrial society. It can be a source of tension in some groups, between those who have combined their social world with their cause work, on the one hand, and those who have families and friends outside the group. The first group may prolong a meeting by cracking jokes or sharing rumors, while the second group is restless because the children are waiting at home, a lover wants some attention, or they want to curl up and finish their mystery novel.

Time management techniques reduce stress in an organization as does the methodology for running more effective meetings.

Face and Resolve Conflicts

Psychiatrist and writer M. Scott Peck believes that the single greatest cause of mental illness in our society is our unwillingness to deal with the conflicts in our own lives-we avoid, deny, procrastinate, and hope that the conflicts will resolve themselves.⁸ When we do that we are in effect telling ourselves that we can't cope, so we're lowering our self-esteem and increasing our stress. In the chapter on conflict resolution you'll find some useful tools. No tools will help if you aren't willing to summon your courage and deal with the conflicts around you.

One reason not to deal with conflicts outside is because they relate to conflicts inside. All of us have internal conflicts; ironically, the more we deny them, the more influence they are likely to have unconsciously and the more risk we run of burnout. Fortunately, there are ways of working with our internal conflicts which increase our effectiveness. The first step is being willing to acknowledge a conflict to ourselves, and the second is being willing not to condemn one of the parts of us which seems to be at war with another part, but instead to take a compassionate and responsible attitude toward oneself in the situation.⁹

Relax!

We generally do our best work when we are in a state of relaxed alertness. Here are some specific tools which many find helpful for relaxing in the midst of tension. Bookstores have books on these topics with more details. These brief descriptions are here to intrigue you and get you started.

Meditation.

The daily use of meditation for fifteen to twenty minutes provides a greater sense of well-being, inner peace and personal confidence. During meditation, and for some time after, people are measurably more relaxed. All you need is yourself and a quiet place. While meditation is a skill that can be highly developed over time, its benefits are almost immediate even for the novice. It helps to meditate at the same time each day, if possible, to become a part of your routine. The best time depends on your lifestyle, but after eating is not a good idea unless you really would rather nap.

Self-hypnosis.

Like meditation, it can be a practical tool for almost everyone, with a variety of uses in addition to reducing stress. When you hypnotize yourself you can regain self-control after a tense situation; say, after being in a heated argument. Your muscles relax, your breathing deepens, your pulse slows down, and anxiety subsides. This is a great way to get ready for a high-pressure negotiation session, or a fundraising pitch where the stakes are high.

Reflective Imaging.

Remember a place in your life that represents peace and tranquility? The human mind is capable of recreating such images and generating the feelings that go with them. First, take several minutes to breathe deeply and tighten then release the muscle groups. At the end of that time, shut your eyes and recreate in your mind a picture of this favorite, quiet place. Some people experience the place not so much as a picture, but as a set of sounds, smells, or sensations. When you do this repeatedly you will find the place becomes more vivid and you can flow into it more easily. The heartbeat slows, the breathing deepens, and you relax.

Let Go of Guilt, Resentment and Fear

One source of stress is inside you: the guilt, fear, and resentment which may be part of your motivation for justice and a better world. It's natural to have those feelings, and they often get us started as activists. The trouble is, guilt, fear, and resentment become a burden in the long run and a drain on creativity and hope. We're distinguishing between anger and resentment: when anger is expressed promptly and appropriately, it can be cleansing and powerful. Resentment is suppressed anger and hurts the person who holds it most of all.

When people are driven by guilt, accomplishments and small successes are never enough and leave them with a gnawing sense of failure or inadequacy. When guilt

motivates us, there is never enough time, our efforts are never good enough, and we're likely to get into comparison games with others over who is working the hardest or has suffered the most (and gets burned out the quickest!). Guilt also pushes us to prove our worthiness by working for justice. We may find ourselves unable to set clear boundaries between work and other parts of our lives. Our refusal to care for ourselves makes it hard for others to see our vision of a caring society.

Fortunately, only a part of our motivation for change comes from distress. "A true revolutionary," as guerrilla leader Che Guevara reportedly said, "is guided by feelings of great love." A part of our work is standing up for ourselves, acknowledging that we are worthy and deserving of a just society, and asserting that love is in our hearts. How can we grow away from the negative emotions which stress us, and toward the positive motivation of worthiness and caring?

Keeping a journal, the consistent writing down of thoughts, feelings, and ideas, can reduce stress by getting feelings out, providing a tracking system for growth, and providing distance and perspective on the conflicts and pressures around us. Honest journaling is a source of continuing education and growth as you express the crucial issues that you face, as spontaneously as possible.

Therapy has assisted numerous people to stay in the struggle by making internal changes in attitude and external changes in behavior. Therapy can be expensive, but some therapists charge on a sliding scale according to ability to pay, and can also be asked to reduce their charge as a contribution to the cause for which you are working. Personal growth seminars have developed powerful ways of assisting people to work from a more centered, positive place.¹⁰

A peer counseling method used by some activists is Re-evaluation Counseling, also called "co-counseling." Re-evaluation Counseling enables people to free themselves of accumulated distress experiences (such as fear, hurt, and loss) that begin early in life. The method entails two people taking turns counseling and being counseled. The person acting as counselor mostly listens and draws the other out. The person acting as client talks and discharges emotions connected with present problems or old memories in physical ways, such as laughing and crying. With experience and increased confidence, the process helps new perspectives to emerge as old feelings begin to lose their power.¹¹

Other ways of nurturing our positive motivation, and thereby reducing stress, include prayer (especially thankfulness and praise), reading inspiring biographies, reading and writing poetry, and, as described above, getting the support of a buddy or an activist support group.

Create a Vision for Your Life

The most effective people tend to have dreams, plans, and visions of the future. Some idea of where they are going promotes a sense of hope and well-being in their lives and provides something to shoot for beyond the here and now. Having such a vision or dream helps maintain a clear and balanced perspective on the present.

Notes

1. For practical information on how support groups can assist in bringing balance and integrity to the lives of people working for social justice, see the manual *Insight and Action* by Tova Green, Peter Woodrow, and Fran Peavey (Philadelphia and Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1994).
2. Ibid.
3. This is similar to the point of view in Anne Herbert's article, "Let the Good Times Last," *Whole Earth Review*, March 1985, pp. 65-74.
4. Virginia Coover, et al, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia and Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1977).
5. David Abramis, "Work Smarter, Not Harder," *Psychology Today* (NEXG 1989), pp. 33-38.
6. The new games movement has produced many books of games which are fun, energy-boosting, and inclusive. A manual which includes a number of games which are brief enough to use in indoor meetings, "For the Fun of It!," is included in Stephanie Judson, ed., *A Manual on Nonviolence and Children* (Philadelphia and Gabriola Island, B.C. New Society Publishers, 1984); two of the authors routinely use these with adults in our consulting practice.
7. Groups for prayer, guided meditation, and various forms of worship are available in most places. Drumming is growing in the men's movement. Full moon and other rituals developed by women who practice Wicca are flourishing. See Starhawk *The Spiral Dance* for a rich array of rituals in this tradition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979). Singing and dancing have provided emotional release over the centuries.
8. In his book *The Road Less Travelled* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1988), M. Scott Peck vividly discusses denial and practical ways of inner change which makes handling conflicts easier.
9. Outlining internal conflict resolution strategies is beyond the scope of this book, but the interested reader can find an abundance of resources. See, for example, consultant Elaine Yarbrough, "Making Peace with Yourself," in Neil Wollman, ed., *Working for Peace: A Handbook of Practical Psychology and Other Tools* (San Luis Obispo, Calif.: Impact Publishers, 1985), pp. 55-62. One frequent arena for inner conflict is money; the Impact Project was organized by activists to assist people to work through their money issues. See their annotated bibliography and resource list, "Taking Charge of our Money, our Values, and our Lives." (The Impact Project, 21 Linwood St., Arlington, MA 02174).
10. *Insight Seminars* and *Lifespring* are two highly competent seminars which are based on humanistic psychology. An organization responsible for much of what we know about group dynamics, human relations training, and self-development is NTL Institute in Alexandria, VA.
11. For information contact Re-evaluation Counseling Communities, 719 Second Ave. N, Seattle, Washington 98109.