Mental Health Challenges in Nonprofits: The Hidden Dangers

Be sure you're paying attention to this threat.

By Gleb Tsipursky

As a coach to nonprofit leaders, I've seen the problem far too often: Nonprofit boards pose a serious threat to the mental health of executive directors and other senior staff. In my experience, board members are rarely trained to recognize mental problems. This lack of understanding often leads to dismissive – even biased – attitudes toward people with mental health issues.

At the same time, research shows that 18.9% of U.S. adults – 46.6 million people – live with a mental illness.[1] What's even more alarming is that those in top leadership positions suffer from mental health issues at far higher rates than the rest of the population.[2]

Other studies show that women in positions of authority tend to suffer from depression in particular.[3] The nonprofit sector is unusual – and praiseworthy – for the proportion of women in leadership positions, but that does make it especially important for nonprofits to emphasize the importance of addressing mental health challenges among staff.

We know from extensive studies that mental health challenges and burnout cause valued key employees to leave.[4] I've seen it happen. For example, I coached the executive director of a mid-sized nonprofit who experienced strong pressure from several board members over fundraising goals. The executive experienced growing anxiety and stress. While I urged him to tell board members about his mental health condition, he refused to do so for fear they wouldn't support him and might even fire him if he revealed his "weakness."

He had some reason for concern. The board had already turned down his request to revise the health plan to provide more support for employee mental health issues, dismissing the importance of dealing with this concern. Moreover, he had seen others hide their mental health challenges due to fears about board reaction.

But I thought it unlikely that they would fire him. Instead, I believed his fears were due to pessimism bias – an excessive perception of risks and a negative outlook on the future.[5]

Make Better Decisions by Understanding Your Brain

In three enlightening, readable books – *The Blind Spots Between Us, The Truth Seeker's Handbook,* and *Never Go with Your Gut* (intentionalinsights.org) – Gleb Tsipursky addresses the cognitive biases that can derail our decisions. As he explains, our brains are prone to a variety of thinking errors that can lead us astray if we're not careful.

BE WARY OF THESE TRAPS

Confirmation bias causes us to ignore information that doesn't fit our beliefs. The stronger we feel about an issue, the stronger this tendency.

Loss aversion leads us to avoid taking risks for fear of losing more than we'll gain. As a result, we sidestep exciting opportunities.

Attentional bias occurs when we attach too much weight to something because we're emotionally attached to one aspect of it.

The overconfidence effect prompts us to believe we're more skilled in decision-making than we really are.

The planning fallacy takes place because we tend to assume that our plans will go well and thus fail to build in enough resources to fix potential problems.

Optimism bias leads us to be excessively optimistic about the future. Studies show we believe our risk of suffering negative effects is less than it actually is, and our belief in positive events is greater than reality. We overemphasize the benefits of our projects and underestimate the costs and time it will take to complete them.

The false consensus effect causes us to overestimate the extent to which others agree with us, creating a sense of false alignment with them.

ADDRESS AVOIDABLE DISASTERS

Here are ways to keep your cognitive biases from leading you into trouble:

Always be ready for your existing practices and processes to fail you, and have contingency plans.

Avoid denying negative information, and be proactive about dealing with problems.

When you begin a project, build in twice the resources – of time, money, and energy – that you think you'll need.

Don't trust your gut reactions without testing them. Confirm your instincts with facts, logic, and data.

Re-evaluate your decisions with cost-benefit analysis, giving each aspect of the decision a rating. This will help you avoid emotional attachment to any one part of the decision.

Never assume you know what others think. The best way to be sure is to ask them.

Conduct a premortem before launching a project or process. Gather stakeholders, and ask them to imagine that the project has failed. Have them write down reasons why it failed, and then brainstorm solutions.

Second-guess your decisions and those of your collaborators. Don't move ahead with your first impulse.

Ask for help if you feel yourself becoming depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed. If you don't find help, you could become a victim of pessimism bias. With such a bias, you're likely to lose confidence in yourself and may end up making harmful – even disastrous – decisions.

Pessimism bias is common for those with anxiety or depression.[6]

His pessimism didn't serve him well. The board continued to pressure him. Despite his wise decision to seek professional help, his anxiety and stress undercut his fundraising capacity. Finally – after he told me he was thinking of quitting – I convinced him to reveal his condition to the board.

Well, guess what? The board expressed a great deal of support. The board members who had pressured him said they did so because they felt anxious themselves over the state of the organization's finances. The board agreed to step back from its fundraising goals and do some cost-cutting instead.

The story didn't have a happy ending. The cost-cutting led to layoffs that undermined staff morale. Employees expressed their discontent to the executive, who was already close to burnout, and the stress from these and other conflicts

– which he previously could have handled easily – helped push him over the edge. He turned in his resignation letter. The organization launched an expensive year-long search for a new executive, who didn't work out well, leading many supporters to abandon the nonprofit.

The whole fiasco could have been prevented if the executive had talked to the board when he first started feeling anxious and overwhelmed. Earlier cost-cutting would have resulted in less drastic layoffs. The executive would have had more mental resources and would have handled the blow to staff morale from these cuts. He would have continued to lead the organization, which would have continued to do well.

I share this story with the hope that you as a nonprofit leader will take it to heart and influence your key stakeholders, especially those without professional nonprofit training,

to be more aware of and attentive to mental health. The executive director I coached is one of many terrific senior nonprofit staff pushed to and past their breaking point by members of their boards.

In an increasingly disrupted and uncertain age, which will only breed more stress and anxiety, we can't afford to lose talented nonprofit leaders by failing to pay attention to the dangers of mental health challenges. Nonprofit leaders – staff and volunteer alike – need to encourage and model transparency around mental wellness and to provide training in how to spot and support colleagues in times of

trouble. We all need to treat mental health as seriously as we do physical health.

Is there a conversation you could have today about mental health with someone in your organization? It's time to take the first step and move this issue into the open. $

Known as the disaster-avoidance expert, Dr. Gleb Tsipursky (gleb@disasteravoidanceexperts.com, glebtsipursky.com) empowers nonprofit leaders to avoid disasters by addressing threats, maximizing opportunities, and resolving personnel problems. A best-selling author of numerous books, he is best known for Never Go With Your Gut *(careerpress.com),* The Blindspots Between Us *(newharbinger.com), and* The Truth Seeker's Handbook *(intentionalinsights.org).*

Footnotes

[1] "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States," Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality.

[2] Jayne Barnard, "Narcissism, Over-optimism, Fear, Anger, and Depression: The Interior Lives of Corporate Leaders," *U. Cin. L. Rev.,* 77: 405.

[3] Tetyana Pudrovska & Amelia Karraker, "Gender, Job Authority, and Depression," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior,* 55.4: 424-441.

[4] Sabine Geurts et al., "Burnout and Intention to Leave among Mental Health-care Professionals," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology,* 17.3: 341-362.

[5] David Hecht, "The Neural Basis of Optimism and Pessimism," *Experimental Neurobiology* 22.3: 173-199.

[6] Susan J. Wenze et al., "Biases in Affective Forecasting and Recall in Individuals with Depression and Anxiety Symptoms," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 38.7: 895-906.

> **"Board members are rarely trained to recognize mental problems."**

Action Steps to Address the Hidden Dangers

Nonprofit leaders can take active steps to address mental health challenges among nonprofit senior staff:

1. Enhance awareness. Be sure your organizational culture permits discussion of mental health issues. Whether you're an executive director, board chair, or other nonprofit leader, it's up to you to address hidden mental health challenges and bring them to light.

2. Train nonprofit board members and staff on supporting those with mental health challenges. By holding such trainings, you accomplish three goals:

Signal that mental health is a topic of concern and that it's acceptable to talk about it.

Invite people who attend the training to share their current or past experiences of mental health challenges, helping them feel less lonely and enabling them to relate to each other.

Provide specific, concrete steps people can take to support anyone with mental health challenges.

3. Make sure the organization finances professional support for mental health challenges, just as you do for physical health. That might mean that you do the following:

Ensure mental health coverage as part of your employee health plan.

Offer an employee assistance provider (EAP) program that includes mental health assistance for employees.

Make it acceptable for employees to take a mental health sick day, just as they would take a sick day for physical health challenges.

Create a Culture that Supports Mental Health

Supporting mental wellness will lead to better communication, greater productivity, and much happier, more motivated people throughout your organization. Assure such an atmosphere with articles such as these from NonprofitWorld.org: