

Self-Care for Grant Proposal Writing Professionals©

By Tarra Nystrom, MBA, CBA

SMART Money Grant Writing

Working in a nonprofit is rewarding. Whether nonprofit work is intentional or fallen into, the pros outweigh the cons. However, as with most jobs and careers, nonprofit work is stressful. Grant proposal writing has a unique set of stressors, and none are unmanageable. Self-care is crucial to healthy, balanced lives. The words deadline, strategy, writing, team, decline, and others associated with grants can make even the most seasoned nonprofit professional a little tense.

Self-care is subjective. Just as no two grant applications are alike, no two grant proposal writers' self-care are alike. Essentially, self-care requires one to relax, recharge, and reinvigorate. Working and volunteering in a nonprofit is stressful. The hours can be demanding, needing and wanting to get as much done as possible in the allotted time.

Grant proposal writers owe it to themselves, their families, and all stakeholder groups from constituents to the Board of Directors to find and implement a workable work-life balance. Last-minute, half-assed efforts are not a prudent use of donor dollars. Time management and stress management are not mutually exclusive. Self-care is about physical, mental, and emotional well-being to manage time and stress.

The physical aspects of self-care are easier to accomplish than the mental and emotional ones. Getting enough sleep, maintaining a healthy diet, and exercising regularly. This is not merely about productivity or a bubbly personality in the workplace. Sleep, diet, and exercise make life more enjoyable for you and those closest to you.

The mental and emotional pieces take scrupulous attention and even practice to create relaxing, recharging, and reinvigorating habits. We have come to view relaxing as a shortcoming or as something we should feel guilty about doing. In reality, relaxation not only benefits the individual doing it but might be more beneficial to those in contact with the person practicing relaxation skills. Just 15 minutes a day with a favorite magazine, cup of tea, or other seemingly

self-indulgence improves mental and emotional well-being. During the workday, leaving your desk (and building) for lunch, connecting for a few minutes with a volunteer in a non-nonprofit conversation, taking a 10-minute walk before the final proposal edit, or retreating for a few minutes of deep breathing after a spirited meeting are a few suggestions.

We are lost when the battery of our phone dies. Grant proposal writers need to recharge just as batteries do, or the organization will be at a loss. Recharging can be as quick as something mentioned for relaxing or as long as a day or weeks away from the workplace. Personal and sick time are strategic parts of human resources policies and handbooks. The executive staff and the board of directors appreciate the value of paid time off to have included it in employee benefits. Be strategic in self-care and use that time. On the rare occasion that more time is needed, negotiating unpaid leave can be advantageous to the employee and the nonprofit.

A day off or a brisk walk can certainly reinvigorate. Reinvigoration can be energy to finish the day, a fresh perspective, or a new project (work-related project, not a new program/project for the targeted constituency). Maybe now is the time to pitch a new area for grant funding or a different manner of evaluation that will improve a program/project and post-award grant reporting. Routine is necessary and valuable but can turn to monotony. Fresh perspectives and revised goals (such as new work projects) will break the monotony.

When relaxing, recharging, and reinvigorating are innate, resilience follows. Resilience means that you will understand stress triggers and automatically control them – well, at least do what is in your power to manage them. Resilience means burnout is far in the rearview mirror. Resilience is a result of SMART self-care.

Specific – Self-care is personal and individual. Only you can identify distinctive ways to relax, recharge, and reinvigorate.

Measurable – A quick personal assessment of how you feel before a little self-care and after will reveal the difference in your mindset and energy level.

Achievable – Self-care is personal and individual. Only you can identify distinctive ways to relax, recharge, and reinvigorate that work for you.

Relevant – Self-care to relax recharge, and reinvigorate results in resilience.

Time-bound – Self-care is habit-forming. Make it a daily habit.

As a grant proposal writer and trainer, I cannot prescribe how every other grant proposal writer should self-care. I am not formally trained as a counselor, therapist, or in mindfulness. I

can only emphasize the importance of managing time and stress as a grant proposal writer to help you experience your best life. I can tell you to practice deep breathing or mindfulness daily, but that is not my expertise or place. (I find checking my favorite retailer's site for great bargains does as much for me as yoga!) I can only declare that taking a little bit of my day for me improved my writing, increased my productivity, positively impacted my tolerance making me a stronger part of the team, and allowed for tactical juggling of competing priorities in my life. I guess taking a little bit of my day for me helped me avoid burnout over time.

SMART self-care proves valuable!

Specific – Improve your writing.

Measurable – Increase your productivity.

Achievable – Allow for tactical juggling of competing priorities in your life.

Relevant – Positively impact your tolerance, making you a stronger part of the team.

Time-bound – Help you avoid burnout over time.

With all of that said, if consulting or freelancing is preferred over traditional grant proposal writing roles, self-care of relaxing, recharging, and reinvigorating includes boundaries. Just because on a particular afternoon or weekend, a client decides “now is the time to tackle this” and wants answers now, it does not mean that the professional (i.e., you, their contracted grant proposal writer) from whom they need those answers is available or work 24/7/365. Remember, as a contractor, you are not part of the inner circle. Those more casual and personal relationships that they have with their inner circle do not immediately extend to partners and consultants. You are the boss of your time, and it is okay to establish boundaries (business boundaries).

Typical business hours are 9-5, M-F (unless otherwise stated or established by a working relationship. A working relationship is not created by one handshake or the fact that you have their business card.)

Don't text unless you have established that with the partner/consultant.

Allow and establish a 24-hour timeframe to respond to a message, email, text, or voicemail. There will be emergencies or deadline-related communication; these are exceptions, not the rule.

As a consultant, I cannot tell you how many texts I get at 10:15 pm asking if it is a good time to talk. No, it is not. A voicemail early Saturday morning demanding a call back as soon as I

get the message. Huh? Three emails in two hours, the subsequent ones asking why I haven't responded yet. Really? Being a consultant does not mean being on call for clients around the clock (unless the consultant chooses). Even some traditional employer-employee relationships cross the line with that expectation. Boundaries are for self-care and sanity.

In the same light as permitting yourself to be the boss of the grants management team, permit yourself to be human – the most significant reason humans burnout is lack of self-care. There are no absolutes in life or grant proposal writing. So, stop expecting absolutes and perfection. The beginnings of burnout start with “should-ing” ourselves – “I should be doing this, or I should have done that.” Next are the self-imposed expectation of perfection and the rigidity by attempting to achieve perfection. Grant proposal writing is difficult, and the feeling of inadequacy can creep in. Finally, unjustifiable ideas of Imposter Syndrome have been known to overtake the most experienced grant proposal writers. Self-doubt hits everyone at one time or another overriding any feelings of success or external proof of one's competence. Humans achieve and succeed so much more often than they fail. Grant proposal writing is much the same.

There are truly only two things in life over which we have no choice: death and taxes. When you permit yourself to make real choices, YOUR choices, you are truly self-caring. The choices are not always going to be what you want or expect. Desires and expectations are great. But the world is not going to stop revolving if some of those desires or expectations get re-routed. So stop should-ing all over yourself and beating yourself up when a re-route occurs. I taught you to breathe in the block on logic models when logic models seemed incredibly scary and impossible. Now, practice that in all of the other parts of your grant proposal writing world!