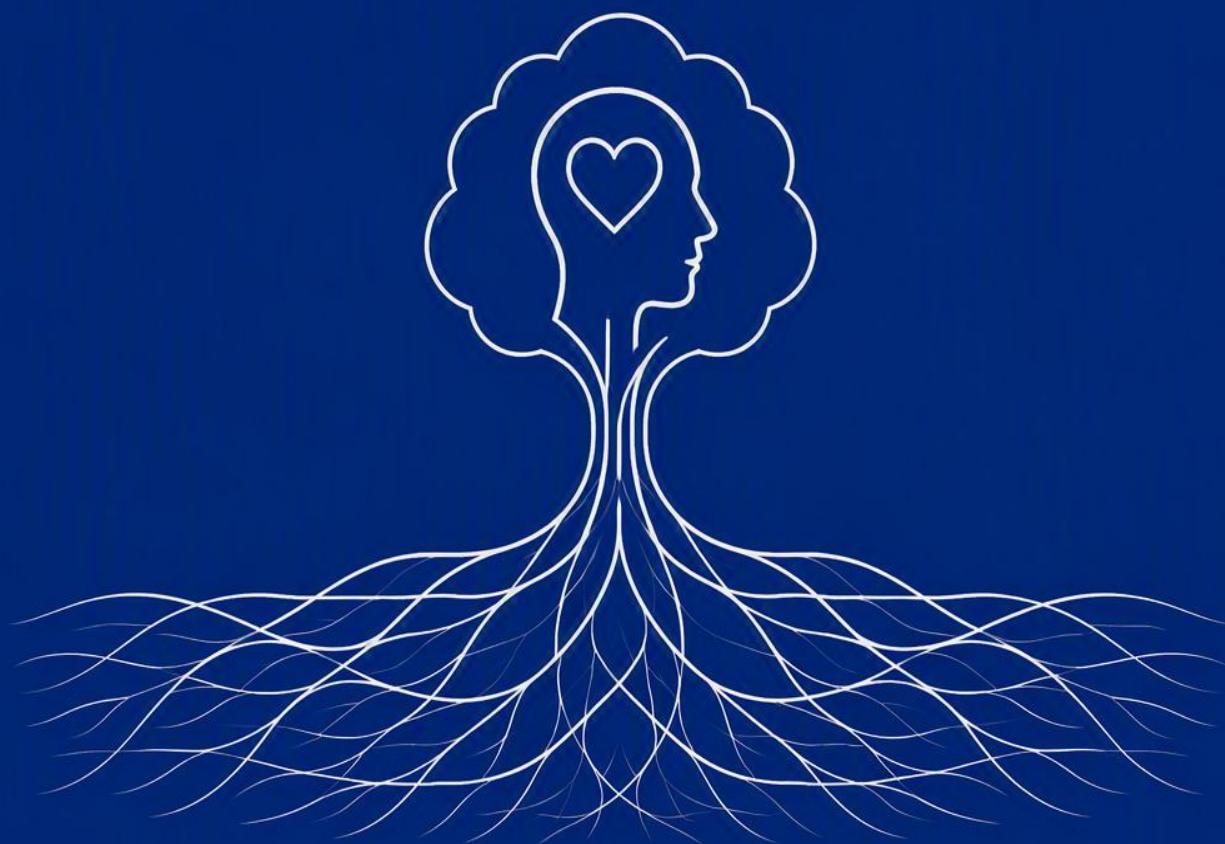




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A Psychological Resilience Guide for Civil Society Organizations



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**Transatlantic
Foundation**



A Psychological Resilience Guide for Civil Society

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1 The Role of Resilience in Civil Society Organizations

Today, civil society organizations across Central and Eastern Europe face similar challenges. Shrinking civic space, political and economic vulnerability, unpredictable funding structures, and targeted communication attacks and smear campaigns against the sector force nonprofit organizations into a state of continuous crisis management.

In this reality, psychological resilience, which is the ability for psychological adaptation, is neither a luxury nor a wellness initiative by HR reserved for team-building events. Nor does it represent yet another expectation for people to be simply “tougher.” Alongside legal and institutional compliance, digital security, and sustainable fundraising, strengthening individual and collective resilience has become a fundamental pillar of the survival and sustainable development of the civic sector.

Professionals working in civil society and social services often face a paradox. While they may be filling gaps in or support the functioning of social systems, work with marginalized communities, or support individuals and groups affected by severe trauma, their own psychological immune systems are often forced into a constant state of exhausting alertness. When environmental demands remain persistently high, individual adaptive capacity inevitably becomes depleted.

This guide was developed to help shift organizations away from merely enduring adversity toward a proactive, growth-oriented approach by providing a conceptual framework and practical tools.

Resilience does not mean being invulnerable. Rather, it is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. One of the most accurate metaphors is the tennis ball effect. Unlike rigid structures, such as a glass, which shatters once pressure exceeds a critical point, a tennis ball absorbs the force of impact by temporarily deforming. It compresses, changes shape, yet does not break; afterward it regains its original form. Applied to human behavior, resilience involves not only maintaining emotional stability but also learning from adversity and developing the capacity to grow amid uncertainty.

2 Dimensions of Resilience: Individual, Team, and Organizational Levels

Often the system mistakenly expects individuals to perform miracles. In the social and nonprofit sectors, professionals frequently face the unspoken expectation that complete dedication means solving issues on their own. This perspective falsely suggests that coping is simply a matter of individual willpower. In reality, psychological resilience is not an isolated personal characteristic. It is a dynamic, a systemic process in which individual, team, and organizational levels are interconnected and continuously influence one another.

These levels are mutually dependent. Weakness at any one level threatens the stability of the entire system. The foundation of this ecosystem is individual resilience, built upon personal resources, intentional self-care, healthy boundaries, and the ability to maintain intrinsic motivation. When this foundation becomes shaky, staff members inevitably become trapped in reactive functioning, limiting their ability to provide effective professional support.

Building upon this foundation is the team level, where solidarity among colleagues and shared social support create a collective protective shield. The sense of collective consciousness and belonging buffers the destructive effects of secondary trauma and external stressors while reducing the risk of early burnout.

Finally, organizational resilience provides the framework that sustains the entire process. Clearly defined structures, shared values, and an agile capacity to adapt to change create the stable environment in which individual and collective protective factors can flourish.

Resilience, therefore, is not merely the sum of individuals' coping capacities. Rather, it is the systemic outcome of organizational processes combined with group-level solidarity.

2.1 Individual Level

Within civil society work, effective individual coping is grounded in intentional self-care, preserving intrinsic motivation, and maintaining healthy personal boundaries. Research on psychological resilience consistently demonstrates that several personal characteristics strongly influence an individual's capacity to withstand stress.

- **Active coping:** Proactively addressing problems through action-oriented strategies, rather than passive endurance, is one of the strongest protective factors against burnout.
- **Emotional exhaustion:** Persistent stress often leads to cynicism, emotional numbness, and withdrawal, gradually depleting an individual's capacity to cope effectively.
- **Experience:** Years spent working in helping professions or civil society contribute to the development of stable internal frameworks and professional routines. As a result, more experienced practitioners are often better protected and more adaptable when responding to everyday crises.

2.2 Team Level

Team resilience functions as a shared psychosocial safety net capable of counterbalancing high levels of stress. Research on workplace well-being consistently identifies solidarity, trust, and mutual social support within teams as among the strongest factors promoting long-term engagement and retention.

The genuine shared professional identity that develops when staff members and volunteers no longer struggle as isolated individuals can serve as a psychological shield. Such a support network mitigates the

effects of secondary trauma, emotional overload, and external pressures, including political and societal hostility, thereby substantially reducing staff turnover and burnout.

2.3 Organizational Level

Organizational resilience is a complex process emerging from the interactions among employees, teams, and existing organizational systems. Its essential components include: clearly defined roles and responsibilities, the ability to adapt to change, transparent communication, and commitment to shared organizational values.

A civil society organization is resilient when its structures and leadership practices support, rather than drain the energy of its staff through bureaucracy, chaos, or excessive micromanagement.

3 The Phases of Psychological Coping

Psychological resilience and stress management are best understood as dynamic processes rather than fixed states. Within civil society organizations, coping with continuous pressure can be divided into three psychological phases.

3.1 Prevention and Resource Building (The Preparation Phase)

This phase focuses on intentionally developing psychological capital and coping capacity before critical stressors arise. It includes accumulating mental and emotional reserves, establishing self-care routines (such as maintaining healthy boundaries and sustainable daily habits), and strengthening social support networks. The objective is to ensure that individuals and communities encounter unexpected crises with sufficient internal resources rather than in a state of exhaustion.

3.2 Acute Coping (The Crisis Phase)

This phase encompasses the immediate psychological response to an acute stressor, such as a coordinated public attack, a traumatic event, or an unexpected loss. During this period, cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation become play a central role. The critical challenge is preventing individuals from freezing or losing their ability to act because of cognitive narrowing, which often is experienced as tunnel vision. At this stage, active problem-focused coping strategies and rapid stress-reduction techniques become essential.

3.3 Processing and Adaptation (The Recovery Phase)

Once the immediate crisis has passed, attention shifts to psychological processing and integration. This phase focuses on making sense of difficult experiences, resolving stress responses, and preventing chronic burnout or post-traumatic stress.

Successful processing does not simply restore the previous state of equilibrium. It can also lead to post-traumatic growth: a process through which individuals become psychologically more mature and better equipped to meet future challenges.

4 Diagnostics: The Stress Iceberg and Cognitive Narrowing

Work in the civic sector requires exceptionally high levels of emotional engagement. Consequently, chronic stress first manifests not in measurable performance indicators but in the psychological well-being of staff members. This phenomenon is known as the workplace stress iceberg effect. The visible warning signs above the surface, such as frequent absenteeism, open conflicts, or unexpected resignations, are almost always preceded by hidden psychological indicators below the surface.

If the organization and the community fail to recognize these hidden patterns in time, sustained pressure gradually leads to cognitive narrowing. A nervous system that is overloaded for a long time loses its flexibility: thinking becomes rigid and black-and-white, while a helping attitude is gradually replaced by cynicism and defensive emotional distancing.

It is essential to recognize that this emotional numbness is not a personal character flaw or evidence of a lack of commitment. Rather, it is a predictable, biologically driven response to prolonged exhaustion.

To assess the psychological capacity of both individuals and teams, organizations are encouraged to conduct an internal **well-being assessment** focusing on the following four critical areas:

1. Emotional exhaustion

Can chronic mental fatigue be observed? Do staff members already feel emotionally depleted before beginning their workday, finding it increasingly difficult to mobilize the energy that originally motivated their commitment to the organization's mission?

2. Compassion fatigue

Has the team's capacity for empathy diminished? Are emotional distancing, numbness, or hidden cynicism emerging toward beneficiaries, clients, victims, supported communities, or even toward new volunteers and colleagues?

3. Cognitive rigidity (tunnel vision)

Does problem-solving become increasingly restricted under pressure? Do staff members struggle to consider alternative solutions, perceiving every differing opinion or constructive criticism as an immediate threat?

4. Social isolation

Are team members withdrawing from interpersonal interactions? Has the supportive sense of community begun to erode, giving way to isolated struggle, silence, and the withholding of information?

5 Crisis Management Toolkit

The following tools are practical methods that can support coping and resilience at the individual and organizational levels. This is not intended to be a definitive or exhaustive list; it can be freely adapted and expanded.

5.1 Personal and Organizational STOP Protocol

When a team or its leader begins to show signs of cognitive overload—rushing, loss of focus, or freezing—the immediate application of a psychological “brake” is essential. The STOP protocol provides a conscious interruption point that prevents instinctive, panic-driven reactions.

S – Stop

Interrupt the current activity immediately. Step away from the screen, stand up from your chair, or put down your phone. Physically changing your environment is the first step toward breaking out of mental tunnel vision.

T – Take a breath

The over-activation of the sympathetic nervous system is most effectively regulated through conscious breathing. “Box breathing” (inhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds, pause for four seconds before the next breath) biologically encourages the body to return to a calmer state.

O – Observe

Take stock of your internal and external reality. What is the actual threat? What is being projected by anxiety rather than supported by evidence? Notice your emotions (anger, fear, helplessness) without judgment, then consciously distinguish them from objective facts.

P – Proceed

Return to the task in a calmer psychological state. At this point, your decisions are no longer being driven primarily by the brain’s survival system (the amygdala), but by the prefrontal cortex, which supports deliberate thinking, judgment, and decision-making.

5.2 The Fist Exercise

Stress is physically stored in our muscles. This exercise helps people consciously recognize and release bodily tension, allowing them to step out of emergency mode.

1. Clench one hand into a fist as tightly as possible. Hold this maximum tension for several seconds. This intentionally represents the body's current stress load and the effort of "holding everything together."
2. As you continue slow, natural breathing, begin to open your fingers gradually, millimeter by millimeter.
3. Pay close attention to the change in muscle tension and the sensation of releasing stress.

Key takeaway: Resilience is not the same as endurance or simply "holding on." True psychological resilience is the capacity to consciously let go of tension and to recover.

5.3 Communication and Decision-Making Under Pressure

Psychological narrowing within an organization is often first reflected in how members of the working community communicate. Passive-aggressive behavior, irritability, and blame are all signs that the system is overloaded.

The principle of delayed response

When faced with aggressive or accusatory external communication (except in situations involving immediate danger to life or suicide risk), avoid responding immediately out of emotional reactivity.

Instead, devote the first 30–60 minutes to clarifying the facts and consult internally.

Facts vs. projections board

During a crisis, maintain a shared platform where only verified facts are recorded.

Differentiate between the questions:

- What are we feeling?
- What do we actually know?

This technique forces the team to move beyond cognitive narrowing, improves situational awareness, and helps prevent catastrophizing.

5.4 Resilience Checklist

When an individual or an organization feels that stress is approaching the limits of sustainable functioning, the following questions can help identify warning signs.

Individual-level warning signs

- **Physical signals:** Am I experiencing persistent muscle tension, jaw clenching, or restless sleep?
- **Cognitive narrowing:** Can I still see alternative solutions, or have I become fixated on a single “must” solution?
- **Emotional disengagement:** Have I become cynical or emotionally detached from work that I previously cared deeply about?
- **Boundaries:** Have I crossed my own boundary that I previously set for myself during the past few days?

Team-level warning signs

- **Psychological safety:** Do team members feel safe asking questions or admitting mistakes without fearing negative consequences?
- **Information-sharing:** Does everyone have access to the same information, or have “knowledge islands” developed that overload some people while excluding others?
- **Decision-making:** Is it clear who makes decisions if the designated leader becomes overwhelmed, isolated, or exhausted?
- **Support:** During the past week, have people had opportunities to share burdens, or is everyone fighting alone?

6 Strategic Integration: Embedding Resilience Into Everyday Operations

For resilience to become more than a theoretical objective or an emergency response tool, it must be integrated into the organization’s everyday culture and routines. The goal is for mental well-being to become an integral part of professional practice rather than an additional responsibility.

6.1 Leadership Through Care

One of a leader's primary responsibilities is safeguarding the team's emotional and psychological capacity. The "martyr leader" mentality occurs when the leader attempts to take on every operational responsibility themselves. This behavior is not heroic, but instead it signals structural weakness that quickly leads to burnout throughout the team.

Long-term organizational stability depends on leadership intentionally creating space to:

- Monitor organizational well-being
- Recognize early signs of burnout
- Maintain protective support systems

6.2 Building a Supportive Infrastructure

Protecting the mental well-being of a team cannot rely solely on informal conversations or spontaneous opportunities to "talk things through." Sustainable functioning requires the deliberate creation of supportive structures.

Engaging external support

Regular supervision or facilitated case discussions are not signs of weakness or professional inadequacy. Rather, they are essential forms of professional and emotional "ventilation."

These spaces help ensure that the emotional weight of difficult cases and demanding work does not accumulate and remain with staff members.

Planned recovery

Retreats, scheduled breaks, and opportunities for restoration should not be viewed as interruptions to work, but as essential components of an organization's psychological recovery and long-term effectiveness.

6.3 The Team's Internal Compass: Caring for the Team

At the beginning of each week, or as part of regular team meetings, it is worth briefly reflecting on the following questions:

Time boundaries

- Are the agreed boundaries around working hours and digital availability being respected?
- Do we protect one another's rest time in order to prevent a chronic state of constant availability?

Psychological safety

- Is there a space where colleagues can safely express emotional strain or signs of secondary trauma without fear of negative consequences?

Sense of community

- Are there any rituals in our work that strengthen solidarity and reinforce a sense of “we”?

Recognizing the process

- At the end of the week, do we acknowledge not only achievements and outcomes, but also the effort of coping together and maintaining team cohesion?

7 Practical Case Studies and Reflective Scenarios

This section is intended to support the practical application of the concepts presented throughout this guide. The purpose of these scenarios is not merely to recognize organizational dynamics in theory, but to help teams become aware of the often invisible patterns affecting their own functioning. Two frequently encountered situations are presented here, yet the reflection questions can easily be adapted to circumstances within your own organization.

7.1 Scenario: The Invisible Walls (The Dynamics of Organizational Narrowing)

Situation

The organization has fallen into a constant “firefighting mode.” Communication consists almost entirely of hurried, fragmented messages, while deeper professional discussions have been pushed aside. Mistakes are becoming more frequent and deadlines are slipping, yet nobody speaks up because everyone can see that their colleagues are already overwhelmed. Silence, emotional exhaustion, and quiet withdrawal have become the dominant features of the organizational culture.

Reflection tasks

1. Diagnosis

Identify the hidden symptoms beneath the “stress iceberg.” What unspoken tensions are contributing to declining effectiveness?

2. Micro-interventions

Design three interventions lasting 15–20 minutes each that could provide the team with breathing space and opportunities for cognitive recovery during the coming week.

Important: Do not create additional work. Instead, redesign existing routines to create space for recovery.

3. Reflection

What were the steps that led to organizational culture acknowledging overload a “forbidden topic”? What leadership or organizational message would be needed so that the practice of asking for help is seen at a fundamental professional practice, and not a sign of weakness?

7.2 Scenario: When the Shield Cracks (A Crisis of Solidarity)

Situation

Two highly qualified new employees join the organization. The newcomers expect more efficient and structured ways of working, while long-standing staff remain attached to the organization’s previous informal, values-driven, family-like culture. The resulting tension remains largely unspoken. People stop gathering informally over coffee. Cliques begin to form. When the organization later faces external attacks, the team is unable to respond as a united front because internal trust has already been weakened.

Reflection tasks

1. Analysis

Using the concept of psychological safety, explain why this internal division left the organization vulnerable. Why was professional competence alone insufficient to protect the organization during an external crisis?

2. Action plan for rebuilding a shared identity

- How could dialogue be initiated so that the professional perspectives of the newcomers and the values of long-standing staff are represented?
- Develop a shared process through which the team can once again experience the strength of solidarity, while ensuring that newer colleagues do not feel excluded.

3. The leader’s role

What can a leader do in this situation if they wish to intervene constructively without appearing to take either side?

Guidance for facilitators

These scenarios are not intended to identify “correct answers.” The facilitator’s role is to help participants recognize that what appear to be technical problems, such as missed deadlines or procedural difficulties, are often rooted in psychological and relational processes. The solution is therefore rarely limited to improved time management or additional regulations. More often, it lies in restoring social support, rebuilding trust, and strengthening psychological safety within the organization.

8 Resilience Is Never a Finished State

Whether in civil society work or in our personal lives, resilience is not a state that once we reach, we can lean back.

Resilience is simultaneously:

- **A process:** how we manage the demands of everyday life
- **An outcome:** how we emerge from crises stronger and wiser
- **A consequence:** the inner stability and confidence that gradually develop through these experiences

This guide is written as a reminder that not only external pressure can be dangerous but also isolation and psychological narrowing. Resilience does not mean being capable of carrying an unlimited burden. This misconception is a clear path to burnout. Resilience means knowing when to let go of the hardship, who you can share it with, and how to preserve your professional integrity while working under sustained pressure. When you pause so that panic does not dictate your actions, when you acknowledge that your capacity is finite, and when you accept responsibility for one another as a community, only then you are doing more than surviving crises and creating resilience.

This guide is a toolbox, but the work belongs to you. Resilience does not reside in protocols alone. It lives in the shared commitment through which those protocols become meaningful in practice. Ultimately, it is not the procedures that protect you, but the alliance you build with one another. Resilience is a deliberate act. By cultivating it, you not only strengthen yourselves and your organization but also safeguard the shared mission that motivates your work every day.

Resilience is therefore also the foundation of professional freedom: the inner space that allows you to remain capable of thoughtful action, even under external pressure, while preserving your belief in the value of the work you do.



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