



EMPATHIC STRAIN: BEYOND BURNOUT

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Purpose

- Understand the phrase “empathic strain” in relation to burnout, primary trauma, secondary/vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue.
- Increase self-awareness about factors influencing the stress level in your life.
- Identify factors in your life that you can change.
- Decide where to begin making positive change.

Background

In brief, empathic strain is helping-induced stress. When we experience empathic strain we endure an erosion of our ability to empathize with people when they express intense feelings and tell difficult stories to us. Empathic strain is most evident in helping professions and caregiver roles. Repeated exposure to the hardships that others are coping with - secondary traumatic stress - can lead to fundamental changes in our own worldviews, cause nightmares, create an inability to stop visualizing certain images, and form unhealthy obsessions with specific stories or events.

Empathic strain was originally referred to as compassion fatigue.¹

How To

Step One:

Understand where your stress comes from at work and in your personal life.

Taking time to consider the trauma inputs in your life will make understanding your stress levels much easier. Trauma inputs include personal vulnerabilities, work-related traumatic grief/loss, direct exposure, indirect trauma, empathic strain, systems failure, working conditions, and socio-cultural context. You can learn more about [trauma inputs](#) here. These trauma inputs impact our physical, behavioural, psychological, and emotional wellbeing. Ask yourself: “what are my symptoms of chronic stress in each of these areas?”

Tool: [Body Scan Exercise](#)

¹ More information on the reason for the change from compassion fatigue to empathic can be found in “[Why It Is Time to Stop Using ‘Compassion Fatigue’](#)” by Françoise Mathieu.

Step Two:

Increase self-care and strengthen work/life balance.

We often hear about the evasive idea of a work/life balance but most of us view this notion as an unrealistic ideal. Setting aside time for ourselves is very difficult; when we try to create that space, we often feel restless, guilty, or bored. If we can make sure we do just one nourishing activity a day, that simple change can have immense impact. Ask yourself: “can I keep one hour, one evening, or half a day per week to self-care?” and “is there anything I can pass on to someone else or say “no” to?” Write a list of activities that are restful for you; in a given week, how often do you partake in these activities now? How often do you wish you could partake in these activities every week. For a two-week period, record actions that you could delegate.

Tool: [Self-care Inventory](#)

Step Three:

Build resiliency with relaxation and stress reduction practices.

When we get overwhelmed our health and wellness tends to be the first part of our lives that we stop putting energy into; we say we “don’t have time” to take proper care of ourselves. When we enter the stress response cycle our cortisol and adrenaline levels increase substantially and we choose to fight or flee. Whether we choose to engage with the stressor (fight) or attempt to avoid the stressor (flee) at the end of our fight or flight we often forget to complete the stress cycle. Our stress response is chronically activated until we take ourselves out of the stress cycle.

Tool: [Release your stress](#)

Step Four:

Commit to change.

In the month to come, commit to making one positive personal and professional life change that will strengthen your self-care and widen the gap between you and empathic erosion. Consider who the members of your emotional village are – people who offer support and hold you accountable in a positive way. Choose one of these people and share your commitment with them; ask that person to help you maintain the change.

Tool: [Self-care action plan](#)

References

Mathieu, F. (2021 August 26). *Why It Is Time to Stop Using “Compassion Fatigue.”* Tend Academy. <https://www.tendacademy.ca/stop-using-compassion-fatigue/>