

# EMPATHIC STRAIN

## *An occupational hazard in helping professions*

Some helpers' roles evolve and expand in response to increasing emotional, cognitive, and behavioural needs of those who need it. They often need to respond to emotional and behavioural crises in their work, and hear about the traumas that individuals are facing. As a result, those working with vulnerable populations are at a higher risk for experiencing occupational hazards, such as empathic strain.

### WHAT IS EMPATHIC STRAIN?

Empathic strain is caused by empathy. It is the natural consequence of stress resulting from caring for and helping traumatized or suffering people. It refers to the profound emotional and physical exhaustion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate. Empathic strain affects the most caring of individuals and has been described as "the cost of caring" for others in emotional pain.

### EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Early recognition and intervention is important; without intervention empathic strain may negatively impact personal, social and occupational functioning and increase risk for burnout and other mental health conditions.

#### Behavioural



- Absenteeism
- Arriving Late
- General Irresponsibility

#### Performance



- Decreased work quality
- Low motivation
- forgetfulness

#### Relational



- Detached withdrawal
- Impatient
- Poor communication

#### Morale



- Decreased confidence
- Apathy
- Loss of interest

### Personal

#### Physical



- Headache
- Fatigue
- Hypertension

#### Emotional



- Anxiety
- Loss of control
- Distressed

#### Cognitive



- Pessimism
- Diminished Concentration
- Unwanted thoughts

#### Spiritual



- Loss of purpose/meaning
- Questioning the good in the world

#### Relational



- Withdrawn or isolated from loved ones
- Distrust of loved ones

#### Behavioural



- Increased irritability
- Easily startled
- Neglect self care

The work of helping requires those in various professions to open their hearts and minds to those they work with – unfortunately, this very process is what makes these workers vulnerable to being profoundly affected by their work and yet it is an essential skill to maintain in order to be effective, ethical and compassionate.



## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Openly discussing and recognizing empathic strain in the workplace
- Regular check-in times and debriefing sessions.
- Personal, professional, and emotional boundaries between work and home
- A strong support network (professionally and personally)
- Regular contact with friends and loved ones and participation in hobbies and special interests
- Prioritizing self-care; including practicing mindfulness techniques
- A supportive community



## RISK FACTORS

- Prior traumatic experiences
- Social isolation, in both personal and professional life
- Avoid feelings, withdraw, or assign blame to others in stressful situations
- Difficulty expressing feelings
- Lack of preparation, orientation, training, and supervision in their jobs
- Constant and intense exposure to trauma with little or no variation in work tasks
- Lack of an effective and supportive process for discussing traumatic content of the work

Higher levels of empathic strain can be seen in people who care for individuals with histories of trauma and include witnessing the social, behavioural, and academic costs of these traumas.

## Tips for coping with empathic strain



### Focus on Making Healthy Choices

Maintain physical, mental and spiritual health by practicing healthy habits (e.g., nutrition, exercise, rest, spending time outdoors). Strive to sleep and eat well. Drink enough fluids to stay hydrated.



### Practice Self Compassion

Be kind to yourself, notice your thoughts and emotions without judging them, and take a broader outlook by putting them into perspective, understanding that you are a human being and you are not perfect. Focus on the things that are in your control and try to notice and celebrate successes both big and small.



### Stay Grounded

When you feel overwhelmed. Try to ground yourself by using your senses (what you see, hear, touch, smell or taste) to be in the present moment.



### Remember It's Okay to say NO

Problems are inevitable when we have inadequate boundaries and sacrifice ourselves in the pursuit of caring of others. It is okay to say no. Honor your own needs.



### Avoid Unhelpful Coping

Try to avoid increasing use of alcohol and other drugs. Although substances may help feelings seem more manageable in the short term, they can also lead to dependence and keep you from addressing issues over which you have control.



### Find time for Self Care

You need to take care of yourself first, and allow others to care for you, to be able to do your best work in caring for others. Engage in your daily stretching exercises and breathing exercises. Set time for yourself daily, no matter how long it could be.

## For Additional Support

One place to seek support is with your employer. Employees have access to multiple supports including an employee assistance program, which offers short-term counseling and referrals. Also, our local health authority has a variety of services ranging from self directed, individual and group counselling.

## Duty to Report

Every person has a legal responsibility to report suspected abuse and neglect for children and youth. Abuse and neglect can take many forms, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. This helps ensure the safety and well-being of our children. To report a concern of suspected child abuse and/or neglect in NL, call toll-free 1-833-552-2368.

For more information visit us at:  
[www.DECYDE.ca](http://www.DECYDE.ca)

### References

1. Canadian Medical Association. (2020, December 8). Physical Wellness Hub. empathic strain: Signs, symptoms and how to cope. Canadian Medical Association. <https://www.cma.ca/physician-wellness-hub/content/compassion-fatigue>
2. Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (n.d.). Is there a cost to protecting, caring for and saving others? Beware of empathic strain. <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/is-there-a-cost-to-protecting-caring-for-and-saving-others-beware-of-compassion-fatigue>
3. Power (2020). empathic strain. Science Direct.
4. Hupe and Stevenson (2019) Teachers' intentions to report suspected child abuse: the influence of empathic strain, Journal of Child Custody.
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