



Understanding Empathic Strain: Identification and Action Plan

The aim of this form is to create a personalized plan for your well-being. If you have concerns with any of the questions, please speak with your direct supervisor.

Empathic Strain, previously known as 'compassion fatigue,' refers to the stress induced by helping clients. When we experience empathic strain, our capacity to empathize diminishes, particularly when individuals share intense emotions or recount difficult experiences. This phenomenon is most prevalent in professions involving caregiving or support. Continuous exposure to clients' hardships can result in secondary traumatic stress, leading to significant shifts in our perspectives, emotional distancing, dehumanization, persistent visualizations, nightmares, and unhealthy fixation on specific narratives.

Burnout, on the other hand, manifests as physical and emotional exhaustion due to factors such as low job satisfaction, feelings of powerlessness, work overload, and insufficient recognition or support from supervisors. Importantly, burnout does not necessarily entail a change in your worldview or a loss of compassion for clients.

It is crucial to distinguish between Empathic Strain and Burnout, as they exhibit similar symptoms and may overlap in some cases.

1. What are some risk factors in your life for Empathic Strain (ES)?

Personal Risk Factors:

- High Empathy Levels:** Individuals with exceptionally high levels of empathy may be more prone to empathic strain as they deeply feel and internalize the emotions of clients.
- Limited Emotional Safeguards:** Difficulty in establishing clear emotional boundaries may lead to absorbing clients' emotions excessively, contributing to empathic strain.
- Past Trauma or Grief:** Personal experiences with trauma or grief may heighten sensitivity, making it challenging to handle the emotional burdens of clients without experiencing strain.
- Undeveloped Coping Mechanisms:** Low levels of coping mechanisms for stress or emotional overload can leave individuals vulnerable to empathic strain.
- Perfectionism:** A strong desire for perfectionism may lead to heightened stress when faced with the perceived inability to alleviate clients' suffering or solve problems.

Over-Identification: Tendency to over-identify with clients, blurring the lines between your own emotions and those of clients, can contribute to empathic strain.

Systemic Oppression: Impacted by oppressive systems such as racism, colonialism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.

Professional Risk Factors:

High Workload: Excessive demands and workload, especially in professions requiring constant empathy may contribute to empathic strain.

Lack of Support Systems: Absence of adequate support, such as supervision, mentorship, or peer support, can amplify the impact of empathic strain.

Chronic Exposure to Trauma: Professions dealing with continual exposure to traumatic situations may face an increased risk of empathic strain.

Limited Autonomy: Lack of autonomy or control over one's work environment may contribute to a sense of helplessness, exacerbating empathic strain.

Unclear Role Boundaries: Ambiguity in professional roles and responsibilities may make it challenging to establish clear emotional boundaries, leading to empathic strain.

Lack of Training in Coping Skills: Insufficient training in stress management, emotional regulation, and coping strategies can leave professionals ill-equipped to handle empathic strain.

Other:

2. Have you experienced Empathic Strain in the past? If so, were there particular factors involved? What did you feel (physically, emotionally, or spiritually)? If you haven't experienced this before, what are some ways that you would know you're feeling Empathic Strain?

3. How might your team know that you're experiencing Empathic Strain?

4. Here are some examples of self-care strategies or work practices that may be helpful to you in preventing or recovering from Empathic Strain:

Establish and Maintain Boundaries:

- Clearly define personal and professional boundaries to prevent emotional overload.
- Learn to say no when necessary to avoid taking on too much emotionally.

Regular Reflection and Supervision:

- Engage in regular reflection on your experiences, seeking supervision or mentorship when needed.
- Discuss challenging cases or situations with colleagues to gain insights and support.

Mindfulness and Meditation:

- Incorporate mindfulness and meditation techniques into your daily routine to stay present and manage stress.
- Practice deep breathing exercises to help regulate emotions.

Physical Exercise:

- Engage in regular physical activity to release built-up tension and stress.
- Exercise has positive effects on mental health and can help prevent burnout.

Hobbies and Creative Outlets:

- Pursue hobbies and creative outlets that bring joy and relaxation.
- Having activities outside of work helps to balance and enrich your life.

Regular Breaks and Vacations:

- Take breaks during the workday to recharge and step away from emotionally challenging situations.
- Plan and take regular vacations to disconnect and rejuvenate.

Healthy Lifestyle Choices:

- Prioritize a balanced and nutritious diet to support overall well-being.

- Ensure adequate sleep to promote emotional resilience and cognitive function.

Seek Emotional Support:

- Build a strong support network of friends, family, or colleagues with whom you can share your feelings.
- Consider professional counseling or therapy to address and process emotions.

Set Realistic Expectations:

- Establish realistic expectations for yourself and others.
- Accept that you cannot always control or fix every situation.

Celebrate Successes:

- Acknowledge and celebrate your successes and positive contributions.
- Focusing on positive outcomes can help counterbalance the emotional challenges.

Regular Check-ins with Yourself:

- Schedule regular self-assessment check-ins to monitor your emotional well-being.
- Adjust self-care strategies based on your evolving needs.

5. The following are some ways that SASC Managers can support you in reducing the risk or impact of Empathic Strain.

Promote Open Communication:

- Encourage open and honest communication within the team.
- Create a culture where team members feel comfortable discussing their emotions and challenges.

Provide Adequate Training:

- Offer training on stress management, emotional regulation, and coping strategies.
- Ensure that team members are well-equipped with the necessary skills to handle emotional challenges.

Foster a Positive Work Environment:

- Cultivate a positive and supportive workplace culture.
- Recognize and celebrate achievements to boost morale.

Encourage Team Bonding:

- Facilitate team-building activities to strengthen interpersonal connections.
- Foster a sense of camaraderie and support within the team.

Offer Regular Supervision and Support:

- Provide regular supervision to discuss challenging cases and offer guidance.
- Be available to listen and offer support when team members are facing emotional difficulties.

Promote Work-Life Balance:

- Encourage and model a healthy work-life balance.
- Encourage employees to take breaks and vacations and not work over their standard hours.

Provide Resources for Self-Care:

- Offer resources and information on self-care practices.
- Consider providing access to wellness programs or initiatives.

Recognize and Address Signs of Strain:

- Train managers to recognize signs of empathic strain in their team members.
- Take proactive steps to address potential issues before they escalate.

Flexible Work Arrangements:

- Consider flexible work arrangements to accommodate individual needs.
- This may include options for remote work or adjusted schedules.

Promote a Culture of Empathy:

- Emphasize the importance of empathy as a valuable skill within the team.
- Foster a culture where team members support each other emotionally.

Regularly Check-In on Well-being:

- Schedule regular check-ins with team members to discuss their well-being.
- Create a safe space for employees to express concerns or seek assistance.

Provide Access to Mental Health Support:

- Encourage the use of SASC's Benefits plan to access support if applicable
- Remove stigma around seeking mental health support.

Monitor Workload and Responsibilities:

- Keep a close eye on team members' workloads and responsibilities.
- Ensure that workload is manageable and reasonable.

Address Systemic Issues:

- Identify and address systemic issues within the organization that may contribute to empathic strain.
- Work towards creating a supportive and empathetic organizational culture.

Other:

Empathic Strain Action Plan

Using the answers above, what concrete steps can we commit to as a team to reduce, and manage empathic strain?

What I Can Do	What My Manager(s) Can Do	What We Can Work on Together