



# Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

## Session 4: Placing Yourself Front and Center

**Purpose:** In this session, we will discuss the science of empathy and offer exercises to help with managing difficult emotions.

### FACILITATOR PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS



Have a self-compassion exercise ready for the end of this session. You can choose your own or use one of the exercises from Kristin Neff, a leading expert on self-compassion.

You can access her self-compassion exercises [here](#).

The bulk of this session is spent in a large group format, with the facilitator providing the group with some ideas and information, then discussing and reflecting with the large group. As the facilitator, take extra time to read through the discussions and have an idea of what you are trying to help the group think through.

Striving for “balanced empathy” does not mean there is a right or wrong to showing empathy. There will be times and scenarios when we feel shut-down (under empathy) or need to save someone by jumping in and fixing the situation (over empathy). This exercise should help us to identify what it looks like when we are in “under or over” empathic states and what we can do to move into a more balanced place.

The concept of empathy isn’t new, and it won’t be “new” to the people in your group. Empathy is absolutely crucial to the helping role. If people can’t be empathic, they can do damage to others. It’s as simple as that. While both crucial and commonly mentioned, empathy is not always well-defined or intentional. To that end, this discussion is likely to bring up lots of emotions in the group—perhaps strong feelings about how their own experience isn’t what’s needed here. The best you can do is to reflect all the viewpoints in the room empathically, rely on the science, and make space for people to come to this, recognizing that some people might need time outside of this hour to absorb what you discuss.

## Starting a Session:

- ▶ **Note:** Throughout this workbook we use the terms “Helper” to describe professionals working in the behavioral healthcare field, often in community-based settings, who are supporting individuals in addressing substance use, mental health, or co-occurring conditions. At times, we use the term “Helpee” to describe the individuals the Helper is working with. We chose to do this so that the lessons in the workbook can be used by a wide variety of professionals who live, work, and play in the same community of the people they serve.
- ▶ **Prepare yourself for the meeting:** Take some time to review and think about the session purpose. Do you have any examples or useful stories to share on the topic
- ▶ **Prepare the room for the meeting:** Arrive 20-30 minutes early to arrange the room. If possible, put chairs in a circle large enough so everyone can easily find a seat. Have pens and paper available just in case someone wants to take notes.
- ▶ **Start the meeting:** As people arrive, be sure to make eye contact and say hello, greeting them by name if you've met before. Start the meeting on time or within 5 minutes of the designated start time. A simple “Let's get started” or “It's 5 minutes after the hour, why don't we begin the meeting” works great.
- ▶ **Give introductions and information:** Introduce yourself briefly, the overall purpose of the session series (Recognizing and Preventing Empathetic Distress) and the purpose of the session.

## FACILITATOR:



**Summarize (3 minutes):** As Helpers, we have unique and powerful roles. Unlike perhaps most of the other people helping the people we work with, we've experienced similar situations. This experience can be a good thing (it may be easy to tap into the place where we can imagine what the person is going through), AND it may be a bit of a trap. When we assume we've had the same experience, we can accidentally downplay the person's experiences. situations with curiosity, recognizing that microaggressions are often unintentional.



**Discuss as a large group (3 minutes):** Ways you recognize how your feelings are getting in the way of your work as a Helper.



**Summarize (5 minutes):** For a moment, let's consider empathy. It's a word that gets frequently tossed around in our work. As Helpers, we know we're supposed to have empathy.

How much time have we spent considering what it really is?

- ▶ What thoughts or intentions do we put into displaying it in our work?
- ▶ What do we know about how good it is for the people we work with?
- ▶ What do we know about how feeling empathic and displaying empathy are good for yourself?
- ▶ We're going to talk about all of this today.

How do you define empathy? What have you learned about it?

#### Science tells us that empathy is:

- ▶ Awareness of the feelings and emotions of other people
- ▶ A key element of emotional intelligence, the link between self and others
- ▶ How we as individuals understand what others are experiencing as if we were feeling it ourselves
- ▶ Not having had the same experience or problem and not telling people our story

So once we know what empathy is, we can figure out how to intentionally bring less, some, or more of it into our work.

#### Let's start by discussing over, under, and just right empathy. (10 minutes)



**Discuss as a large group:** What might under empathy be?

**Summarize:** This might happen when the other person has empathy by thought but not by feeling. For example, someone who excels at persuading might have cognitive or thought empathy—allowing them to think about how best to hurt someone without having any sympathy or fellow feeling.



**Discuss as a large group:** What examples can you think of where another person's attempt at empathy seemed not real, off-putting, like they were putting on a mask? What might over empathy be? HINT: This is where we can be super vulnerable, and things can easily go awry.

**Summarize (3 minutes):** Over empathy is when you literally feel the other person's emotions alongside them as if you are "caught up" in their emotions.

Over empathy is closer to the usual understanding of empathy, but more emotional. For example, babies smile at their mother's smiling face or cry when they hear another baby cry. While on the one hand, it might mean we can more readily understand other people's emotions, it can lead to burnout. It's not good AT ALL because we can get overloaded.



**Discuss as a large group (5 minutes):** Please share examples from your own work where you have or have been tempted to be over-empathic. It's not unusual or abnormal for you to have done this. Please feel free to share.

(If no one shares, the group facilitator should be prepared to share an example.)

**Summarize (3 minutes):** So what we want is "just right" empathy, finding the balance between logic and emotion?

Just-right empathy involves experiencing someone else's pain as if it were happening to us, expressing the right amount of sympathy all while staying in control of our own emotions and applying reason to the situation. This balance means we can make better decisions and provide appropriate support to them when and where it's necessary.



**Discuss as a large group (3 minutes):** So what's the difference? How do we stay out of the realm of sympathy and stay in the empathy camp?

**Summarize (3 minutes):** The other real danger is that we might end up "over-owning" the other person's experiences. Empathy is balanced. It's the balance between logic and emotion. And while we are present, it's not *our* emotions— it's the emotions of the person we are working with.



**Exercise (10 minutes):** Have participants get into groups of 3-4. Provide instructions for the group.

**Instructions:** Be empowered to be present with others and their experiences while not owning those feelings.

But what if we are trying to be there for the person and be there with THEIR emotions, and ours just keep coming up?

We'll take 10 minutes for your small group to brainstorm responses to the following questions:

What do you or what could you do when your emotions are getting in the way of you being able to be balanced between logic and feeling?

What do you do when you're out of balance?



**Debrief as a large group (10 minutes):**

Make a list of the options generated by the group. Below are just a few suggestions:

- ▶ Recognize the relationship between your ability to extend acceptance to others and your self-acceptance.
- ▶ Build awareness of how you feel and what comes up in you when talking with the people you work with. Notice how you accept or deny your own feelings.
- ▶ Acceptance. Be thinking on a universal/human level, put aside assumptions because of shared identity
- ▶ Strategies in place to talk about what is coming up—reflective supervision time
- ▶ Above all, remember: you can't be in someone else's shoes until you take off your own.

**Session Debrief:** End this session with a self-compassion exercise.