

# Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

## Session 7: Coming up for Air

**Purpose:** In this session, we will discuss how to recognize signs of empathic distress

### FACILITATOR PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS



If possible, have a couple of sheets of large sticky note paper on a wall where participants can see them, and have markers ready before the session. If sticky note paper is not available, have a notebook handy to take notes during the session.

- ▶ Take notes of what is said during the large group debrief using a large sticky note or notebook. At the end of the debrief, read through the ways to support each other at work when we are experiencing empathic distress.
- ▶ Be mindful of the energy in the room. Check in on group members as they respond to the questions and during small group interactions. Remind participants to approach this topic with curiosity rather than trying to problem-solve.

### 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 (5 minutes):** Empathy is necessary in helping professions. In our previous sessions, we've discussed skills that help us cultivate empathy and compassion in healthy ways. In this session, we will explore the signs of empathic distress and discuss what we can do when experiencing it.

Remind the group of the definition of empathic distress:<sup>1</sup>

*Empathic distress is the strong aversive and self-oriented response to the suffering of others, accompanied by the desire to withdraw from a situation to protect oneself from excessive negative feelings.*

**Discuss as a large group (5 minutes):** Ask a couple of group members to talk about what the definition of empathic distress means to them.

**Summarize (10 minutes):** No matter the type of helping profession we are in, there will be times when life and work ask more of us than we can give. When we feel overwhelmed, we may experience signs of empathic distress:

- ▶ Lack of energy to participate in what you usually enjoy
- ▶ Feeling fear, dread
- ▶ Feeling disconnected and numb
- ▶ Obsessive thoughts about the suffering of others
- ▶ Feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, powerless
- ▶ Feeling unable to relate to others
- ▶ Inability to concentrate
- ▶ Feeling tired/exhausted, regardless of how much you sleep
- ▶ Frequent headaches or stomach aches
- ▶ Arguing with coworkers, friends, family

In the article [Facing the Shadow Side of Empathy](#), author Elizabeth Scarlett poses 4 questions that help us to recognize if we are experiencing empathic distress. Remind the group that there are no right or wrong answers. Give the group 10 minutes of silent introspection to write down their responses. It is perfectly okay to take a break, stand up, and walk around the room.

**Introspection (5 minutes):** Take out a sheet of paper or notebook and respond to the following questions:

1. How full is my cup?
2. How connected do I feel to the things that are important to me?
3. Does my discomfort feel self-focused or other-focused?
4. Am I feeling the need to avoid parts of my life?



**Exercise (15 minutes):** Have participants get into groups of 3–4. Provide instructions for the group.

**Instructions:** Discuss your responses to the above questions. Remember, while someone is sharing their responses, practice active listening (leaning forward or nodding, not interrupting, offering reflections, withholding judgment, and NOT offering advice). When a speaker is done sharing, the listener(s) can offer an affirmation, validation, or ask an open-ended question. Take turns until everyone has shared. We'll spend 15 minutes in small groups; everyone will have about 5 minutes of uninterrupted time to share.

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

- ▶ What does empathic distress look like in our work?
- ▶ How might knowing more about empathic distress change the ways you provide support?
- ▶ When providing support, what are you currently doing that you feel confident is working well?
- ▶ What about providing support is challenging you?
- ▶ What are ways we can support our colleagues who are experiencing empathic distress?



**Session Debrief:**

Discuss ways to recognize empathic distress in ourselves and others. Identify what you and others can do that will feel supportive.