



Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

*Kris Kelly, BS
Laura A. Saunders, MSSW*

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Great Lakes ATTC, MHTTC, PTTC
University of Wisconsin–Madison
1513 University Ave.
Madison, WI 53705

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Introduction

Helping day in and day out is taxing. Doing it without good training and support is nearly impossible. We've written the *Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook* and accompanying *Facilitator's Guide* with great care in hopes that it serves you well in helping Helpers overcome common challenges.

Getting Started

The *Facilitator's Guide* provides instruction and insight into facilitating the 10 sessions contained in the *Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook*. We highly encourage you to thoroughly read and familiarize yourself with the entire *Facilitator's Guide* before facilitating the 10 sessions in the *Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook*.

Once you feel comfortable with the content in the *Facilitator's Guide*, read through the 10 sessions. Each session is formatted as an individual worksheet, and all group participants will need to access the applicable worksheet at the beginning of the session. We recommend that you complete the sessions in order starting with Session 1 and working your way through session 10.


Our Inspiration: Motivational Interviewing & Person-Centered Care

Taking our collective experiences in Motivational Interviewing and community-based, person-centered care, we constructed or adapted the work of people who inspire us to develop the *Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook*. We created it to encourage YOU and your helping colleagues to move further along the excellence in helping continuum. Reaching toward that excellence is a lifelong journey. We're never really DONE learning about how to help.

While we've shared all that we know, the best teachers for how to help are the people we walk alongside—the people doing the actual hard work of changing and growing. Pay attention to them and what they're saying to you. How are they reacting to you? What do you want them to say about you to their other supporters? Thinking about that and observing how your presence and voice are received will improve your helping.

We're all a work in progress. Perfection isn't likely or necessary. One thing this workbook will not do is replace all you already possess in personal wisdom, training, and support. The *Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook* is intended as just a boost. We're glad you're here!

All our best,
Kris & Laura

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- ▶ **NOTE:** Throughout this workbook, we use the term **Helper** to describe professionals working in the behavioral healthcare field, often in community-based settings, who support 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 as the people they serve.

What is empathic distress?

Before we jump into what we mean by empathic distress, let's start by looking at the different forms and meanings of empathy.

Daniel Goleman is a psychologist and the author of the book *Emotional Intelligence*.¹ He posits that empathy is a crucial component of emotional intelligence and a key factor in building successful relationships, both personal and professional. Miller and Moyers (2013) remind us that Helpers who aren't empathic can do damage to their Helpees. People are better off with no help than help from a non-empathic provider.²

Goleman emphasizes the importance of developing empathy as a skill, not just a trait. He also points out that empathy is not just about feeling someone else's emotions but also being able to understand and communicate with them effectively. Goleman believes that empathy can be learned and cultivated through practice and mindfulness. He also notes that excessive empathy can lead to burnout and suggests that individuals need to balance empathy with self-care and setting appropriate boundaries.

According to Goldman, there are three types of empathy: cognitive, emotional, and compassionate empathy. They all involve the ability to understand, feel, and respond to the emotions of others, but there are some key differences between them.

1) Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand others' perspectives and emotions without necessarily feeling them. It involves using reason, logic, and observation to interpret another person's thoughts and feelings. This type of empathy is often seen in therapists, negotiators, and lawyers, as they need to understand their clients' perspectives to be effective.

2) Emotional empathy, on the other hand, involves feeling the emotions of others alongside them. People who experience emotional empathy mirror the emotions of the person they are interacting with and share the same emotional state. This type of empathy is often seen in people who work in caring professions such as community health work and peer recovery support services

3) Compassionate empathy is a combination of cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. It goes further by explicitly adding action. It involves understanding the emotions of others, feeling them, and taking action to help alleviate their suffering. People who experience compassionate empathy feel others' pain and take steps to alleviate it. Compassionate empathy is often seen in people working in humanitarian aid, social justice, and activism.³

To summarize, cognitive empathy involves understanding others' emotions, emotional empathy involves experiencing them, and compassionate empathy involves both experiencing and taking action to help alleviate them. The lessons in this workbook are intended to help peers sort this out.

You are likely familiar with compassion fatigue and burnout, but we'll share some definitions below, so we have a common understanding of these terms.

Compassion: Our ability to recognize the suffering of others and is accompanied by the desire to relieve or lessen that suffering.¹

Compassion fatigue: The decreased capacity to care for clients because of repeated exposure to their suffering and trauma.³

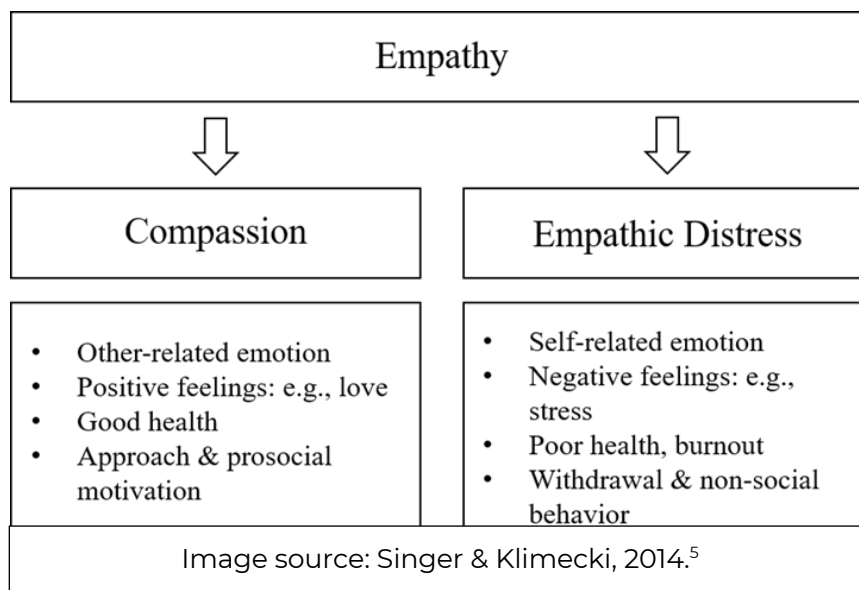
Burnout: An occupational condition resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed and is typically characterized by three dimensions: sustained feelings of exhaustion, depersonalization, and professional inefficacy.⁴


Empathic Distress: Refers to a 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.¹

Compassion is the Antidote

Researchers have discovered that feelings of empathy can generate activity in our pain centers – but that feelings of compassion do not. Instead, research suggests that feelings of compassion stimulate another brain center which they believe is related to positive emotions

¹ In other words, when we strengthen our ability to be compassionate, we reduce the factors that lead to stress, secondary trauma, and burnout.





As a Helper, you've experienced the ups and downs of walking alongside the people you work with, doing your very best to help them overcome barriers and improve their health and wellness. Take a moment to reflect on the most rewarding parts of your work. Now, reflect on the most challenging parts. What would it be like if you could spend more of your time in the rewarding parts and had the tools to move through the challenges?

While it is not possible to completely avoid getting tired and stressed working in a helping profession, we believe that increasing skills like managing boundaries, holding out hope for yourself and others, and addressing workplace conflict can help Helpers avoid burnout and cultivate more compassion. This workbook offers 10 lessons for use in group supervision or professional peer-to-peer groups to strengthen Helpers' abilities to move through common yet difficult situations.

Tips for using The Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook

Congratulations! You're in a place where you're seeking to support the intentional work of your peers, colleagues, or other Helpers who have the pleasure of being in your presence. Taking responsibility for helping others to become better Helpers is an honorable task. Since you're reading this, you have agreed to do so or are, at the very least, exploring the thought. This guide may help you make the best decision about becoming a leader.

What follows are a few tips to enhance your skills:

- 1. Begin by familiarizing yourself** with the introduction to *What is Empathic Distress* and the format of the ten sessions in the workbook.
- 2. Each session has a unique purpose**, focusing on common challenges or encounters that may lead Helpers to experience empathic distress. Each session provides information, activities, and reflection questions.
- 3. The Session Purpose and Facilitator Preparation and Considerations help facilitators understand the objectives and key concepts for each lesson.** The intention is for facilitators to feel confident in the direction of the lesson. It's not unusual for participants to learn or observe an unintended message. Sometimes these are add ons, and that's GREAT! When people are moving off target, KNOWING the target can help you shape the learning experience.
- 4. Take the time to reflect** on your own experiences and feelings related to the session topics and empathic distress. Your main job is to be present in the learning experience. Considering your experience and using stories you've recalled ahead of time might help you decide what you and the participants will be comfortable sharing.
- 5. Take time ahead of the sessions** to practice the activities provided, which may include role-playing exercises and self-reflection prompts.
- 6. Take notes throughout the workbook** to document your thoughts, insights, and any additional resources or strategies you believe will benefit the group.
- 7. Pace yourself** and allow time for integration between sessions to fully absorb the material. There is no prescribed dose response time for learning this material. Whatever works for your group is fine. That said, we suggest at least a week between the lessons because there is much to learn and absorb. Let session participants have some time to marinate in everything that you're sharing.
- 8. Finally, remember** that the *Recognizing & Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook* is a tool for your professional development as a Helper. Embrace the opportunity to practice your engaging skills as you support others who may be experiencing empathic distress.

How the Lessons are Formatted

Each session is formatted in a similar way:

SESSION # & SESSION TITLE

SESSION PURPOSE

FACILITATOR PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS: Information to be mindful of and what to anticipate during the session.

SUMMARIZE = Information facilitators should read and digest ahead of the session.

INSTRUCTIONS= Instructions for exercises. The Facilitator can adjust the size of the small groups to what works best for that group.

INTROSPECTION = Provides an opportunity for participants to think about or examine a concept or question independently, writing out or preparing their thoughts to discuss in a group.

EXERCISE = The time indicates how long you should allow to complete the entire exercise. This is usually accompanied by a couple of prompts for you to prepare the participants.

NOTE: Some items have suggested times next to them. This is to keep facilitators on track and to not run out of time in the session. If the group wants to stay on a certain question or concept, that is perfectly OK. It is more important to follow the flow of the group than to stick to the agenda. With that said, be aware of not letting the discussion go too far off course.

DEBRIEF AS A LARGE GROUP = After small group sessions, it is helpful to bring the large group back together to hear others' thoughts and ideas. The debrief is an opportunity for facilitators to draw out conversation from group members who don't frequently share.

DISCUSS AS A LARGE GROUP= Questions to pose to the large group. Large group discussion is another opportunity to recognize and call upon participants who might hesitate to share their ideas.

SESSION DEBRIEF = When there is time at the end of the session, reviewing key takeaways and responding to any lingering questions can be helpful.

Six Tips for Facilitators

Some of this might be a review, and some of it might be new. You've likely got some skills for facilitating a group. We strongly recommend that you model what you're teaching throughout the sessions. Your skillful modeling is invaluable for your learners and makes having to be the leader less burdensome. We've offered some tips for you to use as you see fit.

1. Set the stage

- a. **Guide participants.** Your role as the facilitator is to guide participants through the content of the worksheets. The sessions in the Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook are not constructed to be stand-and-deliver or sage on the stage training events. The intention is to provide guideposts for conversations and experiential learning to bring out the wisdom and curiosity of the group.
- b. **Time management.** Each session should take about 90 minutes. The core content can be facilitated in 60 minutes. The remaining 30 minutes allows for everyone to settle into the space, access the day's materials, and have some time at the end to process remaining questions or other loose ends.
- c. **Session purpose.** The purpose of the session is listed at top of each session's worksheet. Be sure to introduce the purpose and title of the session each time you meet.
- d. **Meaningful conversations.** The intention of the worksheets is to prompt meaningful and experiential conversations on topics that most Helpers will encounter at some point in their careers. Remind participants that they get to choose what to do with the information.

2. Model the behaviors you're teaching

- a. **Emphasize autonomy:** You're here to present some lessons. What people do with them is up to them. Unless someone requires them to learn this, in that case, what do they see as a possible benefit to learning about some new ways to deal with common challenges?
- b. **Seek collaboration:** Let people know of your experience (describe it) AND that they, too, have experience. As you go through these lessons, you'll be contributing, and they will be contributing. You are their partner as they work through the lessons.
- c. **Empathy:** Learning new skills and strategies is hard work. It's ok for people to have strong feelings about how they currently practice and how it might differ from what you're proposing.

Here's an example:

Hi, my name is Sue. My pronouns are she/her, and I am in long-term recovery. I am currently the lead Peer Recovery Specialist at this Recovery Community Organization. I am thrilled to have you all here today to work together to enhance our knowledge and practice the skills that will help us deal better with [Insert lesson purpose].

As we get ready to start, I want to remind everyone here that you are very good at what you do; you've helped a lot of people get through tough things. You've done that with your previous training, experience, and genuine self. Today we're here to honor what you know and find areas where additions or adjustments can help make our work easier and more fulfilling and ultimately improve change and growth in our Helpees. Keep what you've got and add in some intentionality. We're going to build on you feeling more confident in what you're doing and helping you know, in the moment, why you're doing it. Before we get started, What are your questions? OK. Let's get started!

3. Use open questions

Examples:

- What do you already know about?
- What are your ideas or thoughts about that?
- What surprises you about this information?
- How might this lesson work for you in the real world?
- Say more about...
- Describe that situation...
- Tell me more about....

4. Use Affirmations

Rather than evaluating your participants, you can describe what you're seeing for them.

Example: Let's imagine you have a participant who hasn't yet spoken up. You've noticed from their facial expressions that they've been thinking about the material- sometimes they've shown disbelief, and other times their face is telling you they are confused or really having a good think on what you're saying.

Facilitator: John, I am sensing that you are really thinking about what I just said. Are you willing to share what you're thinking about?

Participant: So, I guess I just always thought of myself as a good listener. I mean, I let the person talk ,but when they're done, I usually have a ton of questions that I want to ask them. Now I'm seeing that questions aren't really the best way to show listening.

Affirmation: Facilitator: You've been thinking hard during this discussion, and you're bravely considering how you might change.

5. Use Reflections

One of the skills that you'll be sharing as a crucial skill for reducing burnout and showing empathy is the skill of reflective listening. Savvy helping people say reflective listening often. It's not a secret that we're supposed to do it. What we intentionally do to reflectively listen often falls short.

a. Listen

Really listen. When a participant wants to share, listen. Model listening with small verbal encouragers (if needed, you can say, Hm-mmm, OK, Uh-huh, Sure, or maybe they need only non-verbals (eye contact, nodding, listening with your eyes and your heart)

b. Reflect

- i. Repeat what the person said (simple reflection)
- ii. Add value to what the person said, go deeper
 - Reflect emotion
 - Reflect what they might say next
 - Reflect their language moving toward change or growth
 - Reflect both their thoughts about being stuck and their thoughts about change and growth

Example Reflection: So, on the one hand you're not sure about this new information, and on the other hand, you're curious about how it could work.

c. Summaries

Summaries can help you gather what's been said, transition to a new topic, or ask for more content.

Reinforce what's been said and ask for more:

Ok, so far, we've determined that because of our lived experience, most of us struggle with stigma and discrimination at work. What else?

OR

So, we talked about what not to do:

Talk to the program director before trying to address issues directly or confronting someone before asking for clarification. If it's ok, let's move on to talking about what to do.

6. Remember how to deal with feedback and conflict

People are going to disagree. What does disagreement look like?	Arguing, not paying attention, whispering at their table, challenging you with evidence from somewhere else, or stating they have more experience than you do. Trying to find allies in the room who agree with their opinion.
People are going to agree. What does agreement look like?	Head nods, examples of how they have seen this work, or people bringing back stories of how lessons from one week to another are changing how they think, feel, and behave. Encourage this hopefulness by creating time for it.
People will be confused. What does confusion look like?	It might look like they disagree. Furrowed brow, shoulder shrugging, puzzled expression, tense body language.

People might have SORT of the right idea.

At some point, people start to realize that intentional practice is really hard, and they get edgy. Sometimes when presented with a new way of being and talking, people worry that what they've been doing is somehow less than. This can come out as disagreeing with everything you're presenting because if they accept that there's a different way, how can they reconcile with what they've been doing.

Affirm that there are many ways to help people and that what they've been doing has helped lots of people.

People might NOT have the right idea. What do you do when someone has a take-away that isn't what you wanted them to see? OR what do you do when a person starts telling a story that has nothing to do with ANYTHING you're trying to share?

Here's the good news: you can use a single skill to show empathy and help reinforce or reframe what the learners are learning.



How to handle disagreement:

Remember, conflict and disagreement are often a difference of opinion. It is natural and occurs when people are really thinking about how they feel about a topic. As long as the conflict remains on the topic and is not a personal attack, it can bring out new ways of thinking. Feel free to use the Global Campus United States Institute of Peace's Dialogue vs. Debate guide if a group struggles with how to manage a disagreement.

Here's an example of how a facilitator might respond:

Participant: I don't like this. The people I work with ask me what to do. They WANT us to tell them.

(Since that's not a message we're reinforcing here, what do you do? You don't want to start arguing with people.)

How about this?

Facilitator: You've got some experience with helping people and the way that we're talking is bumping up against what you've thought about. It's a bit confusing.

Starting a group

We're excited that you made it this far! You've taken the time to read through the Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Facilitator's Guide. You likely already know the why for wanting to host sessions on Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress, and you might have acquired some new facilitation tools and ideas to add to your own.

- 1. Prepare.** After you've decided you're ready to start, identify 2 or 3 people who will help facilitate the groups. Having additional facilitators will provide backup for when you're sick or on vacation and provide participants with a variety of voices and perspectives.
- 2. Schedule.** Decide on the meeting frequency. If your group meets less than once a month, it might lose momentum and focus. We suggest meeting weekly or every other week to keep participants engaged and connected. Sometimes the real benefit of a group is what happens outside of the meeting.
- 3. Publicize.** How will you get the word out about the group? Hopefully you are well-connected to your professional community of professionals. Identify who has a mailing list and might be willing to promote your group. Consider creating flyers or images nonprofits or professional associations can share on social media. Be sure to include the basics: date, time, location, brief description, and who should attend. During the first group meeting, encourage members to help promote the group within their networks.
- 4. Location, location, location!** Decide on a central, accessible, easy-to-get to location with parking and close to public transportation. Ensure bathrooms are available during the group meeting times.
- 5. Set guidelines.** At the first meeting, lead a discussion about how you will create a safe space for all during your time together. Provide the list of guidelines as a starting point for the group. Ask what they would like to change in or add to the list.

Suggested Group Guidelines

- Respect
- Openness
- Confidentiality
- Stretch rule (if you tend to talk a lot in group settings, talk a little less; if you tend to not talk much in group settings, try to talk more)
- Assume good intentions
- Offer strength-based feedback

For additional information on facilitating groups, take a look at [Creating and Facilitating Peer Support Groups from the Community Toolbox](#). While this resource is for starting a self-help support group in the community, many of the recommendations will still apply!

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