

empathy



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A Positive Force We Need to Manage

The Power of Empathy

Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel: to be able to see things from their point of view and imagine yourself in their place, feeling what they are feeling. Empathy means that when you see another person suffering, you can instantly envision the experience, and feel what they are going through.

For many of you, empathy is natural; it may even be so strong that you feel overwhelmed by the emotions of others.

For some of you, it may not come as easily, and requires intent and effort.

Read any article these days on the qualities of a successful leader, and you are bound to come across the concept of Emotional Intelligence – or EQ, Emotional Quotient – that includes empathy as one of its five pillars. Great leaders that demonstrate empathy with their staff build better social connections, provide supportive coaching, promote healthy behaviours, help the team self-regulate, and build trust.

There are three types of empathy:

- **Affective empathy**

The ability to understand another person's emotions and respond appropriately. This may lead to a feeling of concern for another's well-being, or it may lead to feelings of personal distress.

- **Somatic empathy**

Having a physical reaction in response to what someone else is experiencing. When you see someone else feeling embarrassed, for example, you might start to blush or have an upset stomach.

- **Cognitive empathy**

Being able to understand another person's mental state and what they might be thinking in response to a situation.

The Value of Empathy for Leaders

The September 2021 Forbes article "Empathy is the Most Important Leadership Skill According to Research" states that empathy is important in cultivating positive relationships, but is also important for everything from innovation to retention in the workplace.



The article goes on to say that demonstrating empathy, particularly when our staff or people in our community struggle, can have constructive effects such as:

- Enhanced innovation on the part of staff
- Increased staff engagement
- Retention of valued staff
- A feeling that the workplace is inclusive
- A better ability to manage work-/life blending
- An increase in team cooperation
- Better mental health and team resilience

Empathy really comes down to showing care and paying attention, and can be demonstrated through checking in with our staff, asking questions, and being responsive to cues as to how much an individual wants to share. Understanding an individual's perspective and emotions helps a leader be more compassionate, and helps action steps to move forward.

“Leadership is about empathy. It is about having the ability to relate to and connect with people for the purpose of inspiring and empowering their lives.”

Oprah Winfrey

Empathy Starts in the Mirror

What if you find demonstrating empathy difficult: does that mean you should not be a leader? Of course not! It does, however, require you to be particularly self-aware, and provides an opportunity to develop a

skill that enhances your ability to better connect with those around you.

A few years ago, I taught a leadership course on strengthening coping skills and enhancing EQ and empathy. I asked my PhD colleague at the time, “How does someone learn empathy, if this is not a strength?” His answer was that the first step is to learn self-empathy.

When you are feeling challenged and misunderstood yourself, empathizing with someone else is difficult. Without an awareness of your own experience, and your emotional and mental state, how do you know that you are not just projecting your own self upon others?

Self-empathy is not the same as self-compassion. Self-compassion involves treating yourself with the same care, kindness, and support you would show to a good friend. Self-empathy means you observe yourself and your situation, in an empathic manner, and feel and understand what you are experiencing. It requires that you notice and recognize what is happening within you, undertaken with an attitude of suspended judgment and openness towards yourself.

If you still find developing or practicing self-empathy to be challenging or painful, reach out to a professional. There may be psychological ‘blocks’ as to why you struggle with empathy, and a counsellor may be able to help with a release.

The Health Impact of ‘Too Much Empathy’

Vice-Principals and Principals are expected to demonstrate empathy, to understand the experiences of others, and to validate emotions. After all, we are good leaders, and therefore more empathy is better... right?

Empathizing with students, their families, and other community groups is an important and valuable

part of the role of a school leader in supporting the well-being of others. *But, can too much empathy negatively impact your own health?*

Those who are very empathetic – a common trait within our membership – can feel overwhelmed, burned out, or even overstimulated from always thinking about other people's emotions. This can lead to empathy fatigue.

Empathy fatigue refers to the exhaustion you might feel – both emotionally and physically – after being repeatedly exposed to stressful or traumatic events. You may begin to feel numb or powerless, seek ways to isolate yourself, and feel a complete lack of energy. Empathy fatigue is a concern in certain situations where we can't manage the depth of our feelings of empathy (affective empathy, in particular), which can result in compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others, often through experiences of stress or trauma. Common compassion fatigue triggers that align with our roles as school leaders include:

- Being physically or verbally threatened when providing care and support
- Being confronted by suicide, or threats of suicide, by someone under your care
- Providing support to others experiencing extreme stress, trauma, or depression
- Specializing in providing care for those experiencing death, grief, bereavement, or mourning
- Providing care under a heavy workload, excessive demands, or long hours
- Providing service that requires you to visit accident scenes, or deal with evidence or reports of trauma



Compassion fatigue is often mistaken for burnout, which is a cumulative sense of fatigue or dissatisfaction. *This form of fatigue is sometimes called a secondary stress reaction, second-hand shock, secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious trauma; this is largely due to compassion fatigue's link to those in professional roles such as Principals and Vice-Principals that are regularly placed in stressful situations dealing with the trauma of others.*

Over time, both empathy fatigue and compassion fatigue can lead to physical and mental symptoms, including:

- Feeling overwhelmed, questioning, *"What's the point?"*
- Mood swings, with drastic shifts in mood, pessimism, and irritability
- Withdrawal from social connections
- Blaming oneself for failures and the pain of others, a feeling that, *"If I had done more, this wouldn't have happened."*
- Feeling detached and unable to identify with others, a feeling of, *"Why should I care anymore?"*
- Reduced empathy, and an inability to react to bad news or support others; a feeling that, *"I can't deal with this right now."*

- Ruminating (dwelling on) negative thoughts or feelings; a recognition that, *“I can’t stand feeling like this.”*
- Addiction, particularly self medication
- Anxiety and depression
- Trouble being productive, feeling challenged to concentrate, experiencing memory issues
- Insomnia
- Exhaustion, fatigue
- Appetite changes and digestive issues
- Nausea, dizziness, headaches, fatigue, insomnia, and mental exhaustion
- Lack of pleasure in activities that were previously enjoyable
- Lack of participation in – or even avoidance of – work
- Hypersensitivity to perceived criticism

Managing Your Empathy

We bring many strengths to our role, but over-extending these strengths – such as perfectionism – can be detrimental to our health.

How can you protect yourself from emotional distress and create separation from the suffering student or family member without becoming indifferent to that person? How can you nurture empathic concern and better navigate empathic distress? Here are some strategies.

• Set Emotional Boundaries

Setting emotional boundaries helps you to maintain a connection while still remembering and honouring

the fact that you are a separate person with your own needs.

Allowing for a form of detachment from those we aid does help us manage our empathy. For example, those who operate from a position of empathic concern, with its focus on others, can encourage us in relieving another person’s suffering. When you experience empathic concern, you are not necessarily sharing the same painful feelings as the other person – their sadness, or their fear. In fact, you may be quite aware that you are distinct and different from the person who is suffering.

• Check in with Yourself

You see the fearful child in your classroom overwhelmed by her emotions. Your heart is across the room with her, and you’re at a loss, emotionally. In this state, it is hard to help her.

When you notice yourself feeling distressed by someone else’s struggle, it is worth pausing, taking a breath, and asking yourself what you are feeling. What do you need right now? When and how might you respond to this child? Those of us in the helping professions need to foster this level of conscious self-awareness on a regular basis. It is important to assess your needs before moving forward to help others, and to ask, “Do I have what I need to move forward? Have I taken a deep breath and sensed my feet on the ground? Am I calm, composed, and able to respond thoughtfully?” Otherwise, you may perpetuate feelings of distress.

Taking short breaks throughout the day to close your eyes, focus on your breath, or put your hands on your heart and send yourself some compassion can all make a big difference.

• Question Your Thoughts And Feelings

When navigating feelings of distress that are hopelessly intertwined with thoughts and behaviours, consider changing your interpretation of a situation or



event. This may help to lessen the emotional and physical feelings of anxiety. If you are empathizing with a child or staff member experiencing pain – or feeling frustration, fear, or sadness – consider the following questions, either in the moment or at the end of the day:

- What is the situation that triggered me?
- What am I thinking or imagining?
- What does this thought make me feel?
- What makes me think the thought is true or accurate?
- What makes me think the thought is not true or, at least, not completely true?
- Is there another way to look at this? If so, what is it?
- Is there an action I might choose to take right now?

By regularly questioning your thinking in a structured way, you can begin to shift your perspective, tone down feelings of distress, and ultimately respond more thoughtfully to your students and colleagues.

- **Nurture a Concerned, Compassionate Response**

Research shows that regular mindfulness meditation enhances our ability to respond compassionately to the distress of other people. There is specialized compassion meditation which often features a 'loving-kindness' meditation, where you extend feelings of warmth and care toward yourself, a close person, a neutral person, a person in difficulty, and a complete stranger.

- **Engage in Outside Hobbies**

When all your time is spent working or thinking about work, it can be easy to burn out. Making time for leisure activities and personal hobbies outside of work can help lower stress levels and improve overall life satisfaction.

- **Cultivate Healthy Friendships Outside of Work**

While it is great to have strong relationships with your co-workers, it is equally important to cultivate and maintain healthy relationships outside of work. It can sometimes be difficult for co-workers to avoid talking about work even outside the workplace. *(And recognizing that many of our members are married to other school leaders or teachers – this is important to note!)* Connecting with friends who are not aware of the ins and outs of your work situation can provide you with much-needed emotional and professional relief.

- **Use Positive Coping Strategies**

Put down the wine glass and make a list of positive coping strategies, including deep breathing, meditation, taking a walk, talking with a friend, watching a funny movie, or relaxing in a hot bath.

- **Self-Care**

Self-care is so important: eating well, staying hydrated, getting enough sleep and exercise, and practicing meditation. This cannot go by the wayside, which is often the case for those caring for others. Self-care is imperative for your own fortitude and resilience.

And, finally:

- **Seek Personal Therapy**

A therapist can help you process your feelings and implement strategies to help you combat the empathy fatigue and maintain a better life balance.

Takeaways

Empathy is a valuable leadership skill, and benefits you and those around you. Through self-awareness and self-compassion, you can further evolve your ability to be empathetic. Practice good self management, and do regular check-ins to side-step taking on the stress, emotions, and trauma of others, and causing harm to your own health. By practicing the setting of boundaries, self-care, and positive coping strategies, you can mitigate compassion fatigue and continue to be a great school leader!

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connection

"All the topics were perfect! The forum came at a great time, during a very busy and stressful time of the year. It gave me the opportunity to take a step back and reflect on our practices. Most importantly, it re-energized me and I am ready to face the rest of the school year."

(Member Event Feedback)



BCPVPA offers BC Principals and Vice-Principals opportunities to learn, but also to network and collaborate with colleagues from across the province. Those shared experiences bring our 2,600 members closer together and help to strengthen BC's K-12 public education system.

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