

# 60-Minute In-Service and Staff Development Sessions

TRAINING CAMPUS GROUPS EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY ON TARGETED TOPICS



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## Avoid Burnout: Healthy Ways to Handle Emotional Labor and Protect Your Well-Being

### Avoid Burnout:

### Healthy Ways to Handle Emotional Labor and Protect Your Well-Being

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## A Focus on Emotional Labor

As we move away from pandemic times, some remnants still linger. One is the amount of **emotional labor** that often goes into our relationships with students and colleagues.

This increasingly common and often demanding component of campus interactions involves those situations where we're listening to and absorbing other people's problems, explaining issues like systemic racism that directly impact us and sometimes suppressing our own emotions in an effort to best meet organizational needs. The lines between work and personal life have become *much* more porous.

Work is now intensely personal and emotional, Tiffany Beth Mfume, the assistant vice president for student success and retention at Morgan State University (MD), told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She said she and her colleagues "put ourselves in the background so we can worry more about how the students are faring."

"I like to think more broadly about emotional labor at work as managing one's own emotions and/or the emotions of others in order to effectively complete work and meet workplace role expectations," said Doyanne Darnell, a psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the UW School of Medicine, to *Right as Rain*.

She said that emotional labor may be a component of our lives that we value and enjoy yet doing too much can sometimes be a "recipe for burnout – the increased demands of emotional labor can be overwhelming." Burnout and compassion fatigue are very possible if emotional labor goes unchecked.

### This In-Service

While emotional labor may be a reality on today's campuses, there *are* effective ways to counteract its impact. This in-service addresses healthy ways for individuals to address emotional labor and protect their well-being in the process.

*"I don't believe there is anyone not doing emotional labor at work, but how much there is to do, how demanding it is and how evenly distributed among workers it is varies widely."*

— Doyanne Darnell, a psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the UW School of Medicine

**Sources:** *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1/13/21; *Right as Rain* from UW Medicine, the University of Washington, 3/2/22



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### Avoid Burnout: Healthy Ways to Handle Emotional Labor and Protect Your Well-Being

## Talking Points

### The Reality of Emotional Labor

- The lines between work and personal life have become much more porous, often making life balance more difficult.
- Emotional labor (EL) involves those situations where we're listening to and absorbing other people's problems, explaining issues like systemic racism that directly impact us and sometimes suppressing our own emotions to best meet organizational needs.
- Women and BIPOC often do more emotional labor.
- The increased demands of EL can be overwhelming, often leading to burnout, secondary trauma, emotional drain, physical concerns and compassion fatigue if gone unchecked.
- Compassion fatigue (CF) can be an accumulated fatigue and overused sense of compassion that leads to a lack of ability to feel or care for others.
- It's important to be aware that CF and EL can lead to losing your sense of self to those you serve, getting so wrapped up in their issues that you back burner your own well-being.
- There are many preventive and reactive measures, however, including finding balance, boundary-setting, replenishing yourself, practicing self-compassion, managing your emotions, embracing compassion satisfaction and more.



You can use these Points and Prompts to help guide this in-service in a direction that best meets your audience's needs.

## Discussion Prompts

Discussing the reality of emotional labor puts a name and face to this very real issue that is critically impacting campus community members...

- What are some of the key issues students and colleagues have been coming to you with during the past year or so?
- How has carrying the weight of others' stress impacted you?
- What is one way you can bring your own well-being out of the background and make it a priority?
- What boundaries could you erect so you're not at the beck and call of others' needs 24/7?
- What are some instances where you've said "no"? How did it feel?
- When someone is in crisis, where can you turn for assistance?
- After helping someone deal with a trauma or trouble, how do you process it?
- Do you feel like you're losing your sense of self? If so, what are you experiencing?
- How does it feel to talk with colleagues and/or supervisors about the realities of increased emotional labor?
- How concerned are you about how you'll be perceived if you discuss emotional labor issues?
- What do you think would happen if you asked for help regarding emotional labor concerns?



## 8 Things to Know About Emotional Labor

1. Emotional labor often involves carrying others' stress and it can blur the lines, making life balance more difficult.
2. Many educators tend to put themselves in the background to focus on student and co-worker stressors and needs.
3. When we don't put on our own oxygen mask first by engaging in balanced, healthy choices, contending with emotional labor can be incredibly wearing. It can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, depression, anxiety and emotional drain.
4. The stress of consistent emotional labor can show up physically, too, resulting in sleeping concerns, headaches, chronic stress, muscle tension, high blood pressure, chronic pain, stomach and intestinal problems, said Doyanne Darnell, a psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the UW School of Medicine.
5. When we are so focused on addressing emotional labor components in the workplace and/or school, we may not have enough left emotionally to effectively show up for our family and friends.
6. "Being asked to explain or discuss issues like systemic racism – when those issues directly impact you – is emotional labor, too," according to Right as Rain from UW Medicine.
7. "Women, particularly Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), often do more emotional labor," the publication also pointed out. This may involve having "to manage the hostile emotions coming at them from others as well as manage their own emotional experience and reaction," explained Darnell.
8. Emotional labor is often a common and expected component of our work lives, yet it tends to be unrecognized, unappreciated and undervalued.

**Source:** *Right as Rain* from UW Medicine, the University of Washington, 3/2/22

### How Gender Plays a Role

"In their quest to care for others, women often sacrifice themselves," wrote Adam Grant and Sheryl Sandberg in *The New York Times*. They cited an analysis of 183 different studies spanning 15 countries and dozens of occupations that found women were significantly more likely to feel emotionally exhausted. "For every 1,000 people at work, 80 more women than men burn out," they wrote, "in large part because they fail to secure their own oxygen masks before assisting others."

When it comes to emotional labor, gender certainly plays a role. Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter noted that women tend to do the bulk of "office housework." This may involve the extra work that women do such as planning retirement or birthday celebrations, lending an ear when a distressed co-worker needs assistance or bringing in food to share. This expectation that women are nurturing and communal can result in them missing out on other opportunities that will advance their careers.

**Source:** *The New York Times*, 2/6/15



# What Emotional Labor Can Look Like

What might emotional labor look like in action?

- Trying to create a positive environment among colleagues or peers, which can mean diffusing negative situations, helping those who are struggling emotionally and managing your own actions/reactions
- A student always on the cusp of financial concerns making them drop out who is looking to you for ideas, resources and solutions
- A co-worker commenting on your hair as a Black woman and how it's always changing, constantly wanting information so you feel pressured to explain protective styles
- A co-worker struggling with a relationship breaking up and using you as their stand-in therapist while they work through their emotions
- An acquaintance consistently posting hardships on social media and asking if you've seen the latest, wanting you to respond
- Having to bite your tongue when a parent calls, speaking to you rudely and threateningly
- Managing hostile emotions directed at you through microaggressions or biased behaviors while also managing your own emotional reactions
- Handling a student's anxiety as they are triggered by certain topics brought up during class or in another group setting
- A one-sided connection where you are consistently showing up to listen to someone, ask how they're doing, follow up on things they've said, show an interest and more without them doing the same for you

Source: Right as Rain from UW Medicine, the University of Washington, 3/2/22



## Your Turn

Chances are that some of these sound familiar. What are some emotional labor examples that you've experienced?

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## Recognizing Burnout, Secondary Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

When taking on others' emotional labor needs, you may experience some *secondary trauma*. This type of "empathy overload" is a component of *compassion fatigue* that can make it difficult to feel empathy for those you're helping, Kerry A. Schwanz, PhD, from Coastal Carolina University (NC), told the American Psychological Association. Symptoms may include...

- Intrusive thoughts
- Anxiety
- Hypervigilance
- Numbness
- Feeling like you have nothing left to give

You may also experience *burnout* as a result of compassion fatigue, which Schwanz said often presents as depression, anxiety, less work enjoyment, more arguing, and physical and emotional exhaustion.

### Experiencing Compassion Fatigue

People experiencing compassion fatigue often have several things in common...

- An overused sense of compassion that leads to a lack of ability to feel or care for others
- An accumulated fatigue that can take months or years to surface
- Re-experiencing the trauma of a situation or an individual's experience, even after the incident is over
- Avoiding any reminders of an event or numbing yourself to it
- Losing your sense of self to those you serve — getting so wrapped up in their issues that you leave yourself behind
- Feeling devoid of physical and emotional energy

**Secondary Trauma:** *Trauma-related stress reactions and symptoms resulting from exposure to another individual's traumatic experiences (also known as vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue), common among providers of survivor support services."*

Source: Safe Place, "Trauma Sensitive Practices for Health Centers Serving Students"





## Preventing Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Some preventive measures to consider include...

- Maintaining a balanced lifestyle that includes boundaries and limit-setting
- Getting support and help when you need it
- Having plans in place for coping with tough issues and incidents
- Getting adequate training
- Taking stock of your own healing and letting yourself experience the necessary spectrum of emotions
- Replenishing yourself
- Nurturing social relationships outside of work and school
- Getting involved in positive initiatives
- Maintaining proper sleep, nutrition and exercise habits
- Connecting with nature
- Expressing yourself creatively
- Developing a segment of your life where you take as well as give
- Meditating or engaging in spiritual practices
- Taking time off to recharge
- Being honest with yourself about your strengths and limitations
- Maintaining a sense of humor — even during difficult and stressful times
- Working in a positive, supportive and team-oriented environment
- Creating community
- Scheduling five minutes each morning for a self-check-in to assess your tensions and worries
- Practicing self-compassion
- Embracing compassion satisfaction, where you remember to focus on the wins involved with helping others

To tend to the needs of others, you need to first focus on your own well-being. Compassion fatigue is a very real ailment that can negatively impact your best-intentioned efforts to be helpful.

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**Sources:** *Compassion Fatigue: A Potential Consequence of Working with Traumatized People* by Brenda Ingram, CALCASA Leadership Conference, 2005; "What is Compassion Fatigue?" at [www.ace-network.com](http://www.ace-network.com); "Overcoming Compassion Fatigue" at [www.InteliHealth.com](http://www.InteliHealth.com)



## Don't Backburner Your Well-Being

Here are some ways to help counteract the toll of emotional labor...

### Pay Attention Physically

How does emotional labor show up in your body physically?

- Do you feel tense?
- Do you ruminate at night, making it hard to fall asleep?
- Do you have a difficult time concentrating at work?

Acknowledge your answers to these, as you determine ways to help reduce these feelings, such as...

- Doing deep breathing
- Practicing meditation
- Engaging in mindful practices – “Take a few slow, deep breaths, focus on each of your senses, and try to be fully present in whatever you’re doing,” Mental Health America suggests
- Going on a walk
- Listening to music or a podcast you enjoy
- Talking with a friend
- Switching to a work task that requires less emotional labor

Plus, do the regular care pieces that help you better prepare for stressful times, including...

- Getting enough sleep
- Making time for movement
- Eating nutritious food
- Staying hydrated

### Set Boundaries

*“Having the sometimes tough conversations with people that set boundaries around your time, your emotions, your things, your other relationships, your health, and your opinions can give you an opportunity to devote more time and effort to yourself and your own mental health.”*

~ Mental Health America.

*“ I think the concept of emotional labor is also important because it means we are pressed to acknowledge the value of emotional labor by talking about it and discussing it in both private spheres and public workplaces. Through such discourse, we have the chance to picture a world that values an individual’s emotion.”*

~ Yuying Xie, a PhD student in geography at the University of Washington who studies labor, feminism, race and ethnicity and has done research on emotional labor



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### Practice Saying ‘No’

Figure where you might have wiggle room to say “no” in instance such as...

- Attending an after-work event
- Being part of a project you know nothing about
- Skipping a meeting
- Negotiating to do one thing so you can opt out of another

You don’t always have to say “yes.”

### Manage Your Emotions Healthfully

To regulate your emotions...

- Acknowledge and accept what it is that you’re feeling – your truth
- Try not to compare your life to anyone else’s because that can make you feel inadequate and immobilized; instead, work to accept who you are and what your life entails right now to create a solid base for the self-work you’d like to do
- Work to reduce the intensity of the emotion by determining what you might be able to change (asking for a work deadline extension, saying no to an opportunity that doesn’t fit right now, etc.)
- Take a moment to figure what is happening rather than automatically responding so you can determine how you do/don’t want to engage with someone and expend your energy
- When making goals, go for doable microsteps rather than big wins. That way, you can implement them right away and remove the pressure to do a life overhaul all at once.

### Handling Enhanced Emotional Labor

Here are a few suggestions from Adam Grant and Sheryl Sandberg, as written in *The New York Times*...

- **Protect Yourself and Others.** When emotional labor requests come in, don’t hesitate to say that pursuing certain ones could stretch you and your team past the breaking point. This protective approach is giving, caring and effective.
- **Track Acts of Helping.** Doing so can help you take a realistic look at how much time you spend on emotional labor and have a solid metric to share with your supervisor. This can help raise awareness all the way around.
- **Prioritize Your Needs Along with Others’ Needs.** Multiple studies show that people achieving the highest performance, sustaining more energy and experiencing the lowest burnout put self-concern on par with concerns for others. So, there’s likely something to it!
- **Share Recognition and Rewards.** Rather than allowing emotional labor to continue unnoticed, recognize colleagues who are doing it well. Chances are, they’ll return the favor.

Source: *The New York Times*, 2/6/15

Sources: *Right as Rain* from UW Medicine, the University of Washington, 3/2/22; Mental Health America



## The Best Version of Me

When you're feeling on the cusp of burnout due to performing too much emotional labor on top of your other job, student and life responsibilities, it's tough to feel like the best version of yourself. This activity helps participants explore this concept so they can raise their self-awareness and move toward a life of enhanced balance and well-being.

### To Do:

- Post signs around the room that say the following:
  - Social Connections
  - Emotional Well-Being
  - Movement
  - Food and Nutrition
  - Academics
  - Sleep
  - Hobbies/Interests/Unstructured Time
- Explain to participants that you're going to be focusing on personal well-being to help counteract the impacts of too much emotional labor and other life stressors.
- When you say "Go!" encourage individuals to go to the sign that is one of their top concerns when it comes to their well-being.
- Have a facilitator under each sign, ready with some discussion prompts on that particular topic.
- In those initial small clusters, give participants 10 minutes to discuss what helps them feel like the best version of themselves when it comes to the topic at hand. Encourage them to make their own "The Best Version of Me" list where they can jot down their personal findings from this activity.
- Repeat this process every 10 minutes for as long as you'd like the activity to go so that individuals can go to several topic areas that are important to them.
- At the end, encourage participants to continue filling out their list after they leave and post it somewhere to remind themselves of how they can work toward becoming "The Best Version of Me."

### Posting Discussion Questions

If you don't have facilitators for each topic area, you can post discussion questions in each area. For instance, for Social Connections, you could post...

- When was the last time you got together with friends to just enjoy each other's company?
- Who are your most important people?
- How often do you cancel social plans due to work/life stress and being overwhelmed?
- How do you feel after spending time with your special people?
- What are two things you could do in the next week to help alleviate loneliness?



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### CASE STUDY

## ‘The Approachable One’

Vivienne is a well-liked, respected colleague who makes others feel comfortable and welcomed. As a result, she is often inundated with students and co-workers coming to her. They’re looking for someone to listen, to offer advice and to help them feel better about their life situations.

Vivienne often jokes that she’s like a “beacon for troubled folks,” yet seems to enjoy being in this role. She takes great pride in her connections and works hard to remain caring and approachable.

However, you’ve noticed lately that Vivienne seems to be dragging. She’s behind on her work and admits that she’s having a hard time taking care of herself. You see her getting more and more overwhelmed and stressed as she continues to take on all the additional emotional labor that people have come to expect from her.

You’d like to help Vivienne find more balance so she doesn’t completely burn out. Yet being “the approachable one” is so ingrained in her identity that you’re not sure how best to help her even things out. What might you do?

*You want to really respect the fact that you’re human, too. Bearing witness to another person’s suffering ignites things within ourselves.”*

— Psychologist Anna Baran

### For Discussion:

- What can happen when someone so closely identifies with their emotional labor work?
- How might you help Vivienne find more balance?
- What goes into setting healthy boundaries?
- How can caring people put the “fasten your own oxygen mask first” mantra into play while still feeling effective?



## Handling Emotional Labor and Protecting Your Well-Being



Emotional labor can be a valued, enjoyable component of our lives, yet doing too much can be a recipe for burnout.

1

Emotional labor can also lead to secondary trauma, chronic stress, compassion fatigue, physical and emotional concerns, and more.

2

Over-focusing on emotional labor at work/school may not leave enough left emotionally to show up for friends and family.

3

Balance, limit-setting, managing emotions and learning to say 'no' are key.

4

Women and BIPOC tend to do the bulk of emotional labor on campus.

5

6

It's important not to back-burner our own well-being.