THE LAY COUNSELOR ACADEMY

Managing Distress Empathy & Preventing Vicarious Trauma

Many of us may have felt at one time that we have *too much empathy* or that it's too painful to *"feel"* for so many people, so much of the time. We might try to harden our heart so we don't feel so much pain; or we might continue forward, with ever increasing amounts of pain culminating within us. Neither solution is ideal; both harm us and clients. There is another way!

How can we be deeply empathic and not drained?

Empathy is complex. Understanding more about the different types of empathy and increasing our awareness of when we feel them, allows us to make intentional decisions about how to manage these feelings. This helps us be more effective with others while also taking care of ourselves.

Thinking of empathy as two different types, can be useful. The first is **affective (feeling) empathy**, and the second is **perspective-taking empathy.**

Affective empathy is when we feel the *same thing* others are feeling, even though we didn't experience what they did. This type of empathy is hardwired into our brains; it's why we flinch if we see someone fall or feel a flood of happiness when someone tells us they're in love. We essentially "catch" the feelings of other people and experience them as if they were ours. When we feel the positive emotions that others feel, such as elation or happiness, this feels great! It can also *foster* a feeling of connection with others. Imagine the collective euphoria at exciting sporting events or the love felt when you are joyful with a family member over their good news.

Feeling other people's feelings when they are in pain, however, is quite different. In fact, when affective empathy is painful, it's often referred to as distress empathy. Distress empathy is when our client feels hopeless and sad and now we *also* feel sad and hopeless, or when our child's feelings have been hurt by a friend, and now we too, feel hurt when they tell us about it.

While there are some helpful aspects of distress empathy, such as spurring us to action (imagine the urgency to rescue a harmed animal or protest family separation policies after seeing crying children taken from their mothers), feeling it day in and day out is quite damaging. When we feel distress, sadness, and other painful emotions that others are feeling, it activates the pain centers in our brain. When this happens every day, it becomes chronic pain, which is deeply draining. For helping professionals, chronic distress empathy can lead to burnout; we get overwhelmed or experience numbness (empathy fatigue) as we try to distance ourselves from the feelings. When distress empathy is severe, it's called *vicarious trauma*. This is when we develop similar symptoms of trauma that our client has, even though we didn't go through what they went through.

There is another downside to distress empathy: research shows that distress empathy is not perceived by others as true caring. Imagine a friend sharing with us that they are worried and distraught about a member of their family; if we become equally worried and distraught, we no longer feel like a "safe harbor" to our friend. We may stop listening attentively, dive in to give advice, trying to "fix" their problems because we are in pain. Our friend may even feel they have to comfort *us* or they might feel regret for bringing it up. They may also feel insulted that we don't believe they'll be okay or that they can manage this difficulty. All of this results in our friend not feeling particularly cared about, in the interaction. This is the same thing that happens for clients, if they bring up something difficult and they feel our distress.

Perspective-taking empathy **(sometimes called cognitive empathy)** is when we *imagine* what others feel. We take their perspective and try to understand what they are feeling or going through. This type of empathy is characterized by curiosity and imagination and doesn't mean we feel exactly what they are feeling.

Perspective-taking empathy actually lights up reward centers in our brains—it makes us feel closer to people and more connected. When we are in perspective-taking empathy, we are not so distressed that we desperately try to "fix" someone else's feelings, instead we can listen with deep acceptance, understanding, and kindness. We maintain our focus on the other person and ensure we're effectively conveying empathy, which feels more comforting to clients than if we were highly distressed.

For those of us in the helping field, perspective-taking empathy is related to job satisfaction. In contrast with distress empathy, perspective-taking empathy is a protective factor against burnout.

Perspective-taking empathy is also unlimited; we don't have to relate to someone or have been through a similar situation to have empathy for them. We can work to understand anyone, in any situation.

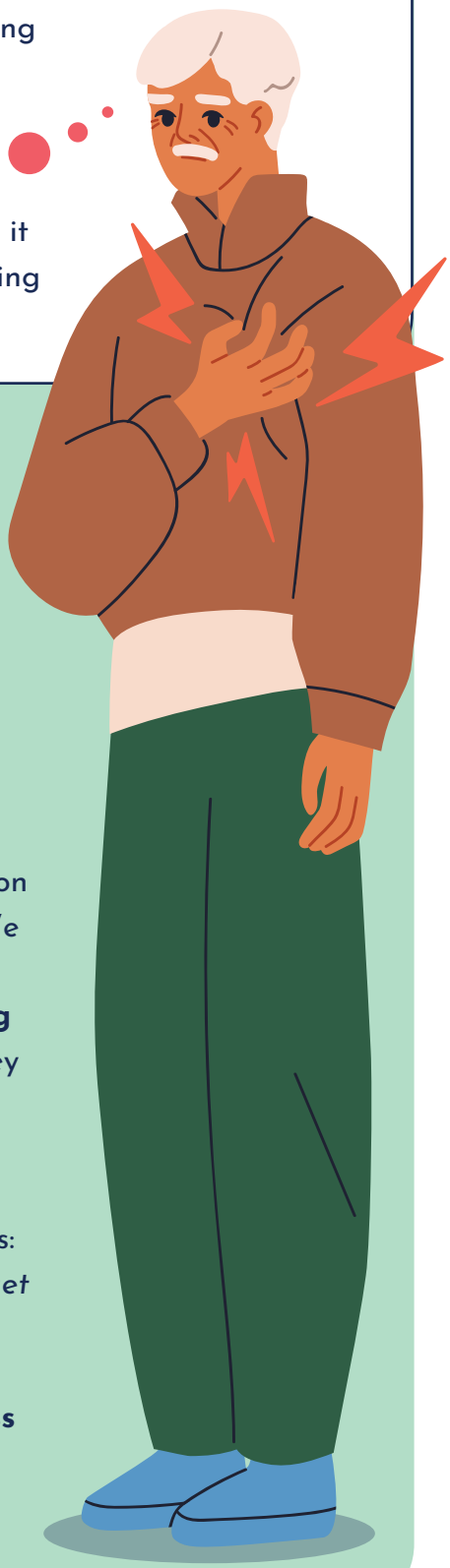
How can we shift from distress empathy to perspective-taking empathy more often?

In Moments of Distress Empathy

First, we **must notice we are in distress empathy** to be able to self-regulate these feelings. For many of us, we become aware when we realize we are feeling sad, hopeless, hurt, lonely or distraught, as we are listening to someone. Once we realize we're feeling someone else's pain, we can identify it to ourselves:

"Aha... I'm feeling the sadness and hopelessness they are feeling."

Naming it internally can give us a bit of distance from the distress, so it isn't quite so overwhelming. After we have the awareness of what's going on within us, we can move toward perspective-taking empathy.



Strategies we can use to move from distress empathy to perspective taking empathy:

1. **We can remind ourselves of this person's strengths and resilience.** Often when we feel distress empathy, we don't believe the other person will be okay and that they can get through the difficulty. When we recall that people go through very hard things all the time, and remind ourselves specifically about the person's strengths, resilience, and resources, the distress often subsides.

2. Sometimes when we feel distress empathy, we forget that the person has been living with this suffering, this difficulty, for a long time. We feel pressure because we now know about it, and we feel we must "fix" it. **We can remind ourselves this person has been managing this without us** and that they have been living with this before they shared with us.

3. **We can call on our faith, prayer, spiritual beliefs, or other comforting beliefs** we have about the world. We can say ourselves: *"This person has their own path; God is holding them."* Or *"people get through hard things; good things can come from difficulty."*

4. **We can remind ourselves that sometimes being a loving witness** is the best way to help others; we can envision ourselves holding hands with them—this visualization can remind us we can just "be with" them during this hard time.

Caring for Ourselves, After

After working with others who are in significant pain, we can shift our focus and skills caring for ourselves. Here are some strategies:

1. **Soothe ourselves with self-compassion exercises.** These are statements or physical gestures that are comforting to us. For example, we can say to ourselves *"It's okay, that was tough to hear,"* while we rub our upper arms. Or, we can go for a walk outside after experiencing distress empathy with a client, breathe deeply, and ground ourselves by naming colors we see or smells.

2. **Talk with a supportive person about our feelings.** This might be someone at work or outside of work. We want to make sure we choose someone to talk to who will not get distressed by us talking about our distress empathy! This is sometimes called a "distress cascade." Instead, we want to choose someone who is a calm, wise presence and can listen without distress.

3. **Seek counseling or other forms of healing** if our distress empathy seems to happen often or in particular circumstances. A pattern of distress empathy to particular disclosures or content, can be a sign we have unhealed parts of ourselves that get "woken up" when someone is in a similar situation or state. For example, if we experience distress empathy whenever someone shares with us that they are being verbally abused by a partner, it may be because we relate and have not been able to make peace with this part of our past.