

be resilient.

A publication of the Employee Assistance Centre

October 2022



Filling up the empathy cup

Empathy is an important part of healthy and fulfilling relationships. Having empathy allows us to connect with others' experiences and emotions, even when we aren't doing or feeling the same thing.

A few years ago, many of us had a stronger ability to compartmentalize experiences, emotions, and thoughts into various rooms in our hearts and minds to help us manage the impacts they had on our well-being. Over the past couple years, the walls between those rooms have struggled to stay up and contain what has been stored inside to the point that some of them have collapsed – leaving us with a chaotic assemblage of confusion, fear, distress and uncertainty.

With all this complexity taking up space in ourselves, how can one possibly make room for the experience of others? The answer is not by putting the walls back up.

Empathy is the ability to place yourself in experiences that stimulate feelings similar to what another person is going through. This allows us to best understand what a person is experiencing without going through the exact same thing.

Experiences do not have to be the same – the emotions you feel help you comprehend the experience. For example, you do not have to go through a car accident to understand what it feels like to have something sudden and unexpected happen to you. While you may not be able to capture the full extent of the experience, you will have the capacity to create a safe space for someone to process their own experience because you understand what you would need in that moment.

While the act of empathy does not carry the expectation of "fixing" a situation, it does require a certain amount of emotional and mental energy that is much harder to come by these days, especially when your empathy cup is empty.

Why is our empathy cup empty?

Being in a prolonged state of survival puts an overwhelming amount of pressure on the human condition, leaving individuals feeling overwhelmed, fatigued, burnt out and emotionally drained. The threat-and-drive system a person relies on to protect and motivate themselves can sustain us for a time, but it can become overactive and cause an influx of depression, anxiety, self-criticism and despair.





How do we refill our empty empathy cup?

The answer is compassion towards oneself. While empathy is the awareness of another's experience and feelings, compassion is the warm response to the empathy we feel. To respond with compassion, we must first extend it to ourselves.

We can call this the "reverse golden rule" – showing kindness to ourselves as we would towards others. When you offer compassion to yourself, you can give compassion and empathy to others. You can practice self-compassion if you remember to L.A.U.G.H.:

- Listen actively to your experience – find a mode of expression, like talking to someone, journaling, collaging, yoga or physical movement.
- Acknowledge the emotion you are feeling – give the emotions a name.
- Understand and hold space for the emotion – allow yourself to feel and say, "It's okay." What words of kindness can you use in place of your critical words?
- Give focus to the experience and not the solution. Do not problem solve – solutions come later. Take time to sit with the experience rather than seek distractions.
- Heal your bias – be compassionate instead of critical towards yourself. Think about what you would tell a friend in your situation.

Compassion towards oneself allows you to self soothe and fill your "cup" by generating feelings of care, positivity, optimism and gratitude. These emotions fuel the capacity to empathize with others and their experiences, because there is something to give and draw from.

How do we keep our empathy cup full?

The giving of empathy is not lost, but like a car in need of gas, the fuel light is on. Like a vehicle on an empty tank, humans can only get so far until they stall. When we stall, we pull over, we call for assistance or we walk to closest gas station.

When you stall on empathy, pull over, ask for support and look for ways to fill your tank – and try to prevent the fuel light from coming on in the first place.

The trick to avoiding another empty cup is balance for others and the self. If we simply overuse our reserves again, we are back to the beginning. Self-compassion acts as a buffer to prevent the burnout or compassion fatigue that can be reached by over empathizing (i.e., giving too much).

Making self-compassion a priority maintains a boundary that helps protect our energy reserves, preventing burnout. Self-compassion is your guide to accessing or re-accessing what is most significant to you, like values, motivations, passions and what brings you joy. Finding ways to access these on a regular basis is essential to maintaining your capacity for empathy.

To empathize is to make space for another and to be self-compassionate is to make space for oneself. The two are mutually inclusive, as we must have space for ourselves to make space available for others – and one is far easier to do when we practice the other.

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca.

