

# Five ways to create a compassionate workplace culture and help workers recover from burnout

November 18 2022, by Astrid H. Kendrick

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

We live in tumultuous times which can create an added layer of uncertainty for employees who need to build relationships with students, patients or clients. Providing calm, confident and warm [emotional labor](#) can be difficult for people experiencing burnout, grief or compassion

fatigue.

I have been studying the [impact of compassion fatigue and burnout](#), as well as the nature of emotional labor, in educational settings.

Workplace culture has emerged as a critical element to prevent burnout and support employees experiencing [emotional distress](#).

Organizations that promote a sense of [collective compassion](#)—by supporting noticing, feeling and acting on the suffering of others at the workplace—may see improvements in both [employee performance and job satisfaction](#).

## Compassionate work culture

The emotions of sympathy, empathy and [compassion](#) play an important role in developing a compassionate work culture, by helping us pay attention, in professionally appropriate ways, to the suffering of our students, patients, clients, colleagues, managers and leaders.

Sympathy—the [superficial recognition of the distress of another individual](#)—is the first step towards developing a compassionate workplace. It helps us notice the suffering of others.

The [emotion of empathy](#) compels us to take the time and attention to investigate and understand the response of the individual in distress. Compassion is noticing, [feeling and then acting on the suffering of others](#).

Workers' acknowledgement and response to these emotions vary according to their professional duties and boundaries. But compassionate action can make the difference at the workplace, whether through small moments of kind interpersonal interaction or sustained collective effort

to address complex and multifaceted challenges.

## Responding to co-workers

An example of how these emotions help to create a compassionate workplace would be the familiar case of a person struggling with a new software program, such as an expense reporting system.

A sympathetic response by a colleague would be to notice that a co-worker is spending too much time inputting their expenses into the management system, and to say, "The new system is tricky! Good luck!" and then walk away.

Empathy would prompt the colleague to seek to understand what the co-worker was already doing (rather than jumping in with an immediate solution) so that the colleague can figure out the origin of the frustration. Empathetic listening takes time.

Having felt similarly frustrated, the colleague may feel compassion and feel compelled to act by scheduling time during the next reporting period to sit with and help the co-worker complete their expense submission. If, through empathetic listening and compassionate action, further action is warranted, the colleague may offer to raise the problem as a larger systemic issue related to software training with management.

## Compassion in action

Building an [organizational culture](#) that encourages compassion requires employers and employees to create time and space for listening. The [cause of a person's distress](#), whether displayed in the workplace or not, can be complex, multi-faceted and not easily solved.

[Compassion satisfaction](#), or the joy and pleasure of providing care to others, provides the caregiver with the long-term fortitude to help others.

While compassion is [not itself limited or easily extinguished](#), acting on it can be slowed or stopped by burnout or compassion fatigue.

## **Moral distress**

The symptoms of compassion fatigue include [a changed worldview to negative, helplessness, hopelessness and disassociation from the individual in distress](#).

The [main symptoms of burnout](#) are physical fatigue, mental and emotional exhaustion, feeling unacknowledged or unimportant and viewing the people one serves and one's colleagues with apathy or a lack of care.

These symptoms can hinder a compassionate individual from acting on their emotions, creating [moral distress](#) for employees who want to be helpful, but do not have the time, energy or fortitude to act on their sympathy.

## **Employers can ignite sympathy, empathy and compassion by:**

1. Encouraging rest for fatigued or burned-out workers. Rest is not only related to following a [healthy sleep schedule](#). It also includes actions like choosing a hard stop time for answering emails or thinking about clients' needs each day, using allotted personal days, de-stigmatizing personal leaves for mentally or emotionally exhausted employees and having a judgment-free return to work plan.

2. Educating employees and managers about how to access organizational and local resources, such as benefits plans, crisis hotlines and mental health clinics. Rarely are individuals equipped—nor should they be—to take on the emotional and mental work of healing people who have experienced [traumatic events](#), so knowing where help is provided can lighten the workers' and leaders' role.
3. Ensuring that leaders (both formal and informal) model the importance of rest by scheduling, *and taking*, breaks throughout the workday. A break could be a ten-minute solo walk around the workplace or an energizing breakfast with colleagues in the local coffee shop.
4. Managing the valuable resource—[employee](#) and manager time—thoughtfully. Every organization likely has busier and slower times in the day, week or year. Consider how your organization regards time, as [workload is strongly related to employee burnout](#). For example, in schools, September and June are extremely busy as the year ramps up and slows down. Avoiding implementing new innovations at this time can help educational workers focus on building strong relationships with students and colleagues.
5. Supporting work check-in practices that provide options for leaders and employees to self-reflect on their own [mental and emotional states of mind](#). Such reflection can include asking oneself: "Am I compelled to look away or act?" Are leaders or employees able to shift focus from hopeless worry about all the suffering they can't relieve to hopeful impact by doing what they can do for each other?

Meanwhile, if resting, taking daily breaks and investigating and accessing workplace benefits and other resources do not help with recovery from compassion fatigue or burnout, consider a longer leave of absence [or investigate other career, job](#) or workplace options.

The embers of sympathy, empathy and compassion are not extinguished by [compassion fatigue](#) or burnout, but they may be temporarily muffled by stress and circumstance. These emotions can be re-ignited through finding daily actions that can support a compassionate [workplace culture](#)

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