

## **This World is Exhausting, don't Let it Exhaust You: Setting Emotional Boundaries to Prevent Fatigue**

Mary Kate Lee

Are you exhausted from everything currently happening in the U.S. and the world? Me too. You've likely heard that I/You/We need to be more compassionate, more caring, and more empathetic, especially in the time of COVID-19 and recent police murder of George Floyd.

Compassion and empathy are pushed in the mainstream wellness culture, but they are rarely discussed in a practical and realistic way. For example, upon hearing or reading the word "compassion," you may be able to loosely describe the concept, its benefits, why it's important, and simple ways to cultivate it. But what happens when you've shown so much compassion and empathy towards others that you're left feeling irritable, exhausted, and maybe even resentful? This can be known as compassion/empathy fatigue.

Let me be clear: *compassion and empathy are not the problem*. The headlines and Facebook posts are on to something. Compassion and empathy are both essential for healthy relationships. Compassion is linked to increased acceptance of oneself and others, awareness of the present moment, happiness, and a longer and happier life.<sup>1,3</sup> Empathy increases helping and cooperation, motivates generous behavior, and is linked to life satisfaction and happiness.<sup>4,5</sup>

The problem stems from how the information is communicated. If we only see sources that rave about emotional intelligence and how it can make us feel better and be healthier, wouldn't you want to practice it *all the time*? This notion can easily lead to emotional fatigue and burnout. If you're constantly putting others' emotional needs before your own but think *this is what you're supposed to do* to be a compassionate/empathetic person, then you might feel confused, frustrated, exhausted, and resentful. Below I review the difference between compassion and empathy and how to set personal boundaries to prevent emotional exhaustion.

### **The World is Exhausting. Don't Let it Exhaust You.**

Coronavirus, the horrifying police murder of George Floyd, ongoing violent riots, and even conversations with others about these issues can completely zap you of emotional energy for days on end. Showing compassion and empathy towards those who are suffering is one of the many necessary steps to take in order to make progress and heal. However, exerting emotional energy for *all of these people* - to all of the ill, all of the wounded, all of the oppressed - will leave you feeling burnt out. In order to protect yourself from emotional exhaustion (which I'm sure you've been feeling lately) personal boundaries must be set. The key is understanding the difference between compassion and empathy.

### **Compassion v. Empathy: What's the Difference?**

Compassion is noticing the suffering of others with the desire to alleviate it. There are three components of compassion: mindfulness (we have to be aware of the suffering and mistreatment of others); kindness (treating others with encouragement, understanding, and gentleness instead of judgement); and

common humanity (understanding that we all suffer, we are all imperfect, and this is part of the human experience).<sup>2</sup> Essentially, compassion is tending to others' needs from a place of understanding, kindness, and shared experience.

Empathy, on the other hand, is an emotional and visceral (or instinctual) experience of another person's feelings.<sup>1</sup> The two components of empathy are cognitive and affective. The cognitive component of empathy is the ability to know someone else's inner experience and explanation for why they feel that way. The affective component of empathy is the ability to name the feelings of another person.<sup>5</sup> For example, if my friend's dog died, I could empathize with her cognitively because I know what it is like for a pet to pass away. Therefore, I understand why she's feeling down. I could empathize with her affectively because I can remember how I felt when my dog died, so I can identify her feelings of loss and sadness. By empathizing with my friend, I am putting myself in her shoes (replaying the death of my dog) and choosing to experience her feelings. Showing *compassion* towards my friend would look a little different. Firstly, I would have to cultivate the awareness that she is suffering (e.g., by her crying). Then, I would show compassion by reminding her she's not alone (common humanity) and treat her with love and kindness (e.g., give her a hug, help her clean out her dog's toys).

From an applied standpoint, the main difference between compassion and empathy is your emotional output. Empathizing with someone and feeling someone's feelings can be a very intense and demanding emotional experience. Showing compassion for someone entails the acknowledgement of suffering but doesn't necessitate taking on that person's emotions as your own. You can be compassionate from an emotional distance. Compassion and empathy are not mutually exclusive, one is not better than the other, and both are extremely important for flourishing relationships and overall wellbeing. However, there is a time and place to demonstrate each, which is where boundary setting comes in.

### **Enough is Enough: Setting Emotional Boundaries**

Knowing the difference between compassion and empathy is a good start to setting emotional boundaries. Allowing yourself the ability to choose when to practice compassion and empathy lets you take back control of your emotional energy. Empathy is a relationship building skill. Therefore, it should be saved for those with whom you have an *actual* relationship. You don't have to empathize with every person on the nightly news, nor with all of the front-line workers in healthcare. If you empathize with everyone, you're going to drain your own resources. Quickly. (Cue the irritability, moodiness, and resentment).

Showing compassion, that is, viewing others without judgement and with loving kindness, may be more appropriate for those you do not know personally. Think of yourself as a slide and a sponge. There are times when you need to have someone's feelings slide off you in order to preserve your energy reserves. There are other times when absorbing someone's feelings, like a sponge, is needed in order to support them.

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I am not suggesting there is right time to express compassion vs. empathy, nor am I prescribing "how to" empathize or show compassion. Ultimately it is up to you, how you define your personal boundaries, and how you choose to use your emotional energy. Cultivating awareness of your emotional responses and energy levels will help you learn and solidify your personal boundaries. This will take time but choosing when and for whom to expend your emotional energy will prevent emotional fatigue and burnout, and likely boost your energy levels, happiness, and quality of your relationships.

## References

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