

# Is it Possible For HR Professionals to be Too Compassionate?



Maybe you were attracted to HR because you like helping people. Maybe you still get the warm fuzzies when you help solve problems or ease employees' pain.

But does your instinct to empathize with employee suffering also trigger vicarious pain in you?

"There's a downside to empathy when it comes to the suffering of others," says Olga Klimecki, a researcher and the lead author of [a study on empathy](#) in the journal *Cerebral Cortex*. "When we share the suffering of others too much, our negative emotions increase. It carries the danger of an emotional burnout."

For HR professionals, too much emotional involvement in employee problems can chew up your time, drain your energy and increase your stress. A 2014 [Towers Watson survey](#) says stress is the number one workforce health issue right now, ranking above even physical inactivity or obesity. For HR, a portion of that stress stems from too much emotional involvement with employee difficulties.

Plus, becoming emotionally hooked on solving employee problems makes you less valuable to the senior executives who look to you as a strategic player.

The problem is rising as employees gain more ways to seek help beyond the ubiquitous walk-in — cell phones, e-mail, texts and the company intranet.

## Keeping your emotional distance: 6 steps

The goal is to be receptive and compassionate to others' feelings without adopting those feelings as your own. Use the following tips to maintain your emotional distance while still remaining effective:

1. **Keep your door open and let employees know you will listen, but ...** remind them, especially in new-hire meetings, that you can't fix all their problems.
2. **Delivering bad news? Don't take it personally.** Explain bad news from the business perspective. Example: If your organization announces layoffs and upset employees flock to your office, don't effuse empathy. Listen and say that you understand how they feel, and explain the business rationale for the cuts.
3. **Empower managers to trouble-shoot employee problems,** including some that strike an emotional

chord with you. Remind managers to direct employees to your EAP. Then, handle only those



the sensitive and difficult cases that could draw senior management's attention.

4. **Set aside time each day to work without interruptions.** Shut your door and don't answer the phone. Spend that time on HR issues that don't stoke your empathy but focus on organizational strategy and growth. Your top brass will recognize these strategic gains, not that you listened to Fred's girlfriend problems for half an hour. Direct employees to your intranet site for basic forms and policy info.
5. **Delegate when possible.** Don't become so emotionally attached to an HR project that you continue to manage the details of it long after you should. Plan a hand-off strategy when launching any such project.
6. **Cut the cord between work and home.** Don't carry home feelings of guilt because you can't help solve every employee's problem. You're their HR person, not their psychiatrist. Realize that and try to leave HR worries in "HRland"; don't bring them home.

**Final point:** To know if "over-attachment" is a problem for you, assess how much time you spend at home dwelling on employee problems. If it seems excessive, map out a plan to draw a brighter line between being compassionate and being consumed.

## Are You Burning Out? Take this 25-Question Self-Quiz

Everybody feels their on-the-job motivation and enthusiasm dip at times. But the blues can quickly turn into full-blown job burnout if they're combined with overwork and over-empathy.

To see if you're edging toward the crispy end of the burnout scale, take our 25-question self-assessment quiz at [TheHRSpecialist.com/burnout](https://TheHRSpecialist.com/burnout).