

# An excess of empathy can be bad for your mental health

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Credit: Anton27/Shutterstock

Have you found yourself irritable, sad or close to tears when watching the news lately? If so, you are not alone.

Experiencing [empathy](#) has its benefits, but there are also many downsides to it, which is why we must learn to practice healthy empathy.

Empathy is an ability to sync emotionally and cognitively with another

person; it is a capacity to perceive a world from their perspective or share their [emotional experiences](#). It is essential for building and maintaining relationships, as it helps us connect with others at a deeper level. It is also associated with higher [self-esteem and life purpose](#).

There are broadly two types of empathy: cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. Emotional empathy is about sharing feelings with others to the extent that you may experience pain when watching someone in pain, or experience distress when watching [someone in distress](#). This is what happens to many people when they watch upsetting [news](#) on TV, especially when they relate to [specific people and their lives](#).

But emotional empathy isn't just about experiencing [negative emotions](#). Empathetic people may experience an abundance of positivity when watching other people's joy, happiness, excitement, or serenity and can get more out of [music and other daily pleasures](#).

While this emotional contagion is suitable for positive states, having too much empathy when watching people suffer can be very upsetting and even lead to mental health problems. Too much empathy towards others, especially when we prioritize other people's emotions over our own, may result in experiences of [anxiety and depression](#), which explains why so many of us feel bad when watching the news about the war in Ukraine.

The other type of empathy—cognitive empathy—refers to seeing the world through other people's eyes, seeing it from their perspective, putting ourselves into their shoes without necessarily experiencing the associated [emotions](#) and, for example, watching the news and understanding at a cognitive level why people feel despair, distress or anger. This process may lead to [emotional empathy](#) or even somatic empathy, where empathy has a physiological effect (somatic being from the ancient Greek word "soma" meaning body).

The effect of empathy on the body has been well documented. For example, parents experiencing high levels of empathy towards their children tend to have chronic low-grade inflammation, [leading to lower immunity](#). Also, our heart beats to the same rhythm when we [empathize with others](#). So the impact of empathy when watching the news is both psychological and physiological. In some circumstances, it may result in what some refer to as ["compassion fatigue."](#)

## **Misnomer**

The burnout experienced by excessive empathy has traditionally been termed [compassion fatigue](#). But more recently, using MRI studies, neuroscientists have argued that this is a misnomer, and that compassion does not cause fatigue. The distinction is important because it turns out that compassion is the antidote to the distress we feel when we empathize with people who are suffering. We need [less empathy and more compassion](#).

Empathy and compassion are distinct events in the brain. Empathy for another person's pain activates areas in the brain associated with negative emotions. Because we feel the other person's pain, the boundary between the self and others can become blurred if we do not have good boundaries or self-regulation skills and we experience ["emotional contagion."](#)

We get entangled in the distress and find it hard to soothe our emotions. We want to depersonalize, become numb, and look away. In contrast, compassion is associated with activity in areas of the brain associated with [positive emotions and action](#).

Compassion can be defined simply as empathy plus action to alleviate another person's pain. The action part of compassion helps us decouple our emotional system from others and see that we are separate

individuals. We do not have to feel their pain when we witness it. Instead, we have the feeling of wanting to help. And we have a rewarding, positive emotional experience when we feel compassion towards another.

Here are three ways to practice compassion while watching the news.

## 1. Practice loving-kindness meditation

When you are overwhelmed by the news, practice loving-kindness meditation, where you focus on sending love to yourself, people you know, and those you don't know who are suffering.

If we can create a buffer of positive emotions with compassion, we can think about how to practically help and act in overwhelming situations. Training your "compassion muscles" provides a buffer against the negative emotions so that you can be better motivated to help and not get [overwhelmed by the distressing emotions](#).

Loving-kindness meditation does not reduce negative emotions. Instead, it increases activation in areas of the brain associated with [positive emotions](#) like love, hope, connection and reward.

## 2. Practice self-compassion

Are you beating yourself up for not being able to help? Or feeling guilty about your life while other people suffer? Try [being kind to yourself](#). Remember that while our suffering is always specific to us, it is not uncommon. We share a common humanity of all experiencing some kind of suffering. While being mindful of your suffering, also try to not over-identify with it. These acts of self-compassion help reduce the distress experienced in empathic burnout and [improves feelings of wellbeing](#).

### 3. Take action

Empathic distress evokes negative feelings, such as stress, and prompts us to withdraw and be unsociable. In contrast, [compassion](#) produces positive feelings of love for another. It prompts us to take action. Most specifically [compassion helps motivate sociability](#). One way to [counter empathic distress] is to get involved: donate, volunteer, organize.

### 4. Stop doomscrolling

Understandably, we look for information in times of crisis. It helps us be prepared. However, doomscrolling—continually scrolling through and reading depressing or worrying content on a [social media](#) or news site, especially on a phone—is [not helpful](#).

Research on social media engagement during the pandemic showed that we need to be mindful of our news consumption to avoid increases in stress and negative emotions. To avoid the news altogether is unrealistic, but limiting our consumption is helpful. Another suggestion is to balance our media consumption by seeking out stories of acts of kindness (kindscrolling?), which can [lift our mood](#).

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