Teacher Empathy: A Personal View on Approaching Compassion Satisfaction, Avoiding Compassion Fatigue

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Abstract

Teaching with empathy is an approach that values the emotional quality of both teacher and student experiences. To incorporate teacher empathy into our teaching practice, we must first recognize that distress is inevitable, and that building skills to deal with stressful situations is an important investment in our future mental health. Communication skills such as listening, validating, and reframing are useful in the midst of student interactions. Designing a personal strategy to handle email communications is also essential, as much of our student communication occurs via this route. Having a short list of phone numbers and email addresses for campus emergency contacts, such as the dean of students or campus counseling center, is another important step in preparedness. Creating appropriate boundaries, stepping back, and taking time for self-awareness all help to preserve teacher mental health. The overall goal is to position ourselves with the mental and emotional resources to interact with students in a manner that leads to successful student outcomes, and leaves us with a feeling of compassion satisfaction, rather than compassion fatigue. https://doi.org/10.21692/haps.2023.020

Key words: communication, boundaries, self-regulation, reflection, self-awareness, empathy

Introduction

Responding to students with empathy is helpful for both the student and the instructor. Subjectively, we might say that showing empathy is better than not showing it. As a social species, humans are drawn to help and support each other. It feels natural to care about one another and want to help. As professionals who have chosen to be educators, we have taken on a role where the primary objective is to increase student learning. Education occurs, however, within the context of individual student (and teacher) circumstances. Many of us routinely draw upon social and emotional skills as we interact with students in more of a helping professional role, whether it be coach, counselor, advisor, or social worker.

Sometimes students come to us for help with a course, and, in the process, we learn of traumatic and catastrophic events. As educators, we are not necessarily trained in how to respond effectively and with compassion, and we may need more skills in this area. Even if handling these deeply challenging situations feels natural to us, we still may struggle to practice boundaries and self-care. Speaking from personal experience, it is easy for the weight of the trauma, chaos, and sadness that walks through my office door to sap my energy and color my mood for days or weeks. This past semester, I embarked on a personal project to learn how to balance empathy with self-care. Here I aim to share some perspective, skills, and resources that I hope will enable you also to support students and yourself simultaneously.

Perspective

First of all, distress is inevitable. The statistics related to the prevalence of child abuse in our homes and sexual assault on our campuses are staggering. According to the Adverse Childhood Experiences survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 61% of adults report experiencing one adverse childhood event, and 1 in 6 adults reported 4 or more adverse events (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

A 2019 survey by the American Association of Universities reported that 13% of students experienced nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or the inability to consent; for undergraduate women, the number was 25.9% (Cantor et al., 2020). Reading the statistics can be overwhelming, but the key point is that child abuse and sexual assault are common, and it seems that, more likely than not, a student coming to office hours will have some history of trauma. Then we layer on the stresses of daily life. Many students are working to pay both rent and tuition bills. They may also be acting as caregivers for aging parents, sick family members, or small children. Now think about how many crises happen each semester. A parent has a heart attack; a partner is diagnosed with cancer; a house burns down. When we serve hundreds of students, the probability that some terrible event will happen becomes a certainty.

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COVID-19 brought added stress and we, as a society, have not yet rebounded. Being in lockdown, isolated from social supports, while experiencing the uncertainty of living or dying from a novel coronavirus created a situation with increased stress and decreased emotional and mental resources to deal with the stress. We may have learned new strategies for coping with stress. Alternatively, we may see our students exiting lockdown with fewer emotional skills and resources for healthy engagement with normal everyday stresses. Anecdotally, it feels as though our student populations post-lockdown are more anxious and have less resilience.

Current stresses, recent catastrophic events, and a history of trauma can all influence student behavior. When we are interacting with students, we can't possibly know all of the backstory for why a student is behaving in a certain way. Students who come to us with requests or questions (or even demands) may need attention to their inner emotional landscape before they are ready and able to dive into a more cognitive approach to problem-solving. This sequential process has been described as the need to first "regulate" agitation or difficult emotions, and then "relate" by creating a connection with the other person (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Only after that can we use "reason" to work through the problem and come to a solution. This plays out in both big and small ways, depending on the situation.

When we interact with hurting people, we will also hurt. Witnessing trauma, in the moment or in the retelling, affects the observer. This is termed secondary trauma, which is a useful term because it clearly names the effect of the trauma on the witness (Figley 1995). Being around another person who is feeling a particular emotion will transfer the quality of that emotion to the observer. We can all feel happy for a friend who gets a promotion at work, and feel sad for a family member who experiences a loss. When students share the circumstances of their stress or trauma with us, it will affect our emotional state. This secondary trauma is not as intense or as personal as the primary trauma, but we will still experience shock, disbelief, horror, loss, sadness, or grief.

It is possible to respond in a manner that increases our personal sense of meaning.

Building skills to call upon in situations of student stress can allow us to experience compassion satisfaction. This occurs when we are able to connect, promote a feeling of understanding, and provide resources. Compassion satisfaction is the opposite of compassion fatigue, when the effect of dealing with stressful situations is to become overwhelmed, depressed, and burned out. By building empathy skills, and balancing them with self-care, we can shift towards experiencing compassion satisfaction rather than fatigue. The Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) Measure, available free online, generates a quick snapshot of whether we are currently experiencing more compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue, or burnout (Center for Victims of Torture, 2021). This website also has descriptions of the terms compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

Skills to Practice

There are many thoughtful and helpful resources as we consider what skills we need and how to practice them. What follows is a collection of skills that I came across in print (Meyers et al., 2019) or in podcasts (especially Vedantam, 2022) or discussed with friends, colleagues, and my therapist.

In the Moment, with a Student

Listening: We start with listening to the student. This sounds very simple, but it is the essential foundation for the interaction. We all know that sometimes we are distracted, thinking about other tasks or worries, while someone is talking to us. Listening requires an awareness of what the student is saying verbally and what they are telling us with body language. We also communicate that we are listening by having an open posture, facing the student, making some eye contact. It should go without saying that we cannot be looking at a phone or a computer while attentively listening. If possible, we can also be conscious of our facial expression; if we, ourselves, are worried about something else, this may be written on our face. Inviting the student in, with a smile, and communicating that we are glad to see them, can help to set the stage for good listening.

Validating: By communicating that we understand the situation, or that we have had similar thoughts or feelings or struggles ourselves, we can validate the student's feelings about their situation. It can help to choose a specific sentence that almost becomes a reflex. Here are some suggestions for specific sentence templates:

- "I'm so sorry to hear that…"
- "I'm disappointed, too, that…"
- "Thank you for letting me know that…"
- "That sounds really…" (tough, challenging, rough, difficult, etc.)

What we are trying to communicate here is understanding, but not in a trite way. We can't say that "we understand" if the reaction will be "You can't possibly know how it feels to [insert situation] because you've never had to deal with [this particular situation]." We're not trying to say that we have felt exactly the same way, and the goal here is not for us to share our experience. The goal is to allow for connection and for the student to feel that they have been heard and understood.

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We don't necessarily need to agree with the student. Often students come to my office with a complaint about another student, a teaching assistant, or another faculty member. In these moments, it would be inappropriate to side with the student against the other person. Validating simply acknowledges that this student, in my office, has had a particular experience.

There is also a fine line between communicating understanding, which is the goal, versus creating false hope by promising a particular response or action. I can agree, for example, that the course policy of requiring correct spelling can make some students anxious. However, I cannot promise to change the course policy in response. I can express my condolences over the loss of a family member, but I cannot promise to give the student a passing grade in response.

Reframing: When a student comes with a complaint, it can be helpful to follow validating with reframing. Reframing is a powerful tool that allows us to grant agency to the student. In reframing, we offer a different perspective, or suggest an appropriate action. If we offer another perspective on the situation, we can encourage flexibility in our thinking and we introduce the possibility that there is more than one way to interpret something. Sometimes this simple act is enough to get us moving again from a "stuck" mental position. If there is a tangible action that we can suggest, we encourage the student to see themselves as autonomous, responsible actors within the learning environment.

As an example of reframing, when a student comes to me complaining that they cannot understand their instructor, or they aren't "getting anything" out of class, I encourage them to come to class prepared by reading before class, and to be sure to ask questions in class if they don't understand. I try to encourage the student to realize that the instructor genuinely wants students to learn, so they want students to ask questions. And other students probably feel the same way, so, as long as they are polite, it's a service to everyone.

Referring: It is helpful to have a list of the most useful phone numbers and email addresses within easy reach. This should include any on-campus resources, such as the Office of the Dean of Students, the Counseling Center, and the Title IX Coordinator. The latter handles complaints of sex-based discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence, so this person is a resource in those types of situations. If you have received a list of on-campus resources, post it where it is easily accessible and update it as needed. If you didn't, hopefully there is another seasoned faculty member who can provide you with the needed information. Once you find that person, you should ask them what to do if a student reveals that that they are homeless, or suicidal, or being abused. There are also nationwide hotlines and resource centers. Michelle Obama's recent book has a list of American resources in the back (Obama, 2022). As educators, we routinely see situations that require professional assistance beyond the scope of our training. We may feel inadequate in responding, or unsure of what to do. We must prepare ahead of time, so that we know where to point students and we can appropriately refer students for professional help.

Saying "no" kindly: We want to say "Yes!" to students who come to us asking for help. While it is completely possible that a student is coming to you with a question that would be answered "Yes" by reading the syllabus, I have found that this is the exception rather than the rule. Reframing, as described above, can help to reshape the question and provide alternate solutions. But often, the answer to the question has to be "Sorry, but no." For me, these are the most important sentences to practice ahead of time, in order to be kind but firm. Speaking without thinking often leads me to feeling later that I mishandled the situation. So here are some suggestions for ways to say no kindly.

- "I see where you're coming from. I understand your request. I just can't do this."
- "I really wish this were possible, I hear how important this is."
- "Given the guidelines of the course, it's not possible to …"
- "In order to be fair to all students, I would need to do this for all students, and this is not possible."

It does help to have clearly-articulated course policies, designed with some flexibility built in.

Communicating with Students via Email

When student requests are handled via email, many of the same skills apply. It's still important to practice validating, reframing, and saying no kindly.

Leading with a positive opening statement: This idea is a substitute for "listening" but has a similar role in email communication. Even a short statement such as "Thank you for your email" allows the recipient to relax for a moment and feel appreciated.

Using standard templates: Keeping a set of standard sentences or paragraphs that you use to response to similar questions or complaints will allow you to feel confident in your communication without investing the same amount of time and emotional capacity each time.

Encouraging in-person interactions: For difficult conversations, it really is better to have a face-to-face (or even virtual) conversation rather than going back and forth with email. It is easy to misinterpret the tone of an email. Nonverbal cues are also very helpful in both interpreting a student's meaning and in communicating empathy. In my experience, oftentimes students are grateful to be invited for an in-person conversation.

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Limiting email availability: Bringing empathy to email communication requires emotional and mental reserves that must be cultivated by time away from email. Setting clear email boundaries and communicating them via your course policies allows for more space and potentially more positive email interactions.

Self-care

The idea of self-care comes up frequently in the popular press and even in casual conversation. At its most elemental level, self-care requires knowledge of how to care for oneself, and then making time and devoting precious personal resources to the implementation of self-care practices.

To me, we must start at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943) by considering whether we are meeting our own basic needs. For me, this includes needs for food, sleep, and exercise, as all of these impact my energy levels and my mood. Whether I have had enough sleep is probably the biggest factor in whether I have a good mood and enough energy for the day. I have learned the hard way that I do not function at all when sleep-deprived, so getting enough sleep is not optional for me. The next question is: Am I eating enough calories and nutrients, with enough frequency, to sustain my energy level and provide some satisfaction? It's not a choice whether to "eat to live" or "live to eat"; we do eat to live, and food can bring pleasure. I don't generally enjoy exercise, but I do feel stronger and healthier when I walk, and stretch, and do some weight-bearing exercise. Every semester when I teach about the skeletal system in Anatomy & Physiology 1, I tell students about the beneficial effect of weight-bearing exercise on bone density, and that reminds of my own need to exercise.

Awareness of our Internal State

Next, we must cultivate an awareness of our ongoing mental and emotional state. Academic success comes along with many hours spent inputting knowledge into our brain's circuitry database. As educators, we tend to be proficient at cognitive processes like analysis and synthesis. We spend a great deal of time in our heads, thinking. What I'm suggesting here is that we pay attention to how we feel, in our body, mind, and spirit. We need to pause routinely to register what is happening at each level. Pain is a mechanism to alert us that something needs attention, something needs to change. Anger is an emotion that indicates that something is wrong, or that a boundary has been crossed; I'm sensing a threat that necessitates some sort of action. Exhaustion tells us that we need rest and restoration. Awareness of these various states allows us to honor what is happening in the moment and to move back toward wholeness. Bessel van der Kolk (2014) described this eloquently when he wrote: "Neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change the way we feel is by becoming aware of our *inner* experience and learning to befriend what is going on inside ourselves.". Awareness is the first step.

And sometimes, awareness is all that it takes to have an internal reset. A brief pause to check-in internally can lead to an acceptance that this particular email is causing me stress, followed by a deep breath before moving on to write a few sentences in response. Slowing down enough to acknowledge the feeling and keeping it in mind while writing helps me to feel satisfied that I have responded appropriately. When speaking to a student, awareness of my own emotional reaction can help me to connect with the student by sharing that I, too, feel the distress of their situation. Or that I, too, am disappointed with how the course went for them. If I'm feeling an angry reaction, and I am able to be aware of that while it is happening, I may be able to express that there is something wrong and I would like to work to fix it. These interactions must be followed by time for closure and for processing.

Closure and Processing

A closure routine or ritual is a personal choice to signal to my mind and body that I'm "closing" the door on a particular event. I may continue to feel the aftershocks of the encounter, I may carry sadness with me, but the initial threat to my sympathetic nervous system is over. A closure routine can be as simple as literally closing the office door and taking a few deep breaths. Or going to get some water, using the restroom, or walking outside for a few minutes. It's a pause, a chance to offer myself the same empathy that I'm offering another and to hopefully reactivate the parasympathetic nervous system and allow for internal calming.

I often find it useful to process what happened by sharing with a close friend, someone who has similar experiences and a similar commitment to balancing empathy and self-care. The purpose is not just to vent and release pressure but to talk through my emotional reaction to a particular situation. Can I name and express my emotion out loud? It is powerful to verbally acknowledge my internal state and accept that the emotion is present. Another person can also perform the important work of validating and reframing for us as we reflect upon our role in an interaction. It is a gift to have another person at work who can do this for us. It could also be useful to have a group of likeminded, resourceful faculty who could meet together regularly to review difficult cases and build skills by sharing ideas for alternate ways to respond or resources to offer. Therapy also presents an opportunity to express my emotional ups and downs and to process. The benefits of a good therapeutic relationship are myriad. We should not be afraid or ashamed to seek professional help in dealing with the demands of student situations requiring the skills typically associated with the helping professions.

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Boundaries

We create physical, mental, and emotional boundaries between ourselves and others. In this case, we are creating boundaries to protect ourselves from the ongoing emotional demands of our work. Boundaries are an important part of setting up a system of self-care that allows you to have time and space for private emotional work. Boundaries include being clear about when you are available to students, in class, on campus, in person, and over email. The ability to step away from your desk, your computer, and your email is essential in order to cultivate the mental and emotional space to come back to students with fresh eyes, ears, and open hearts. Mental boundaries allow us to come up with new solutions and new perspectives because we have allowed our subconscious time to work, unhindered by our anxiety and worry. We can create mental boundaries by taking time out to pursue other interests, by integrating mindfulness practices into daily life, or simply by listening to music while we attack our daily chores.

Emotional boundaries are the most challenging. Emotions come with us when we go to the gym or come home from school. Sometimes it works to visualize leaving the emotion behind: walking through the door and saying to oneself, "I'm home now." Other times, I have learned that I can change my internal emotion simply by saying to myself, "I don't want to feel this way anymore." (It's almost magical when that works, typically with small anger or irritation.) It's very powerful when we can acknowledge and then change the emotion we are feeling. Another revelation to me was when I realized that I could simultaneously feel two differing emotions. This is also powerful because it releases me from being shackled to feeling one persistent emotion that I can't shake. OK, this emotion is here, but I can also feel something else. If I really don't like the emotion I am feeling and I just want it to be gone (but it won't leave), then I try some mindfulness / visualization practices. In one practice, I sit quietly, eyes closed, and imagine myself as a house, where I am inviting anger in to be a guest within my house. When anger is a guest, I am accepting that anger is present, but I also acknowledge that anger is not all that I am. Anger is simply visiting. I also like the practice where you sit quietly, again eyes closed, and picture the negative emotion inside you, and then picture a flow of black wind particles leaving with every exhalation. Breathe in light, breathe out anger.

In Summary: Lessons Learned

This past semester my balance between empathy and self-care has improved. I realized early on that I must be rested to able to be wholeheartedly present in my interactions with others. I prioritized going to bed at 10 PM so that I could get 8 hours sleep. I am a better human being if I get enough sleep. I also created a new closure ritual for myself. I keep a stack of origami paper in my office so that if I am feeling sad or upset about a student, I can take a few minutes to focus in on my feeling and my hopes for that student while folding an origami crane. I now have a short string of origami cranes stapled together, a visual reminder of my intention to be empathetic and also to have boundaries for myself. I have a colleague across the hall who is a partner in processing events and emotions. I can walk into her office and say, "I'm not OK," and talk about it. That has been very helpful. And, I have met monthly with my therapist to communicate my thoughts, my feelings, and my concerns in this domain.

Acknowledging that being around hurting people will hurt, I feel empowered to be intentional in planning my response. I believe in the process of committing internally to being open to the emotion, to allow it to flow through and release it, even as I know that I need help in the process. And I believe that my courses are better when I am rested, present, and aware. Brené Brown (2021) said that leadership requires genuine affection for the individuals you are leading. In the classroom, we are leading students in a learning experience. Genuine affection for students enables us to be better classroom leaders. Taking care of ourselves mentally, emotionally, and physically allows us as educators to come into the classroom bearing the gift of openheartedness. Having an empathetic approach to students allows us to view them with affection.

Resources

It's important to have a list of the emergency phone numbers or email addresses for people on your campus who can help. This may include the Dean of Students office, the Counseling Center, or the Tutoring Center. You may have received a list of important phone numbers during campus orientation, or you may need to create your own short list that you keep on your desk. It's helpful to know which types of situations each office can handle, and what resources are available. For example, your campus may have 24/7 suicide prevention or a mental health hotline, or you may need to have your own list of national resources (there is a helpful appendix in Obama 2022). Your Title IX Coordinator may also have resources to help in cases of domestic abuse or assault.

Likeminded colleagues are another important resource. We all need someone to help debrief and reframe the details of student interactions. This could be individual, informal, as-needed; or it could be a standing faculty group which meets routinely to support one another in practicing empathetic communication. Group members could bring challenging scenarios to the group to evaluate and discuss alternative communication strategies. If possible, a staff member from the counseling center could be present to facilitate the group sessions. Student counselors may also be available to lead educational groups on building empathetic communication skills.

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Individual therapy sessions with a trusted, competent, and compassionate therapist can also help in processing difficult situations, finetuning communication skills and strategies, promoting self-awareness, and ensuring appropriate boundaries. In my experience, the therapy relationship is just like any other relationship which may require trial-and-error. If at first therapy is unsuccessful, it could be that a different therapist would be a better fit (see also: Lakshmin, 2023).

As I mentioned earlier, there are many written resources which may prove useful as we think about practicing teacher empathy. Recent writings that highlight the lifelong effects of trauma can be helpful in thinking about holding our students with an empathetic filter (Perry & Winfrey 2021; Van der Kolk 2014). For more thoughts on setting boundaries and treating yourself with compassion I recommend the recent book *Real Self-Care* (Lakshmin, 2023), which discusses strategies for elucidating our own values and living within our chosen purpose.

Final Thoughts

We want so much for our lives, our careers, our work, and our students. Taking a few moments to focus on self-awareness and how we feel in our bodies is essential in order to check in on how we really are. Knowing our boundaries allows us to feel our limits. In our teaching practice, we strive to create learning environments where students are supported, and student learning is maximized. Investing time in our practice of teacher empathy enables us to better care for both ourselves and our students.

About the Author

Tracy Ediger lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where she teaches Anatomy & Physiology to a diverse body of Georgia State students intent on pursuing health care professions. In her position, she is responsible for teaching 100-plus student lecture sections and supervising graduate teaching assistants who facilitate the labs. Tracy is interested in the science of how learning works and strives to incorporate teamwork activities and hands-on learning into the course framework of both lecture and lab.

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