**Being empathetic is good, but it can hurt your health** By Jennifer Breheny Wallace

Your husband was just passed over for a promotion, and he's depressed. Your friend's breast cancer has returned. As a supportive spouse and friend, you feel their pain. Growing research suggests there's a cost to all that caring.

Empathy - the ability to tune into and share another person's emotion from their perspective - plays a crucial role in bringing people together. It's the joy you feel at a friend's wedding or the pain you experience when you see someone suffering.

It's an essential ingredient for building intimacy in relationships, says Robin Stern, associate director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. "When someone feels seen and heard by you," she says, "they begin to trust you."

But this seemingly positive emotion can also have a downside, particularly if someone gets so consumed by another's feelings that they neglect their own feelings and needs. Stern says those who regularly prioritize others' emotions over their own are more susceptible to experiencing anxiety or low-level depression.

"When we think of empathy fatigue, we usually think about those in helping professions, like nurses, doctors, social workers - but all of us are often in the role of helpers or caretakers, whether it's caring for a sick parent, a child or a friend during a difficult time," says Jamil Zaki, an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University. "Being supportive of those we care about is among our most cherished and important roles," Zaki says, "but it's also one that's fraught: We want to be there for someone but not lose ourselves."

In a study published last year in the journal Health Psychology, researchers looked at the effects of parental empathy on 247 pairs of parents and adolescents. Through blood tests, questionnaire responses and daily diary entries, researchers found that parental empathy was highly correlated with better psychological and physiological well-being in adolescents. The parents in the study benefited, too, with highly empathic parents reporting greater self-esteem and a deeper sense of purpose in their lives than those who reported lower levels of empathy.

But it wasn't all good news. The more empathic the parent, the researchers found, the more likely that person was to be experiencing chronic low-grade inflammation. The researchers speculate, "Parents who readily engage with the struggles and perspectives of others may leave themselves vulnerable to additional burdens, expending physiological resources in order to better help others."

Is there a healthier way to empathize?

Psychologists describe empathy in three ways: You can think it, feel it or be moved by it, Zaki says.

With cognitive empathy, you understand what someone else is thinking and feeling, as when you relate to a character in a novel or take someone's perspective during a business negotiation.

With emotional empathy, you actually put yourself in someone else's shoes and feel their emotion. This is the type of response that, left unchecked, can lead to caretaker burnout, says Zaki.

And then there's compassionate empathy, where you feel concern about another's suffering, but from more of a distance and with a desire to help the person in need.

Which perspective we take when responding to someone else's suffering can affect our own health and well-being. In an upcoming study in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, researchers assigned more than 200 college students to act as a helper to what they were told was a fellow student going through personal crisis. Each participant was asked to read a personal essay detailing the supposed student's financial struggles and stress upon becoming the primary caregiver for a younger sibling after the death of their mother.

While reading the text, a third of the volunteers were asked to think about how that person must be feeling (compassionate empathy) and a third were asked to imagine how they would feel if they were that person (emotional empathy). A control group was asked to stay detached and remain objective.

Researchers then measured the participants for various physiological markers, including hormone stress levels, heart rates and blood pressure. They found that those who put themselves in the other person's shoes had significantly higher "fight-or-flight" responses, as though they, too, were going through a stressful experience.

"Over time," lead researcher Anneke Buffone notes, "the chronic activation of the stress hormone cortisol could lead to a variety of serious health issues like cardiovascular problems, a finding that is particularly meaningful for health professionals who are confronted with others' pain and suffering daily."

But the researchers also discovered that those who were asked to react to the essay with compassion - who thought about how the other person might be feeling but didn't share the emotion - had a positive, invigorating arousal response, as if they were confronting a challenge that was achievable or offering advice that might help improve the student's situation.

"People assume that any kind of empathy is associated with positive health benefits and behaviors, but for the first time we have physical evidence that not all empathy is alike, that its positive or negative effects depend on the perspective you take," Buffone says.

"Neuroscientific research on empathy shows that if you're empathizing with a person who is in pain, anxious or depressed, your brain will show activation of very similar circuits as the brain of the person with whom you're empathizing," notes Richard Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Compassion, on the other hand, activates a different part of the brain, areas associated with motivation and reward. So, where emotional empathy can cause pain and burnout, compassion drives you to want to help.

While it's possible to feel all three types of empathy at once, emotional empathy is often the gateway to feeling compassion, Davidson says. This doesn't mean there can't be a mix of emotions, he says, but feeling another person's pain and suffering is often a prerequisite to feeling compassion.

Psychologists say that we can learn to regulate our empathy, as we do other emotions, and even transform excessive emotional empathy into less stressful compassion. "You want to 'feel' with another person, but you don't need to stay there," Stern says.

One way to keep empathy in check is through compassionate meditation, Davidson says.

"Start by envisioning someone you know who may be in pain or may have gone through a stressful event," he says, "and then envision them being relieved of that suffering." He says it may be helpful to repeat a phrase silently in your mind, such as: May you be happy and be free of suffering.

"Encouraging the focus on the person's well-being and happiness, instead of their distress, actually shifts our brain's pathways from experiencing painful empathy to the more rewarding areas of compassion," Davidson says. "It's this process that helps us to detach from their suffering."

"Research shows that these simple exercises actually affect your actions in the real world, making you more likely to be pro-social and helpful," he says.

Transforming initial emotional empathy into compassion doesn't mean you care less about the person, Davidson says. After all, "mirroring the emotional state of another person who is suffering is not all that helpful - what kind of assistance can you provide if you're now suffering, too?"

He adds: "For the most part, people don't actually want you to feel their pain. What they want is your help and compassion."

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Questions to turn in:

A. “Rooms”

1. What are Katz’ “rooms” and why does he experience them?
2. How would you characterize Katz? Use a specific example from the text to support your characterization.

B.“Empathy”

1. What are some of the negative effects of experiencing too much empathy?
2. How can we best avoid these effects while still caring for others?

C. Synthesis: What is the common link between these two pieces of writing? Look for a meaningful connection. 2-3 sentences is appropriate for your response. Evidence from the writing is appropriate. This exercise is practice for when you have to synthesize many sources in your final essay.