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## **ARTICLE** **STRESS**

# Prevent Burnout by Making Compassion a Habit

*by Annie McKee and Kandi Wiens*



of leaders who used to love their jobs but now say things like, “I’m not sure it’s worth it anymore.” They’re burned out — emotionally exhausted and cynical, as a result of chronic and acute work stress.

Why is stress on the rise? A lot of it has to do with uncertainty in the world and constant changes in our organizations. Many people are [overworking](#), putting in more hours than ever before. The lines between work and home [have blurred or disappeared](#). Add to that persistent (sometimes even toxic) conflicts with bosses and coworkers that put us on guard and make us irritable. Under these circumstances, our performance and well-being suffer. Work feels like a burden. Burnout is just around the corner. And [happiness at work](#) is not even a remote possibility.

Here’s the good news: Some people [don’t get burned out](#). They continue to [thrive](#) despite the difficult conditions in their workplace.

Why? The answer lies in part with empathy, an [emotional intelligence competency](#) packed with potent stress-taming powers. Empathy is “[compassion in action](#).” When you engage empathy, you seek to understand people’s needs, desires, and point of view. You feel and express genuine concern for their well-being, and then *you act on it*.

One of our studies (Kandi’s [research](#) on executive-level health care leaders) confirms this. When asked how they deal with chronic and acute work stress, 91% of the study’s executives described how expressing empathy allows them to stop focusing on themselves and connect with others on a much deeper level. Other researchers agree (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) for examples): Expressing empathy produces physiological effects that calm us in the moment and strengthen our long-term sustainability. It evokes responses in our body that arouse the (good) parasympathetic nervous system, and it reverses the effects of the stress response brought on by the (bad) sympathetic nervous system. So not only do others benefit from our empathy, but we benefit, too.

Based on our research, Annie’s with leaders in global companies and Kandi’s with health care leaders, we offer a two-part strategy that can help unleash empathy and break the burnout cycle. First, you need to practice self-compassion. Then you will be ready to change some of your habitual ways of dealing with people so you — and they — can benefit from your empathy.

### **Practice Self-Compassion**

If you really want to deal with stress, you’ve got to stop trying to be a hero and start caring for and about yourself. Self-compassion involves: (1) seeking to truly *understand* yourself and what you are experiencing emotionally, physically, and intellectually at work; (2) *caring* for yourself, as opposed to shutting down; and (3) *acting* to help yourself. Here are two practical ways to practice self-compassion:

- **Curb the urge to overwork.** When the pressure is on at work, we're often tempted to work more hours to "get on top of things." But overwork is a trap, not a solution. Just doing more — and more, and more, and more — rarely fixes problems, and it usually makes things worse, because we are essentially manufacturing our own stress. We shut the proverbial door on people and problems, thinking that if we can get away, we can at least do our job without getting caught up in others' drama. When nothing changes or it gets worse, we give up. This is a vicious cycle: Overwork leads to more stress, which leads to isolation, which causes us to give up, which leads to even more stress. So, instead of putting in more hours when you're stressed, find ways to renew yourself. Exercise, [practice mindfulness](#), spend more time with loved ones, and [dare we say get more sleep?](#)
- **Stop beating yourself up.** Stress is often the result of being too hard on ourselves when we fail or don't meet our own expectations. We forget to treat ourselves as living, breathing, feeling human beings. Instead of letting self-criticism stress you out, acknowledge how you feel, acknowledge that others would feel similarly in the same situation, and [be kind and forgiving to yourself](#). Shifting your mindset from *threatened* to *self-compassion* will strengthen your resiliency.

### Give Empathy

Taking steps toward self-compassion will prepare you emotionally to reach out to others. But let's face it: Empathy is not the norm in many workplaces. In fact, lack of empathy, even depersonalization of others, are symptoms of the emotional exhaustion that comes with burnout. Here are a few tips to make empathy part of your normal way of dealing with people at work.

- **Build friendships with people you like at work.** Most people can rattle off a dozen reasons why you shouldn't be friends with people at work. We believe just the opposite. Real connections and friendships at work matter — a lot. According to the [Harvard Grant Study](#), one of the longest-running longitudinal studies of human development, having warm relationships is essential to health, well-being, and happiness. Other research shows that caring for and feeling cared for by others lowers our blood pressure, enhances our immunity, and leads to overall better health.
- **Value people for who they really are.** The "ridiculous situations" mentioned by the leader at the beginning of this article are often the result of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Instead of really listening, we hear what we want to, which is misinformed by biases and stereotypes. It gets in the way of our ability to understand and connect with others. The resulting [conflicts](#) cause a lot of unnecessary stress. To prevent this, be curious about people. Ask yourself, "How can I understand where this person is coming from?" Listen with an open mind so that you gain their trust, which is good for your stress level and your ability to influence them.
- **Coach people.** According to [research](#) by Richard Boyatzis, Melvin Smith, and 'Alim Beveridge, coaching others has positive psychophysiological effects that restore the body's natural healing and growth processes and improves stamina. When we care enough to invest time in developing others, we become less preoccupied with ourselves, which balances the toxic effects of stress and burnout.

- **Put your customers, clients, or patients at the center of your conversations.** If misaligned goals with coworkers is a source of your stress, try physically moving your conversations to a place where you can put other people’s needs at the center. One chief medical officer who participated in Kandi’s study described a time when he had an intense, stressful argument with two other physicians about the treatment plan for a terminally ill cancer patient. They were in a conference room debating and debating, with no progress on a decision. Seeing that everyone’s professional conduct was declining and stress levels were rising, the CMO decided to take the conversation to the patient’s room. He sat on one side of the patient’s bed, holding her hand. The other two physicians sat on the opposite side of the bed, holding her other hand. They began talking again, but this time *literally* with the patient at the center of their conversation. As the CMO said, “The conversation took on a very different tone when we were able to refocus. Everyone was calm. It brought us to the same level. We were connected. It was a very effective antidote to stress.”

One caution about empathy and compassion: They can be powerful forces in our fight against stress — until they aren’t. Caring too much can hurt. Overextending your empathy can take a toll on your emotional resources and lead to compassion fatigue, a phenomenon that occurs when compassion becomes a burden and results in even more stress. So pay close attention to your limits and develop strategies to [rein in excessive empathy](#) if it gets out of control.

It’s worth the risk, though. Once you commit to caring about yourself, you can start to care about others, and in the process you will create resonant relationships that are both good for you and good for the people you work with.

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