

Heavy Lifting

There's a fine line between caring for those around you and drowning in their issues. Excess empathy leaving you drained? Time to lighten your load.

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Photographed by Jeffrey Westbrook

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× Get Cozy With Your Mat

✓ Your friend calls you in tears about her recent
✓ breakup, your dad says he's lonely, and your husband is having work troubles. You feel for them, really *feel* for them, and that's a positive! Empathy, or the ability to understand a situation from another person's point of view, helps build connections, says Helen Riess, MD, director of the Empathy and Relational Science Program at Massachusetts General Hospital and author of *The Empathy Effect*.

But like any other good thing, you can have too much of it. When you tune in to others' emotions too deeply, you may wilt under their force, says Dr. Riess. Essentially, it can become too much to carry.

Being the shoulder others always cry on can be exhausting and overwhelming, particularly if you feel powerless to change their situation, says Bianca Acevedo, PhD, a research scientist at the University of California at Santa Barbara. And if you lug someone else's negative feelings around too much, you can become so depleted that you don't share your own struggles. As a result, you might miss out on getting the support you need and even develop anxiety or depression, says psychiatrist Judith Orloff, MD, author of *The Empath's Survival Guide*. Not good, to say the least.

Up to 20 percent of people identify as a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) and are more likely to feel sapped by someone's emotional baggage. Two to three percent more are empaths: They take the HSP experience even further, physically feeling others' stress, anger, or anxiety as if it were their own. But truth is, we're all emotional sponges sometimes. There's nothing wrong with that—as long as you know how to dial down your surplus of goodwill before it starts to pull you under. We've got the strategies to help you find the sweet spot.

A daily downward dog can help you better control your own emotions, which, in turn, buffers the impact of others' feelings. Yoga appears to strengthen connections in parts of the brain related to self-reflection and self-regulation, says Acevedo. Meditation can bring you similar awareness of your thoughts and feelings, notes Dr. Riess. Sit quietly with your hand on your heart and focus on something you love—flowers, your pet—for just three minutes. You'll feel immediately more centered, so outside issues won't take such a toll, says Dr. Orloff.

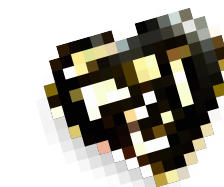
× Back It Up

If a situation is distressing, some distance may be all you need to help others without losing yourself. Say tutoring every Friday in an underserved local school empties your emotional tank for days. Ask if you can host a supplies drive to gather classroom necessities instead. Friend going through a tough time? Send a note instead of showing up on her doorstep. You don't always have to be on the front line to deploy empathy effectively, says Dr. Riess.



× Take a Mini Break

Go, go, going from the moment you wake up to the minute your head hits the pillow can burn out anyone, but especially highly empathetic people, says Dr. Orloff. Eking out a few minutes of conflict-free time—take a walk in the park or grab an afternoon coffee outside the office—helps you pause, reboot, and reset.



× Repeat After Us: “No”

“Creating boundaries” sounds like therapist-speak, but it's crucial, especially if you're sensitive to those around you. Empathetic people often please others at their own expense, says Dr. Orloff. If it feels awkward to tell your friend you can't constantly rehash her dating struggles because it leaves you emotionally wiped out, start small. Excuse yourself from a group of venting coworkers, or turn off the news if a story is making you particularly weepy. With practice, you'll feel more comfortable setting limits when you're running out of emotional fuel.

“No” doesn't have to be a hard line, by the way. After all, you still want to be there for the ones you love. So if your brother calls to complain about a work deal gone wrong and you're totally tapped out, suggest speaking at another time when you can be there wholeheartedly, says Acevedo.

× Find Your Happy Place

You know those spots where you just feel **totally** relaxed? Make more of them. Highly sensitive people recharge with solo time, says Dr. Orloff. Whether it's a nook in your bedroom with a comfy pillow or a quiet desk overlooking your backyard, create an at-home sanctuary where you can give yourself TLC.





Check Yourself

When you recognize you're being emotionally hijacked, you'll be more able to snap out of it, says Dr. Riess. Before spending time with someone, do a quick check of your energy level. Afterward, repeat the exercise, suggests Dr. Orloff. Tracking how certain people make you feel can help you spot the individuals who tax your emotions the most, so you can set boundaries or limit time spent with them.

Know Your Audience

If you're the one venting (we all need to unload sometimes!), keep in mind that your friend may also be prone to empathy overload. If she looks tired, clams up, or crosses her arms (a subconscious sign she's protecting herself from your energy suck), these are red flags your pal might be approaching her limit, says Dr. Orloff. If you spot these signs, ask if your kvetching is bothering her—it gives her a chance to be honest. If she says yes, tell her you get it, then try talking to someone else. Or lift yourself out of your funk by doing—wait for it—a burpee! “Unusual behaviors can interrupt thinking patterns, getting you into a different mindset,” says Dr. Orloff. Worth a try!



All the Feels

If you answer yes to most of the below, you may have an excess of empathy. (Pro tip: It's a good idea to tell loved ones if you're super tuned in to others' feelings so they won't feel hurt if you occasionally need to take a breather from hearing their problems.)



xxxx
Do loud noises, smells, light, or scratchy fabrics drive you crazy?



xxxx
Do you need loads of alone time to reset?



xxxx
Do arguments or yelling make you feel sick?



xxxx
Do you absorb others' feelings to the point that you vent about their problems instead of your own?



xxxx
Do you prefer to hang out in small groups over big ones?

Source: Judith Orloff, MD