



You're doing a lot of emotional labour. Here's how to lighten the load

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED MARCH 13, 2024

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There's a group chat active among my friends on any given day. It usually blows up right before the holidays. "My kid keeps crying, telling me her friends are being mean. Husband is cranky – not sure why? Need to pick up groceries but drained after listening to my boss vent for the past hour. Help," writes Ilana Gold, a working mother of three. Everybody chimes in with tales of meltdowns (kids') and exhaustion (their own). One shares how she wishes that just once, someone would ask her how *she's* feeling for a change.

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Many of us can relate to this psychological toll of managing everyone else's emotions 24/7. It's especially relevant to members of a generation who were told they can have it all (a thriving career *and* a family) but end up juggling the demands of work, children, aging parents and more – to the point of depletion.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined the term in 1983 in her book *The Managed Heart*, referring to the emotional labour expected of workers, primarily in the service industry, who must regulate emotional expressions with others as part of their role (think public-facing positions such as flight

attendants, health care workers and retail employees). Not surprisingly, this type of labour can lead to big-time burnout; imagine having to put on a smile for 40-plus hours a week regardless of circumstance.

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While Hochschild's definition was specific to the work force, the concept of emotional labour has since entered the mainstream to include the emotional work that happens at home and among friends, too. Not to be confused with "mental load" – that constant to-do list, from laundry to grocery shopping to school lunches to remembering every family member's birthday and buying gifts accordingly – emotional labour involves putting your emotions to work.

Privately, that could mean having to initiate every discussion about sensitive topics with a spouse. Socially, it could entail acting as a makeshift therapist for a friend – being constantly expected to listen to postbreakup rants or other crises.

"Emotional labour is definitely something that occurs – and is very necessary – in all realms of life," says Susan Heitler, a clinical psychologist who specializes in conflict resolution and psychological well-being. "Just as physical labour is work that may involve lifting or moving things, emotional labour is dealing primarily with feelings."

For example, if a child returns from school looking sad and picking on his little brother, emotional labour involves noticing and responding appropriately: "I see you're frowning and you don't usually pick on your brother. What's going on?" As Heitler explains, "Emotional labour is the ability to use *why* and *how* questions to tease out the details of what's bothering him." In other words, being empathetic.

Just last year, Rose Hackman published her book, *Emotional Labor: The*

Invisible Work Shaping Our Lives and How to Claim Our Power. It explores the ways in which people edit their emotions to accommodate and elevate the emotions of others. “It’s the concept of being in charge of communal well-being,” says the British journalist, now based in Detroit. “It’s highly feminized, sometimes racialized and it’s about power.” Hackman says there’s nothing inherently wrong with emotional labour; it’s a problem only when people expect it from women, people of colour and those perceived to be of lesser status, which is so often the case.

The fact that it is feminine-coded raises the question of whether women are naturally better at emotional labour or just more accustomed to doing it. Hackman unearths some interesting finds in her research; she references a study out of University of Oregon showing that men and women have the same capacity for empathy with the right (often financial) motivation. Another study, published in a 2017 issue of Human Resource Management, maintains that both men and women must appear competent and confident to get ahead at work, but a woman has the added burden of needing to act “pro-social” (in a way that benefits others or the whole) in order to exert influence.

Millennial women are not okay

Despite these inequalities, Hackman sees emotional labour as having great value; it involves empathy and compassion, which clearly benefit everyone. The goal, however, is to recognize the worth of this kind of work, and create ways for sharing the load. Experts agree that taking on too much emotional labour can lead to feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, depleted and resentful. Take teachers, for instance, whose job involves caring for others. They must put their students’ feelings first and remain calm at all times, even when dealing with demanding parents, then return home to, say, a child sulking over math scores or a partner stressing about work deadlines (never mind that there’s dinner to cook, dishes to clean, tests to mark). It’s a lot.

“If there’s a dynamic where one person is doing far more emotional labour than the other, that’s not a healthy relationship. It doesn’t emanate naturally from any of us; if we do too much of it, we’ll barrel towards burnout,” warns Hackman. To that end, it’s important to set boundaries and self-advocate. Speaking up – simply stating what it is you need – is especially helpful. That can mean telling a partner to pull their weight when it comes to tending to the emotional needs of the *entire* family (comforting a crying child in the middle of the night, for instance, or helping to care for an aging parent).

Heitler also recommends people listen to their gut: “When your inner voice is saying *this is too much* or *I can’t do this*, find a tactful way to explain that to someone or to leave the situation.” For example, if a friend shares that she’s having problems with her husband, her boss is coming on to her and now she’s tempted to have an affair, Heitler recommends saying something along the lines, “Yes, you are clearly having struggles and dealing with this feels above my pay grade. I’d love to ask around the get the names of a therapist

you could work with – are you open to that?”

Of course, this type of response to emotional-labour overload isn't so simple when it comes to the workplace. Scott Schieman is a professor of sociology at University of Toronto who studies trends in quality of working life and how it shapes well-being. His findings reveal that people have become angrier, in general, since COVID. “The instability and rudeness of customers pushes emotional labour to another level,” he says of public-facing roles.

“Being thanked for the work you've done or being told you've done something especially well – those kinds of interactions really matter for people's mental health,” says Schieman. If there is no support in place, don't be afraid to share with your boss your achievements and the impact they've had on the company.

While the notion of emotional labour has a bad reputation, it's vital to our collective well-being. The goal isn't to get rid of it but rather to have it be valued – by employers, partners and friends – and to recognize when and how you can lighten your load so you can keep giving instead of burning out. Heitler, for one, sees it as a blessing. “There's something very gratifying about being able to help people feel better,” she says. “It's a gift.”

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