



Reduce harmful work stressors

Improve job quality and health

Work Stress Solutions

Addressing emotional labor

Emotional labor is the work of managing human feelings (yours and others) as part of one's professional work role. It is sometimes a requirement of the job to smile, or to be kind and compliant—even when you don't feel that way or even when you are treated poorly by clients, patients or customers. Emotional labor is usually associated with paid work, mostly in health and human service work, K-12 education, transportation, food and customer service, and many other kinds of public-facing jobs. While this kind of work is essential, and can be rewarding, the requirement to display positive feelings AND suppress negative emotions can lead to high rates of burnout in these jobs.

I. Workplace Policies & Practices

While emotional labor may be a fixed part of many occupations, these are some recommendations or resources that an organization can use to help reduce the negative effects on employee health and well-being.

1. **EDUCATIONAL TRAINING** for employees¹ and managers² to learn about “emotional labor” as a skill, and how to intervene to reduce harm, including effective coping strategies.
2. **REDUCE “SURFACE ACTING”** - by training³ staff with public-facing jobs to adopt techniques that reduce the need to “hide feelings” and develop “deep-acting,” including greater [empathy and compassion](#).

3. **MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING (MI)** techniques - teaching health and human service workers how to use MI with clients/patients has been shown to be helpful in reducing burnout.⁴
4. **PEER or SUPERVISOR SUPPORT** - daily peer check-ins, peer support groups, and mentoring programs to help reduce the burden of emotional labor.
5. **ROTATE EMPLOYEES** between jobs that involve more stressful client interactions to jobs with less frequent or less stressful client interactions.
6. **PROVIDE MORE RECOVERY TIME** - those doing highly emotionally demanding work need more built-in rest breaks during the day, and recovery time (after work hours).
7. **PROVIDE BACK-UP**; if employees are conducting site visits in client homes or are out in public, whenever possible, provide employees with a partner.
8. **DEVELOP A CODE OF CONDUCT** - to raise awareness for workers, leaders and the public being served, about the importance of [dignity and respect](#) for all. There are also many [examples of D&R campaigns](#) within organizations and community groups. Promoting civility and reducing disrespectful or abusive behavior by the public towards workers will help to reduce emotional labor.

II. Healthy Work Strategies Case Studies and Resources

- [Workplace policies and programs to reduce job stress among K-12 education staff](#)
- [Programs and policies to reduce work stress among bus drivers in the United States and Canada](#)
- [Compassion in Action: Compassion & Resilience Toolkit for Health & Human Services](#)

References

¹Weaver A. et al, *Coping with Emotional Labor: An Intervention Study*. University of Nebraska, Omaha.

²Edelman, P. J., & Knippenberg, D. (2016). Training leader emotion regulation and leadership effectiveness. *Journal of Business and Psychology*. Advance online publication.

³Hülshager, U. R., Lang, J. B., Schewe, A. F., & Zijlstra, F. R. (2015). When regulating emotions at work pays off: A diary and an intervention study on emotion regulation and customer tips in service jobs. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *100*, 263-277.

⁴Hershberger, P. J., Flowers, S. R., Bayless, S. L., Conway, K., & Crawford, T. N. (2024). Interface Between Motivational Interviewing and Burnout. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, *15*, 181–187.

⁵United for Respect. *Promoting Dignity and Respect in the Workplace Toolkit*. United Nations HR Portal