

# EMOTIONS IN CASEWORKERS

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS & PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS

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University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work, Child Welfare Education & Research Programs  
January 2022



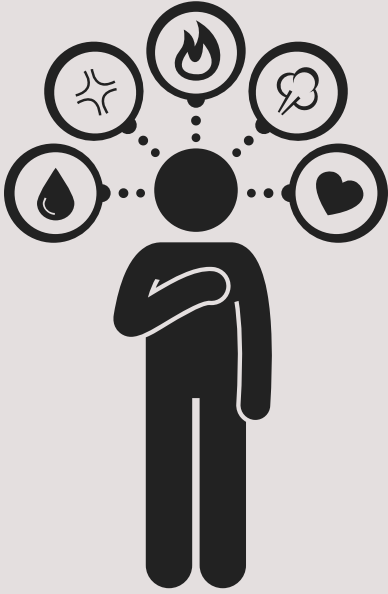
The first component of our project focused on emotional intelligence (EI) competencies. Broadly speaking, EI consists of different skills related to identifying, understanding, and appropriately responding to one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. These skills are particularly important for child welfare professionals, who are routinely faced with emotionally fraught situations. Research with other helping professionals has shown that EI strengths are associated with better work performance and higher levels of well-being. However, we know little about these competencies in the child welfare workforce, which is what prompted this research project.

This newsletter provides some more information about the EI competencies we assessed, as well as additional resources where you can learn more about them. Please join us for this month's session to learn more about how we measured these competencies and what they looked like for participants in our study.

*Findings from Dr. Marlo A. Perry's research project,  
"Emotional awareness in child welfare professionals and its relationship with emotional variability, compassion satisfaction, and  
commitment to the field: A pilot study utilizing ecological momentary assessment"*  
*Funded by the Steven D. Manners Faculty Development Award, University of Pittsburgh Center for Urban and Social Research*

# Which EI competencies did we assess?

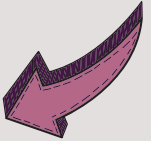
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## Emotional Labor

Emotional labor refers to regulating one's emotional expressions according to professional expectations and/or requirements. This could include faking emotions that one doesn't feel (e.g., laughing with a client when one is internally seething with anger) or suppressing emotions (e.g., pushing down one's sadness when criticized by a supervisor). High rates of emotional labor are associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout.

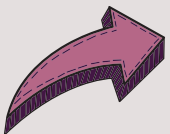
**Read about how to manage the risks associated with emotional labor:**  
<https://tinyurl.com/2p8jhb7z>



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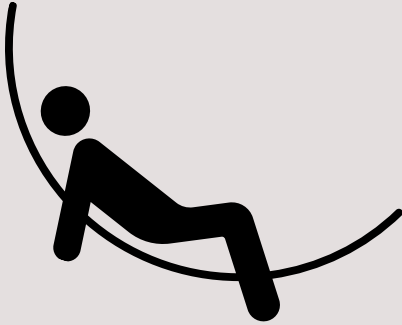
## Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize, understand, and even vicariously feel what another is feeling. Empathy is integral to a field such as child welfare. However, too much empathy can be a hindrance to one's own well-being. For example, if a caseworker is so overwrought about a client's situation, it may increase their own distress and decrease their ability to connect with and help the client.



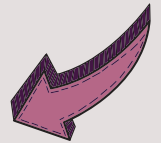
**Watch to learn more about how empathy differs from sympathy:**  
<https://tinyurl.com/2p854yt6>

# Energy Recovery



The ability to emotionally and physically recover from the stressors of one's workday is crucial in the helping professions. Individual efforts (e.g., making time to connect with loved ones) and organizational policies & practices (e.g., not having expectations that employees will respond to emails after hours) are both important components of energy recovery. It is important to note that our individual go-to strategies (e.g., Netflix, scrolling Instagram, mindless munching) are not likely to promote real recovery -- instead, we need to take a more active approach. This looks different to each of us, however; experiment with different strategies to determine what works best for you (yoga? a walk in nature? playing on a community sports team? painting? meditation?).

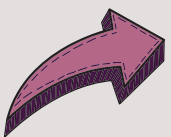
**Read to learn how energy recovery helps decrease burnout:**  
<https://tinyurl.com/2p9fxkp3>



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## Mindful Awareness

Mindful awareness is "the moment-by-moment process of actively and openly observing one's physical, mental and emotional experiences" (<https://www.uclahealth.org/marc/>). Mindful awareness can increase emotional awareness and emotion regulation, as well as decrease anxiety, stress, and burnout. Meditation is only one form of mindfulness; other activities can be done mindfully as well, including walking, eating, and writing.



**Read (or listen) to learn about the benefits of mindful awareness:**  
<https://tinyurl.com/4s4ey9ca>

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