



The Sacred Work of Showing Up

Emotional labor is the detail work of caring, of noticing, of paying attention. It is the foundation of strong relationships, and it is overwhelmingly gendered female. People perceived as women are expected to “naturally” do the work of keeping track and tending and nurturing, and are judged harshly for refusing. People perceived as men have the choice to remain oblivious that the work even exists to be done. More generally, people with less privilege are expected to care for people with more privilege.

Paid emotional labor includes the smile you get with your coffee from your regular barista, as well as their memory for what you always order. Many service workers are required to be warm, friendly, and enthusiastic as part of their jobs. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild coined the term “emotional labor” in her 1983 book, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*.

Unpaid emotional labor in relationships includes the work of listening, keeping track of people’s preferences, making sure everyone has what they need, remembering birthdays, sending thank you cards, and generally signaling, in a way that works for the recipient, that they are important and cared about. This work is a crucial part of creating community for everyone.

Comfort is a privilege. Unpaid emotional labor also includes tracking someone’s emotional state from moment to moment, making sure they are not offended, soothing

them if they seem upset, and looking for phrasing that is most likely to be acceptable to them. This work occurs when there is a power imbalance and a hidden threat of violence in a relationship. One person is doing the work of keeping another person on an emotional even keel.

It is an unequally distributed privilege to expect to be comfortable. It is a privilege to take for granted the work others do to create comfort, to expect others to discern and provide what pleases us without returning the favor. It is a privilege to expect people to prioritize moderating their tone to protect our tender feelings. Some messages are simply uncomfortable to hear.

Showing up. Doing our share of emotional labor includes showing up with ourselves, paying attention to our own behavior and emotions. It includes the gritty, exhausting, long haul work of healing from trauma. Looking inside is a service we do for ourselves, and also for the people around us. Each wound we heal, each old pattern we shift, each fractured child-self we integrate, helps us be more present, aware, and compassionate, which ripples out to benefit the rest of the world.

Doing our share of emotional labor includes showing up with others, identifying our longings, needs, and boundaries, and courageously talking about them. It includes listening to others' longings, needs, and boundaries and keeping them in mind in the future.

Pause and listen. When we talk about our emotional labor, we hope for recognition, appreciation, and, eventually, to share the burden. Unfortunately, people who are comfortably unaware of the emotional labor they demand often react with shame, anger, and defensiveness instead. The conversation turns once again to soothing their feelings,

instead of being heard.

We can open the door to hearing uncomfortable truths by asking close friends or family, “Is there anything I take for granted that you would like to be appreciated for? Is there anything you want me to hear?” When someone says something surprising or jarring, we can resist reflexively telling them why they are wrong. Instead, we can pause and listen, showing respect for their viewpoint.

Look for balance. Emotional labor includes gentle attention to the balance between listening and talking. Our existing biases tend to reinforce imbalances. Those of us who have been taught to monitor the needs of everyone around us continue to believe we are not doing enough. Those of us who have been taught to expect our comfort to be prioritized continue to believe it is all someone else’s problem.

Make the world a better place. Some people cause harm to others because they enjoy it, or think the ends justify the means. When most of us cause harm, we sincerely mean well, but we inflict our lack of awareness and unexamined patterns on the people around us.

When we show up with ourselves and others, when we peer into our shadows, when we learn to tolerate discomfort (but not misery), when we share responsibility for creating comfort, we add to the wholeness in the world. We begin to mend cultural and generational legacies of silence, aversion, neglect, and abuse, doing the sacred work of making the world a better place.