

Emotional Labor and the Rona

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Almost everyone I have talked to in the past few weeks has said similar things:

“I’m so tired.”

“I thought I would handle this better.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me—I can’t get anything done.”

“I can’t seem to catch a gear.”

“I feel like I’m moving in slow motion, like my limbs are weighed down.”

Compounded by responsibility—for businesses, for young children, for leading teams—and that sentiment only increases. What’s behind this fatigue—this country wide loss of energy? COVID-19 of course, but there’s something more: Emotional Labor.

Emotional labor is the energy required to manage our emotions. Sometimes it’s used to show people the emotions they expect -- like smiling on the outside when we want to burn the house down on the inside or trying to generate optimism that we don’t feel. Sometimes it’s used to regulate our own emotional response to the world, like not snapping at our partner or barking at our team.

Consider what we are expending our emotional labor on.

First, the virus. We have a low-level background hum of bad news and anxiety to contend with, not to mention trying to social distance while washing our hands and wondering how long the coronavirus can live on our Amazon deliveries.

Second, work. For those of us under stay at home orders, our schedules have been turned upside down. We are learning to telework and haven’t quite figured out what the boundaries are and whether it’s healthy to stay in sweatpants all day. For those of us who are considered essential, we must keep going for the good of the

country as well as our families. We are watching those who are stuck at home with some amount of envy and some amount of dread. Some of us have been laid off, and all of us are worried about our jobs. If we lead others we are trying to be reassuring when we can't predict the future, but we know in the short run it's bad. We are all expending tons of energy adapting to a new reality while not looking at our 401k.

Third, our families. We are worried about our loved ones and praying they stay safe. We are staying in when we used to go out, we are eating our feelings, and we are learning how to teach math. We are trying to work with a four-year-old stuck to one leg and a dog that needs to go out stuck to the other. We are getting on each other's nerves and wishing we had a bigger place to live.

All of this is burning up the rocket fuel we would rather be using performing at high levels or excelling at life. Instead we are using that fuel to manage our emotions and not yell at the television.

What we are feeling—this fatigue—is a usual reaction to an unusual situation. Of course, we are tired. How could we not be when our significant others are breathing SO LOUDLY?

Here's how to cope:

1. **Give yourself a bit of grace.** It's okay to be tired. So, what if you are not at 100%? Right now, maybe 70% is good enough. You're not in this alone.
2. **Get back to normal as you can.** Many of us have changed when we get up and when we go to bed. We are eating differently than before. If we worked out, we stopped. And the kids are out of school. Get back on a schedule that works for you and your family, if you can.
3. **Fill up your tank.** Consider how you are spending your work time and your home time—are there activities that you have stopped doing that give you energy or positive feelings? Can you add them in to your schedule? For example, if working out fills up your tank, find a way to work out while social distancing. If reading gives you fuel, make time to read. If you need five minutes alone, go sit in your car without the dog and the kids and your spouse. Take some time for you, if you can. It's not selfish, it's necessary.
4. **Connect with someone.** This crisis has severed us from our usual connections—coworkers, friends, family. Find a way to reconnect with the people in our lives who bring us joy. For those who leech our energy, best to stay disconnected. There are bright spots in every crisis, after all.

Leadership always means going first. Maybe what our families and our teams need most right now, is for you to go first. Set a good example, and put some rocket fuel back in your tank. We need you, and the emotional labor required to get through this thing is only going to go up.

How are you feeling? What strategies have worked best for you? Comment below or send me a note at Thomas.Epperson@innerwill.org. I'd love to hear from you!

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