

When You're the Person Your Colleagues Always Vent To

by Sandra L. Robinson and Kira Schabram

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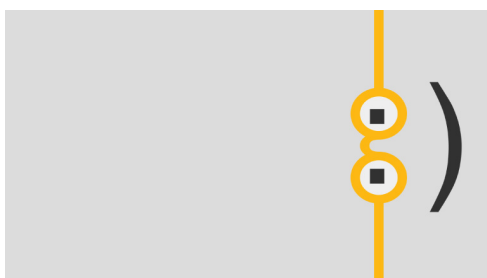


Divani (not her real name) is a senior analyst at a large telecommunications firm. She proudly describes herself as her department's "resident cheer-upper." As she says, "I have always been the person that people turn to for support...I listen really well and I like to listen, I like to help." But the year before I spoke to her, Divani's organization was going through a major change initiative: "I already had so much on my plate and so many colleagues were leaning on me, turning to me to process, commiserate, ask for advice. It was hard to get through my own deadlines and also be there for my coworkers. I was drowning in stress and nearing burnout." She told us about feeling down on

Sunday nights, feeling increasingly angry and cynical, and having trouble sleeping because she couldn't "shut my mind off." She took up smoking after having given it up for four years and let her exercise routine falter.

Divani is what Peter Frost and one of us (Sandra) termed a "toxic handler," someone who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organizational life just as joy and success are. Toxic handlers can be found at all levels of the organization, particularly in roles that span disparate groups. And they are by no means confined to management roles. Their work is difficult and critical even if it often goes uncelebrated; it keeps organizations positive and productive even as the individuals within it necessarily clash and tussle. By carrying others' confidences, suggesting solutions to interpersonal issues, working behind the scenes to prevent pain, and reframing difficult messages in constructive ways, toxic handlers absorb the negativity in day-to-day professional life and allow employees to focus on constructive work.

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This isn't easy work, and as Sandra's and Peter Frost's research of over 70 toxic handlers (or those who managed them) revealed, individuals in these roles frequently experience untenably high levels of stress and strain, which affect their physical health and career paths and often mean they have a diminished capacity to help others in the long run — a side effect that is most troubling for handlers.

But if handlers can recognize that they're playing a role that is both highly valuable *and*

burdensome, they can see their own emotional competence in a new light and recognize the signs of serious strain while there's still something they can do about it.

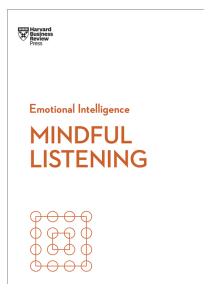
How do you know if *you're* a toxic handler? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Are you working in an organizational characterized by lots of change, dysfunction, or politics?
- Are you working in a role that spans different groups or different levels?
- Do you spend a lot of time listening to and offering advice to colleagues at work?
- Do people come to you to unload their worries, emotions, secrets, or workplace problems?
- Do you have a hard time saying no to colleagues, especially when they need you?
- Do you spend time behind the scenes, managing politics and influencing decisions so others are protected?
- Do you tend to mediate communication between a toxic individual and others?
- Are you that person who feels compelled to stand up for the people at work that need your help?
- Do you think of yourself as a counselor, mediator, or peacemaker?

If you've answered "yes" to four or more of these questions, then you may be a toxic handler. Before you panic at that label, recognize that there are both positives and negatives to fulfilling this role. On the positive side, being a toxic handler means you have valuable emotional strengths: you're probably a good listener; you're empathetic; you're good at suggesting solutions instead of piling on problems. The people around you value the support you provide. It's important too to understand that this role is strategically critical to organizations: you likely defuse tough situations and reduce dysfunction.

Now for the bad news. Chances are that you're taking on more work than is covered in your formal job description (and in fact, as an unsung hero, you may not be getting any kind of formal credit from the organization for these efforts and how much of yourself you bring to them). Listening, mediating, and working behind the scenes to protect others takes important time away from your other responsibilities. More importantly, being a toxic handler also takes tremendous emotional energy to listen, comfort, and counsel. As you are not a trained therapist, you may also be inadvertently taking on others' pain and slowly paying a price for it. Sandra's research shows that toxic handlers tend to take on others' emotions but have no way to offload them. Quite likely, as a person who is constantly helping others, you may be unlikely to be seeking support for yourself. And lastly, this role may be part of your identity, something that brings you fulfillment and in which you take—and so it is difficult to step away from.

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Consider Sheung-Li (not his real name). His manager was a star with a great track record. But he created a lot of turmoil. The manager wouldn't take the time to get to know anyone on Sheung-Li's team personally and totally disregarded more junior members. He was also obsessed with lofty performance goals that seemed to come out of nowhere. "My main role became protecting my team, reassuring them, keeping them focused on our objectives and away from the tensions this guy continually created," Sheung-Li described. "I spent an ordinate amount of time massaging the message, trying to convince my boss to reconsider his decisions so as to avoid the obvious fall-out they would bring, playing mediator when our team was not delivering. I felt like I was treading water all the time. And I'm not even sure I was protecting my team from the pain he was causing. I was losing sleep over what was happening to my team, I had lost weight, and I was starting to get sick with

one bug after another. I don't know if that was the cause but I know this was a really tough time in my life. It was hard to concentrate on anything else.”

So if Sheung-Li's and Divani's stories sound familiar, how can you continue to help to your colleagues (and your organization!) while also protecting yourself? How can you keep playing your valuable role in a *sustainable* way?

Start by assessing whether the role is indeed taking a toll. Some toxic handlers are able to naturally take on more than others; you need to know what's right for you at any given time. Look for evidence of strain and burnout: physical symptoms like insomnia, jaw pain and TMJ, heart palpitations, more sickness than usual. Do you have a shorter fuse than usual, or an inability to concentrate? Sometimes these symptoms can sneak up on you, so it may help to check in with others to see if they've noticed a change. If you're not experiencing stress as a result, there's nothing you need to change other than being aware and keeping an eye out. Being a toxic handler only needs to be “fixed” if it's actually hurting you. Here's how:

Reduce symptoms of stress. Turn to tried and true methods for stress relief: meditation, exercise, enough sleep, and healthful eating. Because toxic handlers have trouble doing things just for themselves, keep in mind that you're helping your colleagues by taking care of yourself. Set your colleagues as your intention for your meditation or yoga practice.

Pick your battles. It's hard to ask yourself where you'll have the most impact if you're emotionally drawn to every problem, but it's an exercise that will allow you to be more helpful where you can actually make a difference. Who is likely to be fine without your help? In which situations have you not even made a dent, despite your best efforts? Step away from these interactions.

Learn to say no. It's hard to say no to things you want to do, but it's important. Here's how to do it while still being supportive:

- **Convey empathy:** make it clear that you feel for your colleague in their pain—you're not denying that they are having a legitimate emotional response to a situation.
- Tell them you're currently not in a position to be most helpful to them right now, and, to the extent you are comfortable, explain the reasons why.
- **Consider alternative sources of support:** refer them to another support person in the organization, or someone having a similar experience (so they can provide mutual support to one another). Suggest an article, book, or other resource on the topic (be it something on managing conflict or handling office politics). Or, if you know from experience that the person is good at coming up with creative solutions themselves, you can simply offer them encouragement to do so.

Let go of the guilt. If you feel guilty that you're not stepping in to help someone, here are some things to consider:

- Recognize that conflicts are often better solved by the parties directly involved. If you're stepping in repeatedly, you're not helping people acquire the skills and tools they need to succeed.
- Question whether you are truly the only one that can help in a particular situation. Enlist trusted others in the organization to help you think through this—you may identify a way to share the load.
- Remember that there is only so much of you to go around: saying yes to one more person necessarily means that you are agreeing to do less for those people and projects you have already committed to.

Form a community. Find other toxic handlers to turn to for support—these could be others in similar roles in your organization, or other team members whom you see dealing with the fallout from the same toxic leader. You can also identify a pal to vent to, or create a more formal group that comes together

regularly to share their experiences. This is a particularly good option if your whole team or organization is going through turmoil and you know there are others experiencing the same challenges. Keep these outlets from turning into repetitive venting sessions by focusing the conversation on creative problem solving and advice.

Take breaks. These can be as small or as dramatic as you need. Divani started working with her door closed, which she had never done before. “I felt terrible about this, as if I was abandoning my coworkers that needed me. But if I lost my job I wasn’t going to be much good to anybody,” she explained. Consider giving yourself a mental health day off of work or planning a significant vacation. In more dramatic situations, you could also consider a temporary reassignment of your role; because jobs that require you to mediate between multiple teams or groups tend to come under particular fire, if you are able to step away from that role for a time you’re more likely to get the respite you need.

These breaks don’t need to be forever, though. “Things have since calmed down at work,” Divani has reported, “and I find I have gravitated back to being the person people lean on for emotional support, but at this point it is totally doable.”

Make a change. If nothing you are doing has resulted in a shift, your best option may be to leave. Sheung-Li explained: “After two years of this [toxic situation], and at the encouragement of my wife, I saw a therapist. It then became clear to me this work reality was not going to change, this toxic manager was not going anywhere, and the stress was eating me alive, and I am the one that needed to change. I did a bunch of things but I think the key thing I did was I ended up making a lateral move in our company to escape this role and to protect my long-term well-being. It was the best decision I ever made.”

Consider therapy. It may sound dramatic, but Sheung-Li’s bid to talk to a therapist is a highly useful one. A trained psychologist can help you identify burnout, manage your symptoms of stress, help you learn to say “no,” and work through any guilt. Not only

can they help you protect yourself from the emotional vagaries of being a toxic handler; they can also assist you in your role. Clinical psychologists themselves are trained to listen to their clients empathetically without taking on their emotions. They can help you build the skills you need to help others without absorbing as much of the emotional burden yourself.

Lastly, here are some things we suggest you avoid. While they seem like good solutions on the surface, they often aren't as helpful as you'd think.

Just venting. While it's good to unburden yourself of your emotions—catharsis *can* reduce aggression—too much venting can actually increase stress levels. You want to move forward, rather than dwelling on problems. And this is as true for those confiding in you as it is for you! When people come to you to vent consider saying something like, “I hear you! How about we think about what we can change to make this better?”

Going to your boss or HR. Sadly the role of toxic handler is often under-recognized and under-appreciated in organizations, despite its tremendous value. This means that while your boss may want to help, it can be risky for them in many organizational cultures. Similarly many firms are unlikely to intervene in a toxic situation on behalf of the handler.

Yet toxic handlers are critical to the emotional well-being of organizations and the people in them. If you're a toxic handler, learn to monitor yourself for signs of emotional or physical fatigue—and know how to step away when you need to—so that you can keep doing what you do best.

Sandra L. Robinson is a professor of organizational behavior at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business.

Kira Schabram is an assistant professor at the University of Washington's Foster School of Business and the Evert McCabe Endowed Fellow in Private Enterprise.

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