SUMMARY

Toxic Emotions at Work offers discourse regarding emotional pain produced in the workplace by leaders and organizations, how the pain in turn becomes toxic, and the effect of that pain on individuals and the organization. This discussion involves a study of the individuals who attempt to help alleviate workplace pain, and how they, the toxin handlers, often go unrecognized and unsupported in the work they do. This neglect results in damage to both the handler and the organization. This book describes what leaders and companies can do to prevent toxicity from destroying people and organizations.

It offers insight into how individuals can become better skilled and protected in their role as toxic handlers, and how organizations can provide support for those individuals by providing their own brand of handling.

Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.

- Dread Pirate Roberts,
Chapter One: Emotional Pain in Organizations

Emotions are inherent in any organization have an impact on performance and function.

Chapter Two: Sources of Toxicity in Organizations

Managers and organizations themselves can create emotional toxins

Chapter Three: The Work of the Toxin Handler

The work of the toxic handler is complex and necessary for the well-being of the workplace.

Chapter Four: The Toll on the Toxin Handlers

Handlers burn out because the work of handling emotional toxins is dangerous.

Chapter Five: Healing the Handlers

Building in breaks and building up reserves heals and protects toxic handlers.

Chapter Six: At the Interface: What Handlers and Their Organizations Can Do

Treating the existence of emotional toxicity as real and worthy of attention is the start of an organizations support.

Chapter Seven: Leaders Handling Pain

The compassionate actions of leaders can contribute significantly to a healthy workplace

Chapter Eight: The Compassionate Company: Architecting Responses to Pain

The ways organizations can deal systematically and effectively with pain, even when dramatic and unexpected.

Chapter Nine: Looking Through the Lens of Pain

A lens that organizations can use to dissolve dysfunction.
According to Frost, toxicity in the workplace is produced when individuals or an organization’s policies, or a combination of both, fail to take into consideration the emotional attachment people feel to their place and contribution in the workplace. Emotionally insensitive attitudes of managers and organizations undermine people’s confidence, esteem, self-worth, and sense of efficacy. It removes the desire and the ability of people to their job effectively.

**Sources of Toxicity**

**People:** The lack of sensitivity to others is common in those who hold positions of power and influence. In the quest for control and prosperity, those at the top may neglect how their actions affect others, creating a culture that is dismissive of the feelings and the value of others.

**Organizations:** Toxicity is inherent in the general functioning of organizations: policies and procedures that do not take into account the human aspect of the employee; demanding and abusive clients or customers, demands resulting from changes in technology; changes to existing practices; and unpleasent co-workers.

**The Organization’s Drive Survive:** The values that are reinforced in organizations are often the prime source of toxicity. Doing whatever it takes to come out on top can often mean that people don’t come first. As a result people feel disposable and unvalued.

**Things That Make You Go Hhhmm....**

“Good leadership by its very nature engenders pain”

(p. 59).

Currently in Education:

- Curricula renewal
- Mega-school divisions
- Assessment renaissance
- Technology
- Declining student enrollment
- Staff cuts
- Unstable/heavy teaching assignments
- School closures
- Escalating student issues – bulling, substance abuse, violence
- Inequities
- Isolation
- Absentee parents
- Community expectations

Please don’t make me go to school tomorrow!

But Honey, you’re the teacher.

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The pain caused by forces in the workplace is often intercepted by **compassionate** and **caring** individuals known as “toxic handlers”. Frost proposed that the toxic handler posses a skill set apart and different from the job the individual was hired for. When properly executed by the handler, those skills helps other individuals better cope with stress they face, thereby allowing them to remain productive and efficient in the workplace. The author proposed that the work of the toxic handler is complex, demanding and invaluable to the maintenance of healthy organizations. Having such a person on staff can create stability and a feeling of calm and for others.

**Skill Set:**
- Listening
- Holding space for healing
- Buffering pain
- Extricating others from painful situations
- Transforming pain

**Why They Do It:**
- Desire to help others
- Keep work places free from emotional distress that undermines productivity
- Create healthy workplaces

Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers. "Give me your rag," he said so gently, "and I'll give you another."

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own faces; and then HE began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.
The Toll on Toxin Handlers

Handling the emotions of others is a dangerous game. Toxic handlers get caught up in fixing everything and everyone. They feel so intensely responsible for the well-being of colleagues, the organization, and the relationship between the two that they neglect their own physical, emotional and spiritual health. Carrying around the pain of others comes at a cost when handlers find themselves anxious, depressed and burned out.

“At work I would be strong for my team, but at home I cried a lot. I slept away from my husband, although I didn’t actually sleep very much and often felt terribly depressed. The worst part was the panic attacks, which would come on suddenly. My heart would pound, and I would lose my breath.” (p. 93).

“I can help others, but can’t seem to help myself. I keep seeing people suffering from the cruelty and indifference of their bosses, from stupid rules and decisions. I am tired of being the one who people turn to when it hits the fan. Whom do I turn to?” (p. 103).

Signs of Depression

• Disrupted sleep, sometimes through upsetting dreams
• Early morning waking and difficulty getting back to sleep
• Doing less of what they used to enjoy
• Difficulty concentrating during the day
• Improved energy as the day goes on
• Anxious worrying and intrusive upsetting thoughts
• Becoming emotional or upset for no particular reason
• Shortness of temper, or irritability

The Toll of Stress

Long Term
• heart disease
• lowered immune systems
• clinical depression

Short Term
• fatigue
• irritability
“To respond to someone’s pain is an act of compassion, a way of reaching out to a person who is alone and suffering. Efforts to reconnect people to their competence and self-worth are expressions of love” (p.108). Frost maintained that handlers must learn to help people deal with their pain, but must do so without taking it on as a part of their own experience. If handlers are aware of the inherent dangers of their job, they will strategically avoid potential harm to their well-being. Self-protection can be achieved through adapting a set of attitudes and behaviours that allow for both a healthy mind and body. In order to create the needed respite to keep handlers well, the author recommended a plan developed by Loehr and Schartz, trainers who spent over two decades of work with high performance athletes faced with periods of intense pressure. The plan includes incorporating the need to build in breaks and the need to build up reserves into the work handlers do so as to maintain stamina and health. Within this framework, handlers must focus on their preserving their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health.

- Exercise
- Take up a sport
- Eat well
- Get sleep
- Drink plenty of water
- Get a massage
- Stay positive
- Don’t take things personally
- Accept what you can’t change
- Meditate
- Step back from the work space
- Find time for self
- Visualize a happy place
- Say no

In the midst of winter, I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer.  
- Albert Camus,
THE ROLE OF LEADERS

Frost proposed that in order to control toxicity, leaders need to first acknowledge that toxicity exists. If possible, leaders should consciously assume the role of toxic handler. If they feel they are not adequately skilled to do so, they need to provide support for those individuals who fill the void. Immediate support comes in legitimizing the importance the role and work of the handler. When toxicity is recognized as a part of work culture, conversations and language can develop around productive work that has often been done in isolation and without recognition. This validation removes some of the burden of the task of helping others through pain. When handlers communicate the relevance of what they are doing, or they are supported by organizational leaders, they create a position of value in the organization, paving the way for improved organizational practice. Legitimizing pain in the workplace creates an opportunity to address issues before suffering and performance worsen. When leaders are willing to deal with toxicity, there is an increase in moral, creativity, and performance.

Compassionate leaders need to develop the following skills:

- Paying attention – attentive leaders need to be alert to the emotional condition of a staff
- Putting people first – people need to be the center point of a leaders thoughts and actions
- Practice professional intimacy – leaders need to use reason to guide emotion, and emotion to guide reason
- Planting seeds – leaders need to be able to anticipate handling pain and plan to deal with it
- Pushing back – sometimes leaders have to eliminate the source of the pain

THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS

The responsibility of dealing with workplace pain cannot be left solely to the leaders and handlers of an organization. Organizations that believe in the worth of the people who serve them need to build policy and procedures that reflect compassion and care. Organizations need to be proactive and develop strategies using a before, during and after model to address toxicity that weakens individuals and the organization. (Refer to chart on following page.)
PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Choosing employees for attitude and competence
- Developing people and helping them shine
- Building fair-minded workplaces
- Creating a healthy atmosphere by allowing space for healing

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

- Dealing with downturns by building bridges for people to leave with hope and opportunity
- Dealing with peoples' personal pain by creating policies that are compasionate and systematic
- Dealing with trauma by helping people find meaning in the midst of tragedy
- Maintaining a presence in the face of great suffering
- Providing a context for meaning
- Providing a context for action

RESTORATION AND RECOVERY STRATEGIES

- Showing patience and trust in the belief that time heals
- Providing process: letting people talk
- Providing guidance: helping people see positive options
- Exhibiting confidence: treating people as if they can cope
- Providing hope and inspiration
- Providing focus: restoring active routines
- Fostering rituals and symbols for letting go
- Providing a basis for renewed trust
- Helping people focus on constructive action
THE WORLD WAS WATCHING...
The only thing missing from the office memo were expletives. It had everything else. There were lines berating employees for not caring about the company. There were words in all capital letters like “SICK” and “NO LONGER.” There were threats of layoffs and hiring freezes and the shutting down of the employee gym. The memo was sent by email on March 13th by the chief executive officer of Cerner Corp., a company which develops software for the health care industry and is based in Kansas City, Missouri, with 3,100 employees around the world. Originally intended for only 400 or so company managers, it quickly took on a life of its own. The email was leaked and posted on Yahoo. Its belligerence and tone surprised thousands of readers, including analysts and investors. In the stock market, the value of the company, which was $1.5 billion on March 20th, plummeted 22 percent in three days (p. 215).

Accepting that pain is part of organizational culture, Frost proposed that leaders could well use it as a diagnostic into the health and stability of the organization as a whole. Infections and illnesses that require immediate attention will be addressed early, eliminating epidemics and terminal conditions. When managers are aware of this, they are better tuned to the emotional health of their staff and organization and realize quickly when toxicity must be addressed (p. 216).

What do you see...

• A 28 year teacher crying as she attempts to do her years plans with renewed curricula
• Teacher eating his lunch in his classroom alone
• Poor attendance at the staff Christmas party
Critical Evaluation

*Toxic Emotions at Work* is the beginning to a conversation that is intended to end in the workplace, with the hope that managers and organizations consciously build care and compassion into workplace culture. An easy read, the book provides a sense of hope and optimism that with awareness and support, people will indeed come first in the workplace. The numerous vignettes of people dealing with workplace toxins provided by the author assists the reader in connecting with the work in a meaningful and sometimes painful way. As a result, the strategies offered for dealing with workplace pain are anticipated and eagerly welcomed. Maintaining the unity of the work, strategies for maintaining the personal well-being of managers and handlers, as well as a prevention – intervention – recovery strategy piece for organizations as a whole, are presented practically and realistically. Frost’s tone remains consistent with his frequently reoccurring message: people need to be treated respectfully and compassionately. This book is a must-read for all leaders, those who truly care for the people in their charge, and those who need to start doing so. Frost’s seemingly oxymoron-like revelation that good leadership in itself causes pain for others is reason enough for all those who lead others to pick up and start flipping through the pages of his book.

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

― Maya Angelou

TO TAKE AWAY...

- Am I a handler or a toxin?
- How healthy is my workplace?
- What is my emotional IQ?
- How do I deal with workplace pain?
- How do I stay healthy?
- How does my organization show compassion and care for me?
- What could I do better to help myself and others?