

Introduction:

This activity will challenge participants to define the concept of emotion labor, identify their own and others' emotion labor, and reflect on coping skills and positive outcomes for emotion labor.

Materials:

Writing utensils and copies of the Rating Feelings handout for each participant (see notes below).

Optional: Just Smile! PowerPoint

Note to the facilitator:

Facilitators should ensure that they understand the concept of emotion labor. According to Hochschild (1983), emotion labor is the work that professionals are expected to perform to manage their feelings and "to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7). Emotional labor typically involves surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting is the verbal and nonverbal displays of emotion that are not genuinely felt by the person performing them. Deep acting, on the other hand, is consciously generating emotions towards other people in order to experience the appropriate, authentic emotion needed for the interaction.

This activity has 2 versions for the first part only. One version targets a general adult audience. The other targets more traditionally-aged college students.

When introducing this activity, acknowledge that it's normal for varying degrees of emotion to surface both while doing the activity and in the answers to the first part. Also tell that group that the activity has several parts, including a part they do alone and times when they discuss in small groups and as a whole group.

This activity can be done virtually or in person as long as participants have access to the relevant questionnaire and can work in small groups.

Part 1 - Rating Feelings (5-7 minutes):

Ensure that each participant has a copy of the Rating Feelings handout and ask them to place themselves in the situations described in each question and imagine the feelings they would have. Then, they should rate the strength of those feelings on a scale from "no feelings" to "very strong" feelings.

Note: Use the Rating Feelings Undergraduate Version handout if you are working with a group of undergraduate students. For any other type of group, use the Rating Feelings General Version handout.

Part 2 - Group Debrief 1 (5 minutes):

After all participants have completed the handout, debrief with the entire group using the following questions:

- How was it to consider the strength of your feelings in these situations?
- What were some of the feelings that came up?
- Where would you like to know more about a situation?

Part 3 – Small Group Discussion (10-15 minutes):

In a small group (3-4 people), have participants discuss several of the situations where at least one of them marked “strong” or “very strong.” What do they think they would do in each of those situations?

- Suppress their emotions
- Try to produce certain emotions in someone else
- Pretend that they share someone else’s emotions
- Genuinely share someone else’s emotions

Part 4 – Group Debrief 1 (15-20 minutes):

Debrief with the entire group using the following questions:

- What were some of the situations you discussed?
- What surprised you in the discussion?
- Based on this activity, how would you define emotion labor? (Offer definition if needed.)
- What are other situations – work, home, social – where emotion labor is required? (If no one brings it up, you might mention police, social workers, teachers, caregivers, doctors and nurses, etc.)
- What are some ways you or others cope with emotion labor to avoid emotional exhaustion? (If no one brings it up, you might ask if anyone has heard of gallows humor or of workplace trainings for dealing directly with upset clients.)
- In what ways can emotion labor bring positive outcomes to those who do it? (If needed, you might offer a starting suggestion such as self-esteem, job satisfaction, commitment, effectiveness on the job and attach it to a particular context, e.g., the effectiveness parents feel when dealing well with their children’s emotions or the job satisfaction of helping turn a customer’s bad attitude into a more positive one.)
- What did you learn, and what will you do with what you learned?