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Addressing Over-Responsibility for Others

What Is Compulsive Caretaking?

Compulsive caretaking (or over-responsibility for others) is a pattern where you automatically try to read other people's minds to figure out what they want or need, and then work to meet those needs without being asked—often before you've even checked in with your own feelings or needs.

This pattern often develops in childhood when it wasn't safe to have needs of your own, when you learned that your job was to keep others comfortable, or when you discovered that anticipating and meeting others' needs was the best way to earn love, avoid conflict, or maintain connection.

As an adult, this pattern can leave you exhausted, resentful, disconnected from yourself, and unclear about your own boundaries. You may struggle to know what you actually want, because you're so focused on what everyone else needs.

Signs You Might Be Doing This

- You often anticipate what others need before they ask
- You feel responsible for other people's comfort or emotional state
- You struggle to say no, even when you're overwhelmed
- You feel guilty when you prioritize your own needs or disappoint someone
- You get anxious when someone seems upset, and immediately try to fix it
- You often feel resentful after helping because it wasn't truly your choice
- You have trouble identifying what you want or need in a given moment

Learning Not to Abandon Yourself

Every time you try to read others' minds and prioritize others' needs over your own, you are abandoning yourself emotionally. Recovery from over-responsibility for others involves three interconnected practices: noticing the pattern, interrupting it with curiosity, and reconnecting with your own feelings and needs. These practices build on each other and require patience—you're rewiring deeply ingrained habits.

Step 1: Notice the Pattern

The first step is simply becoming aware of when you're doing it. Compulsive caretaking often happens so automatically that you don't realize it's happening until you're already exhausted or resentful.

Practice catching yourself in the act:

- **Notice your body's signals.** Do you feel tension, anxiety, discomfort, or a rushing feeling when you start to think about the feelings or needs of others? Does your body go on high alert, trying to imagine what others are needing from you?
- **Notice what you're thinking.** Are you thinking things like "They seem stressed, I should offer to make dinner" or "he's kind of quiet today. I wonder if he's upset with me" or "I can tell she's upset, I need to fix this"?
- **Notice when you're mind-reading.** Are you making assumptions about what someone else wants, needs, or feels, without them letting you know, and without checking with them?
- **Notice the urge to act.** Do you feel compelled to immediately jump in and help, even when no one has asked?

Journaling prompt: At the end of each day this week, write down one instance where you noticed yourself trying to anticipate or meet someone's needs without being asked. What were you thinking? What were you feeling in your body? What did you assume the other person needed?

Step 2: Get Curious and Interrupt the Pattern

Once you notice the pattern, the next step is to pause before automatically following through. This is where curiosity comes in. Instead of judging yourself for the pattern, get interested in it.

When you notice the urge to caretake, try these practices:

- **Pause.** Before you jump in to help, fix, or soothe, literally pause. Take a breath. Give yourself even just 30 seconds before acting.
- **Ask yourself curious questions:**
 - "What am I afraid will happen if I don't do this?"
 - "Am I making assumptions about what this person needs, or have they actually asked?"
 - "What would happen if I waited to see if they ask for help?"
 - "Is this something I genuinely want to do, or am I acting out of obligation or fear?"
- **Practice not acting.** Sometimes, the most powerful practice is to simply choose not to act on the urge to take care of the other person. Notice the urge, acknowledge it, and then consciously choose not to follow through. See what happens.
- **Tolerate the discomfort.** When you don't immediately jump in to help, you might feel anxious, guilty, or worried. This is normal. These feelings are what the pattern has been protecting you from. Practice sitting with the discomfort without having to do anything about it.

- **Ask instead of assuming.** If you're genuinely unsure whether someone needs help and you are feeling generous, try asking: "Do you need anything from me right now?" or "Would you like help with that, or would you rather handle it yourself?" Let them tell you what they need instead of guessing.

Practice: This week, pick one situation where you notice the urge to caretake and deliberately pause before acting. Notice what comes up for you when you don't immediately follow through.

Step 3: Increase Awareness of Your Own Feelings and Needs

Over-responsibility for others often develops because it didn't feel safe in your early life to have your own needs. As you interrupt the pattern, you need to simultaneously rebuild your connection to yourself—to what you feel, want, and need.

Practices for reconnecting with yourself:

- **Check in with your body regularly.** Several times a day, take one deep, slow breath and notice: What am I feeling right now? Where do I feel it in my body? Am I hungry, tired, tense, energized?
- **Practice naming your emotions.** When something happens, ask yourself: What am I feeling? (Not what should I be feeling, but what am I actually feeling?) Start with basic emotions: happy, sad, angry, scared, frustrated, excited. Over time, you might notice more subtle emotions, such as disappointment, envy, resentment or hurt. All emotions are OK, and they all pass over time.
- **Ask yourself what you need.** This might feel strange at first if you're not used to prioritizing your needs. Start small: Do I need water? Rest? A walk? Quiet? Connection? To say no to something?
- **Practice micro-choices.** Throughout the day, give yourself small choices: What do I want for lunch? Do I want to sit or stand? Do I want to take this call now or later? These tiny acts of honoring your preferences rebuild your connection to your own desires.
- **Notice when you're about to override your needs.** If you realize you're exhausted but about to say yes to something, pause. You don't have to say no—just notice the pattern of abandoning yourself. Recognize that you are making a choice.
- **Give yourself permission to matter.** Your needs are just as important as everyone else's. You don't have to earn the right to take up space, rest, or ask for help. Practice saying to yourself: "My needs matter" or "I'm allowed to want things."

Journaling prompt: For one week, at the end of each day write down: (1) One feeling I noticed today, (2) One need I had, (3) Whether I honored that need or overrode it, and (4) What made it hard or easy to honor my need.

Why This Matters

Breaking free from compulsive caretaking isn't about becoming selfish or uncaring. It's about developing the capacity to choose when and how you care for others, rather than operating on autopilot from fear or obligation.

When you stop automatically sacrificing yourself, you create space for genuine connection and the feeling of generosity rather than obligation. You can give from a place of abundance rather than depletion. You model healthy boundaries for the people around you. And most importantly, you stop abandoning yourself in your efforts to care for everyone else.

This work takes time. Be patient with yourself. Every time you pause, every time you check in with your own needs, every time you choose not to automatically jump in to fix or soothe—you're building new neural pathways and reclaiming yourself.

Remember

- You don't have to be perfect at this. The goal is awareness and practice, not perfection.
- Other people are capable of handling their own feelings and asking for what they need. You don't have to do it for them.
- It's okay to disappoint people sometimes. Their disappointment is not your emergency, and it is OK for people to be disappointed sometimes.
- Your worth is not determined by how much you do for others.
- Reconnecting with yourself is not selfish—it's essential for your well-being.

If you find that this work brings up challenging feelings or that you're not making progress in overcoming this pattern, working with a trained therapist may help. If you're in California, you can reach out to me through my website at <http://merilevy.com>. I'm happy to support you through this journey.