

Rescuing, Resenting, and Regretting: A Codependent Pattern

Codependents are often caretakers – which seems like a great quality except we tend to do it at our own expense and often when help isn't wanted or needed. The result is a codependent pattern of rescuing, resenting, and regretting.

What is rescuing?

Rescuing is an unhealthy version of helping. It resembles [enabling](#) and tries to change or fix other people.

Rescuing includes:

- Doing things for others that they are capable of doing themselves
- Making it easier for others to continue their unhealthy behaviors
- Helping others avoid the consequences of their actions
- Doing more than your share of the work
- Taking responsibility for other people, trying to solve their problems
- Helping out of obligation rather than because you want to ([people-pleasing](#))

Certainly, not all helping is bad or unhealthy. To distinguish rescuing from true helping, it's useful to question your motivation for helping and expectations regarding the outcome. True help is given with an open heart, with no strings attached, and no expectations. It's done because we want to help not because we feel like we have to or because we'll feel guilty if we don't. True help isn't enabling or an effort to help people avoid consequences. And it doesn't foster dependence by doing things for others that they can do for themselves.

Why do codependents rescue?

Codependents feel compelled to help. We see a problem and spring into action, often without examining whether it's our problem to solve or not. Rescuing gives us a purpose; it makes us feel needed, which is something codependents crave. We're prone to low self-esteem, so rescuing becomes our identity and help us feel important or worthwhile.

Usually, our compulsion to help can be traced back to our childhoods. It tends to be the result of dysfunctional family dynamics, cultural roles, and societal expectations.

Sometimes, rescuing is an unconscious effort to do-over a traumatic past experience, such as a desire to rescue a parent that you couldn't save or to be rescued yourself. Often, early experiences of feeling out of control and ineffective get imprinted on us and as adults, we repeat our failed efforts to rescue people without being consciously aware of the connection between the past and present.

Rescuing, of course, can also be a mindset that we were taught. Perhaps a family member modeled being a martyr. Or maybe you were praised for being self-sacrificing or took care of others as a way to feel needed or get attention. These behaviors get reinforced the more we do them. Many of us continue rescuing behaviors in adulthood because we were taught it's what we *should* do – and we haven't stopped to consider whether it's working or whether we have other choices.

Codependents rescue because:

- Caretaking and rescuing make us feel useful, needed, and worthy.
- We became caretakers at an early age out of necessity because our parents lacked caretaking skills.
- We feel responsible for other people – their feelings, choices, safety, happiness, and so on.
- Rescuing helps us feel in control and temporarily quiets our fears and anxieties.
- We think it's our duty or job to take care of everyone and everything.
- We're afraid to say no and set boundaries (another form of people-pleasing).
- We believe others will suffer if we don't rescue them.
- We think we know better than others and have the answers to their problems.
- We confuse rescuing with true helping.

Resentment and regret

In the beginning, codependents have a rescue fantasy: We think we can rescue our loved one and fix her problems. And as a result, she'll be happy and grateful. And we'll feel loved, appreciated, and valued. In this rescue fantasy, you're the knight in shining armor who rescues the damsel in distress and then you ride off into the proverbial sunset together and live happily ever after. Except, it doesn't work that way. Does it?

In reality, our rescuing efforts usually fail. [We can't help people who don't want our help and we can't solve other people's problems.](#) Instead, our failed rescue attempts leave us feeling hurt, angry, and resentful.

When we try to rescue or fix other people's problems, we become resentful because:

- Our help isn't appreciated.
- Our advice and guidance aren't taken.
- We ignore our own needs.
- We do things we didn't really want to do; we acted out of obligation.
- No one notices what we need or tries to meet our needs; we feel neglected.

When we try to rescue others, we end up feeling used and abused. We may blow up in [anger](#). Or we may stew in our resentment, acting in passive-aggressive ways like making snide comments or giving dirty looks. Understandably, we often get anger in return from the person we just tried to help. As our resentments grow, so do our feelings of regret. We regret that we tried to help at all. We criticize ourselves, blame ourselves, and feel ashamed of our seemingly foolish behavior.

And the longer we participate in trying to rescue, the more frustrated and resentful we become. Our rescuing becomes enabling and although we realize it's not going to change our loved one's behavior, we continue the pattern of rescuing, resenting, and regretting.

How to stop the rescue-resent-regret pattern

If you feel taken advantage of by those you're trying to help, the solution is to stop throwing on your Superman cape and running to the rescue. You don't have to put your life on hold and jump into problem-solving mode every time someone has a problem or unpleasant feeling.

Often, we try to solve the rescue-resent-regret pattern by doubling down on rescuing. We think: *If I can only get Jane to change, then I can stop rescuing and we'll both feel better.* This is a classic codependent thinking error. We mistakenly think that rescuing others is the solution to our feelings of resentment and regret, but in reality, rescuing is the source of these difficult feelings. And we have the power to disrupt this pattern by letting others take responsibility for their own lives – their feelings, choices, and consequences.

Yes, it's hard to do this. No one wants to see a friend or family member suffering. However, I think if you can step back and see the whole picture, you'll recognize that rescuing is contributing to your suffering. The rescue-resent-regret pattern doesn't solve anything – and it often creates more problems in our relationships and for ourselves. In addition to resentment and regret, it results in self-neglect and missing out on our own lives because we're so focused on others. Sometimes, we lose our interests, goals, values, and health.

Instead of rescuing, you can:

- Recognize what's your responsibility and what's not.
- Stop taking responsibility for other people's problems, responsibilities, and feelings,
- Practice consistent self-care (noticing and meeting your own needs).
- Refrain from giving advice or help that wasn't requested.
- Consider how someone's request for help fits your own needs, plans, etc.
- Set boundaries and say no when needed.

Codependent thinking and behavior patterns are notoriously hard to break because they were established early in life and reinforced for years and years. That doesn't mean it's impossible to change; it just means that you'll need to practice a lot, have patience, and be kind to yourself. It's a process. To begin, start to notice when you're trying to rescue others and whether it leads to resentment and regret. Awareness is where change begins.