MAX PARADOX

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

Self-Help with a Sense of Humor ;)

I Take on Too Much

How to Stop Being the Entire World's One-Person Rescue Squad



We have a problem. Relax. We can solve it—and have a laugh along the way.

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INTRO

You are halfway through answering an email when your phone rings. It is a friend who needs advice. While you are talking, a coworker sends a message marked “quick question,” which in office language means, “I am about to donate part of my problem to you.” Then your mother texts because she cannot find a document she definitely put somewhere safe. Your partner asks if you can handle a small errand. Someone in the family group chat has misunderstood someone else, and for reasons nobody can explain, you have apparently been appointed Secretary-General of Emotional Affairs.

By 6:00 p.m., you have solved four problems, prevented two minor disasters, found one lost PDF, calmed down three people, and moved exactly zero of your own important tasks forward. You are exhausted. Your brain feels like an airport control tower run by one person who is also responsible for baggage claim. And somehow, despite everything you have already done, a small voice in your head suggests that perhaps you should have done more.

Welcome to the strange life of the person who takes on too much.

This book is not about becoming cold, selfish, unavailable, or the kind of person who responds to every request with, “That sounds like a you problem.” There are enough of those people already, and several of them appear to have become managers. The goal is much simpler: to stop treating every difficulty within a ten-mile radius as a personal assignment. You can still care. You can still help. You can still be dependable. You just do not have to operate like a twenty-

four-hour emergency service with no staff, no holidays, and suspiciously poor benefits.

If you are the reliable one, the capable one, the calm one, the organized one, or simply the person who made the catastrophic mistake of being helpful more than twice, people may have learned that you can be counted on. That sounds nice because it is nice. Until “can be counted on” quietly becomes “will handle everything.” Then your life starts filling with invisible jobs. You remember birthdays, organize trips, fix scheduling conflicts, listen to the same relationship story for the seventh time, and try not to mention that the plot has not changed since episode two. At work, you notice what is missing, what might go wrong, what should have been done yesterday, and who is currently pretending not to see it. At home, you carry the mental list. With friends, you become the emergency contact even when no emergency has technically occurred.

You do not need a cape.

You already have twelve browser tabs open.

The problem is not simply that other people ask too much. Sometimes they do. But often something even faster happens: you volunteer before the request has fully formed. Someone says, “I have no idea how I’m going to get all this done,” and your brain immediately begins assembling a rescue helicopter. Maybe I could do that part. I know who to call. I can probably squeeze it in. It would be faster if I just handled it. They are already stressed. It is not that big a deal. Five innocent thoughts later, you are spending Saturday morning solving a problem that did not belong to you on Friday.

Taking on too much is especially tricky because it often looks admirable from the outside. It wears the respectable clothing of generosity, competence, loyalty, responsibility, and being "the person everyone can rely on." Sometimes it genuinely is all those things. Helping people matters. Showing up matters. Being dependable is a strength. But strengths become expensive when they have no off switch. The trouble starts when helping stops being a decision and becomes an automatic reflex—when someone else's discomfort creates an immediate sense of duty in you, saying no feels cruel, delegating feels irresponsible, waiting feels dangerous, and allowing another adult to experience the consequences of their own choices feels roughly equivalent to abandoning them in the wilderness with one granola bar.

So you step in. Again. And because you step in, things often work out. The appointment gets booked. The forgotten task gets finished. The crisis disappears. Everyone relaxes. Your brain receives a small but powerful message: See? Good thing we handled that. What your brain conveniently forgets to calculate is the bill. The bill arrives later as resentment, fatigue, unfinished personal goals, low-level irritability, constant mental load, and the peculiar experience of being needed by everyone while feeling strangely absent from your own life. You may become so busy preventing other people from dropping balls that you fail to notice you are now juggling your own obligations with your teeth.

Then the system adapts. Not necessarily because anyone is malicious, lazy, or secretly plotting to destroy your free time. Humans are simply efficient. If one person consistently remembers, fixes, organizes, reminds, books, checks, follows up, rescues, and smooths everything over, everyone else

gradually learns that this person exists. Why build a bridge when you already have Kevin?

You are Kevin.

Even if your name is not Kevin.

This is also why the problem will not be solved by one dramatic speech about boundaries while standing on a cliff at sunset. Real boundaries are rarely cinematic. The request arrives on Tuesday at 3:14 p.m. while you are eating something over the sink. It comes from someone you care about. It sounds reasonable. You are already tired. You do not want conflict. You know you could do it. Before you have consciously decided anything, your mouth is preparing to say, "Sure."

That is the moment that matters.

The goal of this book is to slow that moment down just enough for you to make an actual decision instead of performing your usual rescue reflex. You will learn to tell the difference between helping and taking over, between responsibility and control, between kindness and quietly deleting yourself from your own schedule. You will learn how to stop automatically becoming the project manager of other people's lives—and, more importantly, what to do instead.

That means practical things. How to delay your yes without sounding strange. How to refuse without presenting a seventeen-minute courtroom defense. How to help with part of a problem without adopting the entire problem and giving it your last name. How to let capable adults remain capable adults. How to stop fixing situations nobody actually asked you to fix. How to notice when "It'll be easier if I just do it" is technically true for the next ten minutes but spectacularly false for the next ten years.

You will also need to survive something many chronic rescuers find more difficult than the actual workload: discomfort. People may be surprised when you stop automatically taking over. Some may push back. Someone may sigh dramatically. A coworker might discover the phrase, “But you always do it.” A relative may briefly behave as though your refusal to organize one dinner has destabilized civilization.

Civilization will recover.

More importantly, some people may suddenly discover that they possess problem-solving abilities previously thought lost to science.

Your own reactions may be louder than anyone else’s. Guilt can appear even when you have done nothing wrong. You may worry that you are disappointing people, being selfish, becoming difficult, or failing some invisible test of goodness. You may even wonder whether people will still value you if you are no longer endlessly useful. That fear deserves to be understood because it can keep an entire rescue system running long after everyone involved is tired of it. But understanding a fear is different from obeying it.

This book will not ask you to become less caring. It will ask you to become more deliberate. To help because you choose to help, not because every request activates the same internal fire alarm. To be generous without becoming infrastructure. To support people without becoming their unpaid logistics department. To leave some problems where they actually belong and discover that many of them mysteriously get solved anyway.

You can still be the person others trust.

You just do not have to be the entire world’s one-person rescue squad.

The world, despite early indications, does have other employees.

Chapter 1 - Your Problem Collection Is Full

At 8:42 on a Wednesday morning, you are supposed to be starting your own work. Instead, you are thinking about whether your coworker remembered to send her report, whether your brother has called the insurance company, whether your friend is still upset about the argument she had last night, and whether somebody should remind the group that the restaurant needs a reservation.

Nobody has asked you to think about all four things.

Your brain has simply opened several unpaid internships.

This is what taking on too much often looks like in real life. It is not necessarily dramatic. You are not carrying three people out of a burning building before breakfast. You are carrying their unfinished tasks, decisions, worries, appointments, conflicts, deadlines, and potential mistakes in your head. The problem is not just the things you physically do. It is everything you mentally adopt.

That distinction matters because many people say, “I don’t actually do that much for everyone,” while simultaneously keeping a private database of everybody else’s lives. They remember who needs to call whom, which family member is annoyed, which coworker is behind, who still has not booked a flight, and whether somebody might forget Grandma’s birthday.

You are not doing the task.

You are merely hosting it.

Unfortunately, mental hosting still uses electricity.

The first step toward taking on less is to recognize what you are actually carrying. Most chronic overhelpers underestimate their load because they count only visible actions: driving someone somewhere, doing part of their work, organizing the party, making the phone call, fixing the mistake. But invisible responsibility can be just as exhausting.

You may not book the dentist appointment for your partner, for example, but you remind them twice, wonder whether they did it, ask again on Thursday, notice the appointment is still not in the shared calendar, then silently worry that they will wait until something hurts.

Congratulations.

You have outsourced the clicking and retained the management contract.

The Three Ways You Take Something On

You can take responsibility for somebody else's situation in at least three different ways.

The first is doing.

You complete the task yourself. A coworker is overwhelmed, so you finish part of the presentation. Your teenager forgot something, so you drive back home and get it. Your friend hates making phone calls, so you call the company for them. Someone is confused by a form, and before they have finished saying, "I'm not sure what this means," you are already downloading the PDF.

Doing is obvious because it leaves evidence.

The second is managing.

You do not perform the task, but you supervise it. You remind, check, coordinate, plan, schedule, confirm, follow up,

and make sure nothing explodes. This can feel less intrusive because technically the other person is still doing the thing.

Technically.

A project manager does not personally install every window in a building either. The building is still very much their problem.

The third is carrying.

This happens mostly inside your head. Someone else has a problem, and you feel responsible for whether it turns out well. Maybe there is nothing useful you can even do. That does not stop you from replaying it during your shower, lunch, commute, and the moment when you were hoping to fall asleep.

Your friend has an interview tomorrow.

You are more nervous than your friend.

Your sister is deciding whether to move.

You have created three spreadsheets.

Your coworker has a conflict with the boss.

You are emotionally preparing testimony for a trial that will never occur.

Of these three, carrying is often the hardest to notice because it can masquerade as caring. You tell yourself, “I’m just concerned.”

Sometimes you are.

Sometimes you are running an unauthorized control room.

Responsibility Is Not the Same as Concern

Here is a useful distinction: you can care about the outcome without being responsible for producing the outcome.