

# Helping 'til it Hurts: 4 Signs You're Giving Too Much

LAURA DABNEY, MD

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"Angel" had always been praised for her generosity. She was active in her church and a dedicated volunteer. Funerals, craft sales, committees—Angel was a Good Samaritan.

One fall, a young woman at work revealed that she was about to lose the lease on her apartment. The two women worked closely together and Angel knew that her colleague was in trouble; she had survived a traumatic childhood and no longer had ties to her family. It broke Angel's heart. She offered the woman her spare bedroom until she was back on her feet.

Today, Angel says, she can't look back on the experience without feeling embarrassed and angry. What she believed to be a well-intentioned gesture ended up straining her marriage, her relationship with her own kids, and even her health.

Helping becomes pathological when it hurts more than it helps.

As extreme as it may sound, Angel's story isn't uncommon. In fact, it is symptomatic of *Pathological Altruism*. Unlike healthy altruism, pathological altruism is giving to the extreme, and is performed with little or no consideration of the harm it may cause to the giver or the recipient. In other words, helping becomes pathological when it hurts more than it helps.

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Here's what Pathological Altruism often looks like, as demonstrated by Angel.

### Supreme confidence in one's skills or ability to help.

Let's face it: Angel was not a trained therapist. She raised successful children, but it was unreasonable and dangerous for her to expect that she could soothe her friend's serious emotional wounds. Like a novice mechanic working on a finely tuned engine, when our desire to help exceeds our skills, we are likely to do more damage than good.

### Tendency to deny one's own needs for the needs of others.

Angel spent so much time helping her friend with her everyday needs that she ate poorly, gained weight, woke exhausted, and felt increasingly depressed. It's a predictable cycle that flight attendants have advised us about for decades: you must put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.

### Belief that one is partly or wholly at fault for another person's issues.

When months passed and the woman still hadn't found an apartment, Angel began to doubt herself; maybe she wasn't as good a parent and mentor as she thought. Over time, her self-doubt increasingly tainted her interactions with her kids, throwing her relationships with them into chaos.

### Inability to see the harmful consequences of your helping behaviors.

As in physics, we cannot exert one force without expecting an equal or greater force in response. So it is with our relationships. By the time Angel had had enough of her houseguest, her children had quit calling and she fought nearly every day with her husband. Her dedication to helping her friend had led her to neglect the people she loved.

As sad as it sounds, giving can be our downfall. But the pathological cycle can be broken. For those struggling with Pathological Altruism, the answer lies in understanding the cause of our own behaviors and beliefs.



Learn more about how Dr. Dabney can help you at [drladabney.com](http://drladabney.com)