

# An Unhealthy Loop

Dale Easley's Blog

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For quite a few years, I've observed a recurring issue in several colleagues' lives. Come to think of it, I saw it at home growing up, too. It is the tendency to resent people who don't reciprocate in the way we expect them to. That sounds too vague, so let me be more specific.

A person I worked with was an incredibly giving person, always doing things for others. She'd throw parties, take people out, sit and listen for hours, etc. Initially, her behavior was great for generating a sense of community and camaraderie. However, over time, she became increasingly resentful that her acts weren't adequately appreciated, despite her not having been asked to do them. She was volunteering her time and money to make a lot of wonderful things happen, but in the process she was growing increasingly bitter. Finally, things exploded and she was asked to leave her job.

If this were a single instance I described, I could think it an anomaly. Indeed, other things were happening in the woman's life that made her world view more negative. However, there always are other things. The pattern keeps appearing. Just recently, a colleague went well out of the way to help pay expenses for a relative. Again, the relative didn't behave as expected and major grief resulted.

In my life, I have a history of being in relationships where I feel taken advantage of. I try to treat people nicely, and they run over me. The anger that results was the focus of one of my earlier sets of therapy sessions ([here](#)). As we dug in, the therapist helped me see what preceded that anger—a sense of injustice. Things shouldn't be this way! I'm being taken advantage of! Poor me!

Unfortunately, there's not a lot of power for change in self-pity. I'm not in favor of blaming the victim (me, in this case) but acting as if you were cause in the matter is a crucial step in overcoming a situation. So, to begin to work through my anger, I had to first recognize and then correct my actions that were leading to being taken advantage of. Such thinking doesn't mean letting others off the hook for their behavior. However, it does mean not allowing the pattern of victimization to continue.

First, a huge issue is the establishment of healthy boundaries. I grew up as the grandchild of an alcoholic, and alcoholic families are notorious for lacking healthy boundaries. (If you come from such a family, get some help. Read. I found [Grandchildren of Alcoholics](#) very helpful.) A healthy boundary is neither absent nor rigid. It's permeable. What that means is that you don't let just any

behavior or person into your life nor do you shut all of them out. You establish for yourself what's acceptable and stick to it.

Second, you can't please all of the people all of the time, as Abe Lincoln said. For me, trying to please people to the point of selling myself out was a huge issue. (See my writings on my therapy experiences [here](#).) In the past I'd get angry at students for taking advantage of me. Now, not so much. I try to create situations where I can't be taken advantage of. I generally don't do makeup tests, for example. Instead, I drop the lowest grade. That decision alone brought tremendous relief from an ongoing problem. Again, setting clear rules (boundaries) and sticking to them may not please everyone, but it depersonalizes the upset.

Third, if you do things for someone else, be honest about your motives. Are you doing it to feel good about yourself? Are you doing it because you believe someone else (society) thinks you should? Such motivations don't have staying power. You burn out, become embittered, or get depressed. Are the things worthy of doing no matter the outcome? Is your compassion real? Do you really believe so? It's best to be sure.

Finally, are you well informed about the situation you're upset about? Could there be factors you are unaware of? When students aren't performing as well as I know they can, it's easy to get down on them. However, when I've put the effort into trying to get to know my students well, I begin to understand why they behave the way they do. And more often than not, I come away astounded at how well they are doing with their lives, overcoming things far beyond my experiences as a student. Understanding doesn't mean changing the rules, but it definitely reduces the conflict by leading to compassion rather than judgment.