

The Rescuer Identity

Who is Really Saving Who?

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Help me! That's the mating call for the Rescuer or Super Hero identity. It arouses all of the stress hormones combined with a strong need to connect in the only way he's ever known to connect. We all know this identity. It's the grandmother to whom you can take your dirty laundry and she'll say it wasn't your fault and fold you up under her wing to rest while she takes over. It's the person in the neighborhood who takes in all the stray animals and people and has a regular farm on his less than half acre property or 3 people coming over for supper every day in his tiny apartment. It's the fierce warrior who goes to battle to save the "whatever needs saving lately." It's the man or woman who never even hums the song "What have you done for me lately?"

Unlike the Scapegoat, guilt is not the chief motivator here, however. Rather, the Rescuer needs to be needed. The Rescuer not only depends on her role to give her a sense of self, but she also depends on it to bridge the gap between self and others. In other words she needs the Rescuer role just as much, probably more, than the rescued needs rescuing. In fact, the Rescuer tends to feel as if her self-esteem has taken a big hit when there is a lag-time between rescues. Though on the one hand she might be relieved that she's not having to take care of every little thing for the rescued during that lag-time; on the other hand, she's wondering what she's doing here if it isn't to rescue someone else. There's a deep unsettling underground tremor that tells her that something is really wrong with this picture. So, without really paying much attention to it, she launches herself into another search for the next victim in need of rescue.

The best way to avoid these down turns in mood and this loss of mission is to marry or commit to someone who needs rescuing. That way the Rescuer always feels needed, even essential to his partner. There is always something that is needed, something that needs doing, some sympathy to feel, some hurdle to jump, some mission to accomplish--and it's all done with the greatest of noble thoughts--for, indeed, it does appear to the Rescuer to be a noble cause. He just can't imagine that what he is doing is not absolutely essential to the well-being, if not the survival of his partner.

Of course, it is easy to see how the Rescuer can become the primary enabler for an addict or alcoholic, but she can also become the primary enablers for the Big Baby, the Victim or the Runaway. Enabling is what the Rescuer does. The definition of enabling here is the unconscious encouragement of another's dis-ability. Not another's disability, but another's dis-ability. In other words, whatever it is that the other person is refusing to do for him or herself, that's exactly what the Rescuer will do. This encourages the other person to continue to refuse to do it for him or herself.

Typically, the first question the Rescuer will ask when this information is given to him is: "Well, how do you know they are refusing to do it; how do you know that they simply can't do it?" The answer? Stop doing it for her and watch what happens. Typically, he already knows what happens because he's seen it several times by now: "She pitches a holy fit!" Or, "She gets really pitiful." Or, she ups the ante by getting sicker or more needy in some way--even sometimes going as far as to threaten or even attempt suicide. It is interesting that the poor Victim, now turned Bully, can put all of this enormous energy into pitching a fit, getting pitiful or upping the ante, but can't find one ounce of energy to save herself.

The Rescuer became the Rescuer early in life when powerlessness was still a big issue. But this child is assigned the role that carries with it the awesome and heady power of rescuing mother or father, sister or

brother, or the whole family. There's a giant "I can't" hanging around in the air in this family. The child believes that "I can't" and assumes the "I can" as if it were the Superhero's cape and costume. Over time and the building of rescuing skills, this becomes the only method by which the child can feel connected to otherwise self-absorbed or self-involved parents, whose needs seem to outweigh those of the child. The child learns to meet her own needs vicariously through meeting those of other people. She learns that the only legitimate way to connect to others is to rescue them. Ergo, when she goes looking for friends and lovers, later in life, she'll only seek out those who need rescuing--for this sense that they need her is the only thing she has ever known of giving and receiving love. And those who assume an identity of needing rescue, for whatever reason, are attracted to her like a bee to pollen.

But when the Rescuer finally arrives in a therapist's office, it's usually because the voice of the Authentic Self has begun to be heard. And it is heard through the powerful urges, repressed by now for many years, of his own needs--his needs for love, support, affection, and a strong sense of self that is not dependent on fixing the lives of other people. He's built up years of resentment and absolute frustration that he can't seem to fix the person he's trying desperately to fix. And usually his first question in therapy is "What's wrong with me?" because he feels that his resentment and anger are telling him he's really a bad person, since his sense of self has been built on rescuing others. Generally, he is experiencing a concomitant and equally strong, seductive urge to keep on doing what he's always done. This internal conflict is creating stress and/or some physical maladies, by the time he finally arrives at therapy's door.

Andrea Mathews LPC, NCC

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