



KARYN SHANKS MD  
*Heart, Hope, Healing*

# When Help Hurts

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | OCTOBER 5, 2019



I struck a resonant chord with my discussion about asking for [help](#) last week. Thank you so much for speaking up about your troubles and insights—you can be sure there are a whole bunch of others feeling exactly the same way but choose to stay quiet. We have so much to learn from one another!

## **What did I learn from you?**

There's a whole other angle to the help story that often gets us stuck.

That's right—sometimes help hurts.

On the one hand, help is good and beautiful and love-in-action, as we discussed last week.

**But how many of us give and give and give until there's no time, attention, or energy left for ourselves and our own needs and priorities?**

Like one of my readers noted:

*"I feel like all I do is help. There's no time left for me."*

You nailed it, sister.

Oprah famously calls this *"the disease to please."*

### **But I think it's more nuanced and complicated than that.**

For most of us, over-helping and over-pleasing is motivated by simultaneous conflicting impulses.

Our big loving kind hearts truly want to help. While our survival-oriented brains need to belong, need to please, need to feel acceptable.

*To our detriment.* Yikes. How do we get ourselves out of *that* mess?

### **Like the Power of Water**

I love the water metaphor expressed by another of my readers:

*"I am usually very much like water and will help others which is fine except I may benefit from saying no."*

It makes me think of the flowing nature of love and the beautiful ways we let our love surround, support, and nourish those who need it.

But water, like love, is a powerful force. Too little is depleting. Just enough is nourishing. Too much destroys.

Nature is all about balance and dynamic equilibrium. Balance *will* be achieved. The deluge of a storm that destroys everything in its path, uprooting trees and flooding the landscape, will eventually settle into a new normal.

The animals will return, and new growth will emerge, but only *after* the devastation has occurred.

### **Balance is Within Our Control**

The good news for us, as distinct from the rest of nature, is that balance is within our control.

We don't have to wait for the raging waters to destroy everything in our path before we do something about it.

We don't have to accept the status quo just because we've gotten stuck in over-pleasing and over-helping.

We have the power and the tools to stop the problem.

## How Do We Create a New Balance?

- First, if you perceive that the time, attention, and energy you devote to others is pulling you away from yourself and taking a toll, acknowledge it, like my readers did. Powerful first step. *Name the problem.*
- Next, affirm the importance of directing your time, attention, and energy to yourself. If you're on a lifepath as a helper or healer, this is especially important—and challenging!

### ***Know that your suffering and energy depletion helps no one.***

- Then ask yourself:

Having identified the problem and affirmed a better path, why don't I take it? Why don't I take that better path on behalf of myself? Why don't I say "no" or direct more of my precious time, attention, and energy to myself and my own important needs?

### **Consider the Possibilities**

Old habits die hard.

How true is that? If this is you, you've got it easy. Simply choose your new strategy, affirm it, write it down or say it out loud, practice it ("no," perhaps? Or, "no!!") and get to work! In 30-days you'll be well set on your new path.

### ***You didn't recognize the problem.***

Yes, this happens! We become so well practiced in our business-as-usual behavior we don't even see the problem. Some of us don't recognize how the excessive time, attention, and energy focused on others depletes us. Presto-chango! Problem solved.

### ***There's a tenacious story standing in your way.***

You probably know what it is, yes? If not, consider these possibilities:

*My self-worth is defined by how much I help and give to others.*

*I don't know how to say "no," though I really, really want to.*

*Others will judge me if I say "no."*

*If I say "no" I am a bad person.*

*When I do things to please others, they like me more.*

*If I don't help them, no one will.*

Do any of those sound familiar to you? Do you feel some emotion when you read them? A bit

miffed at me, perhaps, for the suggestion?

***There may be a tenacious story standing in your way to saying “yes” to yourself (which may require saying “no” to someone else!)***

### **Our Stories are Built on Assumptions**

The stories that drive our behavior (behavior we’d like to change!) are *always* built on assumptions we’ve made about how others will respond to our choices, or what’s required of us to belong to the tribe.

Know that your assumptions are not the facts, at least not *all* the facts. However powerful, your stories and the assumptions that support them are not “the truth.” (And, yah, we all do this—it’s what our brains are good at!)

### **Holy Crap. What Do I Do Now?**

Reimagine your story.

Write your *own* story that allows you to love and help others but keeps you in the priority position in your life.

Be brave and test drive that new story in the face of potential criticism and scrutiny. (Like maybe say “no” when you need to tend to yourself first.)

Look around you as you live that new story and see the awe and respect of others who learn from you. Who get to share your new truth and light. Who you’ve helped by helping yourself.

Oh, my goodness, see how that works?

Have a Beautiful day!

Karyn

p.s. I’m obsessed with the discussion of stories and how they help or hinder our healing. I love how our story minds are our point of powerful control over our lives. For a much deeper dive into how to work with stories for healing, please have a look at my series of articles, [Empower Your Healing Story](#). And let’s talk!

p.p.s. My new book, ***HEAL: A Nine-Stage Roadmap to Recover Energy, Reverse Chronic Illness, and Claim the Potential of a Vibrant New You***, is just weeks away from its launch into the world. Thank you to my early readers and reviewers—more details coming soon!

### **From my Archives:**

[Why’s It So Hard to Ask for Help?](#) 2019.

## **KARYN SHANKS MD**

Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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