

# Emotional Vampires: When Caring Becomes Carrying

Drawing boundaries and protecting your energy does not make you selfish. It's hard because it feels so ingrained to think of others before ourselves and to worry about looking selfish. But the truth is, we also can't give from an empty cup.

Hi, and welcome to *Keep Me Seen*. I'm Aileen. And I'm Julie. We're two friends navigating life's ups and downs together from opposite sides of the world.

Hi, Julie, how are you?

I'm good. How are you?

I'm good, thank you very much.

Excellent.

So today we were discussing this chat we had with a friend recently. They said they love being the person that people can open up to, which is what we love as well—the listener, the helper. But this person started noticing something. Remember that chat?

That friend said that every time one person messages them, it starts the same way: "Well, hey, how are you?" And before they get a chance to answer properly, they're hit with a wave of "this happened, and then that will happen, and then you never believe what..." They don't even get to say who they are. It's not a conversation, is it? It's a monologue. You're sitting there hosting a monologue.

This friend had been getting it a lot with a few people, and it wasn't just people in need—it was just people who do this all the time. I think that's a different dynamic. You and I send each other long voice notes all the time, and yes, they're monologues, but it's completely different. We always come back with reflection or encouragement. It never feels draining. But this is different. When someone keeps unloading without pause, we've both experienced it over the years. Then you start realizing they're not actually interested in how you are—they just want somewhere to deposit their emotions. It's not an exchange.

Of course, when a friend is really going through something—a breakup or a personal crisis—they need to offload, and that's always one way. We've been there, and that's different because you've got the background of a balanced relationship. But when someone is constantly having a monologue at you, it becomes really uncomfortable, because you care and want to be kind. You love helping people and giving advice, but with these kinds of people, it's always a one-way energy exchange. At some point, you have to ask when helping them becomes unhealthy for you and when you stop being a friend and start being a dumping ground. It's important to notice, not just for you, but also for them, because being stuck in that loop prevents them from growing or moving on from their issues.

That's what we're exploring today: the space between empathy and exhaustion, between being kind and being consumed. Or, as some people say, when a friend becomes an emotional vampire. I love that expression. It feels awful, because it is a real sucking of energy. But we also need to talk about the guilt that comes when you start to pull back, and

how this dynamic doesn't just show up in friendships—it happens in partnerships and family life too.

In many relationships, one person ends up doing most of the emotional labor—the listening, the checking in, the soothing—while the other gets recognized for visible contributions like earning money or ticking boxes. When you finally stop being that emotional crutch, you quickly see who actually comes to check in on you. Some people drop off. That can be hard to see, because how do you put a value on emotional support, on being that safe space, the steady one, the person who holds everything together? It matters so much, but it's often just expected. You can't measure it easily, but it matters as much as, if not more than, the visible contributions someone makes.

Many of us, especially women, are taught that being there for others is what makes us good. It's a narrative we've grown up with, so when we stop being there, it can feel like a self-worth issue. You feel selfish and unkind, even if maintaining your boundaries is necessary. For some, being that person heals an old wound—if you weren't seen or heard as a child, you grew up wanting to give others what you never received. It's nurturing, empathetic, caring—but if it becomes your main source of worth, it can turn into a trap.

I've had to confront this over the past few years, dealing with perimenopause and thyroid issues. Fatigue forced me to conserve energy, which at first hit my sense of worth badly. I felt guilty for not giving as much time. Now, I'm much more comfortable with my limits. When I see someone start a rant in my inbox without even a simple "hi, how are you?" I just freeze. And if I reply with some reality, some people choose not to respond anyway. So I've had to pull back to preserve my energy and self-worth, though some guilt lingers.

Guilt is a big thing because being there for someone is something we often think makes us valuable. When you don't, you feel like you're failing. Especially in midlife, your value can feel tied to how much you can absorb—partner's stress, kids' worries, friends' dramas, work colleagues. You do become the emotional caretaker for many people's storms. We love helping, but as it piles up, it becomes noticeable, and when the exchange is one-way, it becomes harder to carry.

And the irony is, no one sees that work. There's no pay, no thank you card. Not that we do it for that, but you feel the weight of it. Emotional support can go unnoticed, and if you've allowed it, it may be tied to your own sense of worth. You put yourself in that role out of love and care, not martyrdom. But when you pull back, some people go quieter, and you realize the imbalance. Life stage makes it necessary to draw boundaries because your capacity is limited. People who drop away show that it's a one-way exchange. It becomes a self-worth issue because in order to redress the balance, you have to disappoint people or not give them as much as they expect. That's tough when your value lies in doing things for people and being accepted.

Invisible labor is another key aspect—when one person brings in the income and another carries the emotional load, it can feel imbalanced. Breadwinners often receive praise, but the emotional backbone goes unnoticed. The one earning may have support systems, while the other sacrifices their career to keep the family functioning. Juggling children, supporting a partner, and work is enormous. Our friend, feeling drained by people who constantly expect

support, has reduced capacity because of family and work demands. That imbalance is more obvious in midlife.

It's important to acknowledge the invisible emotional load—the reminders, the listening, the regulation, the empathy—and to check in with your own capacity. Otherwise, the well can run dry, and you may need to redress balances. When relationships stop feeling mutual, leaving you depleted or anxious, that's a red flag. Constantly giving while the other takes creates a vicious cycle. Romantic relationships are even trickier; one partner may become an emotional sponge while the other remains oblivious, eventually breeding resentment.

Self-worth is central. When you genuinely value yourself, you stop believing it's your job to manage everyone else's emotions. You can care deeply without carrying all the burden. But it takes strong self-worth to speak up, because it feels difficult. You may feel like you're letting someone down or being selfish, but boundaries don't make you cold or heartless—they make you conscious and self-aware.

Hi, just a quick note before we get back to the episode. If you've been enjoying *Keep Me Seen*, you might love our *Sanity Check*, short weekly episodes where we share what's really on our minds. They've been part of the podcast since the beginning—little check-ins about what's weighing on us, what we're learning, and how we're holding it all together. Honestly, they've become some of your favourites and ours too.

And now they're exclusively on Patreon, where we can go a bit deeper, more candid, more unfiltered and a little more connected. You can join us there for the price of a coffee a month. It's a lovely way to support the show and keep these conversations going. Just search *Keep Me Sane* on Patreon or head to the link in our show notes. We'd love to see you there.

You can love someone and still say, this is too much for me right now, although I'm not sure I'd ever use those words. But I have had to tell someone that I couldn't communicate as much because I had so much going on in my daily life. To be fair, they were accepting of my decision. They took that boundary. It was a hard thing to do, but it was authentic to me in that moment.

It's hard, especially if you've always been the strong one. But it really is a sign of self-respect, not selfishness. And it's interesting to see how people respond when you've always been the one who listens. When you pull back, it's interesting to see who checks in on you after that.

It is interesting to see who checks in on who. Because if you've been the strong one or the one that's always been there, you often attach your value and worth to that role. It's very hard to step away from it and say, actually, I can't be the strong one right now or the one who helps. But it's important to acknowledge that and to step up and set that boundary for yourself.

You can still love someone and be there for them, but you sometimes need to draw a line. Often the bravest thing you can do is step back from a dynamic like that, even if it means disappointing someone. Protecting your energy is protecting your peace, and that's what allows you to be fully yourself. Even your giving, loving self can't really show up if you're resentful or drained.

So you need boundaries, and you shouldn't feel bad about it—although we always do. That's the ridiculous thing. You feel bad. It's crazy, but it's one of the biggest lessons to learn. Drawing boundaries and protecting your energy does not make you selfish. It's hard because it feels so ingrained to think of others before ourselves and to worry about looking selfish. But the truth is, we can't give from an empty cup. We need balance. It's far from selfish to protect our energy when we need to—it just feels deeply uncomfortable to do so.

I feel like we're getting better at it over the years. Especially over the last decade, we've definitely improved. It's necessary, even though it still feels uncomfortable, particularly if you tied your worth to being the fixer for a long time. For some of us, that started very young—fixing things between parents or siblings, carrying responsibility far too early. Big childhood wounds sit underneath that.

This stage of life doesn't leave much capacity. There isn't the energy to be there for everyone anymore. Being an exhausted single parent, running a business, managing constant demands—it all takes time and energy. And it's not right to be constantly available if some people are taking too much for too long.

If you're listening and realising this might be happening in your life, start by observing without judgement. Ask yourself how you feel after talking to this person. Do you feel lighter or heavier? Drained or uplifted? Be really honest with yourself.

Check whether there's balance and reciprocity. Are you always the listener? Notice your energy. You might need to draw some boundaries, and it doesn't have to be dramatic. Sometimes it's just a gentle reset. You can still say you want to support someone, but that you don't always have the emotional energy to take everything on. Sometimes it's simply about responding when you have capacity, not out of obligation.

With so much immediate access to people these days, we feel compelled to respond straight away. Messages appear on our phones and we assume we should answer instantly. But we're also receiving dozens of messages a day. We can't be available all the time. It's not good for our nervous systems.

This constant availability is something we need to address across the board, not just with draining relationships. A generation or two ago, you might get one phone call a day, maybe a visitor. Now it's relentless. Dozens of messages with varying demands from friends and family. It's a lot, and it's worth unpacking further.

There used to be no expectation of instant replies. You might respond days later and it was normal. Now even children expect immediate responses. It's a completely different world, and it's one that demands stronger boundaries than ever before.

Boundaries don't have to be confrontational. They can be quiet adjustments that protect your wellbeing. Even letting a day pass before replying to a message is absolutely fine. And if guilt creeps in, remember that guilt often shows up when you start choosing yourself. It's a sign of growth, not wrongdoing.

You don't owe anyone constant access to your energy, especially if they don't respect how much you're already holding. Empathy without boundaries can lead to burnout. And when

guilt shows up as you step back, remember that it's not proof you're wrong—it's proof you're doing something new.

If someone in your life constantly offloads but rarely checks in with you, let this be your reminder to protect your energy. Your worth isn't measured by how much you hold for others. It's also about how gently you hold yourself.

We'd love to hear your thoughts. Share your story with us on Instagram or leave us a voice note. And if you know a friend who's always the strong one, send this episode to them. Sometimes the kindest thing you can do for others is stop rescuing them. And the kindest thing you can do for yourself is remember that your peace has value.

If you enjoy these conversations, you can join us on Patreon for our sanity checks—short, honest mini episodes where we share what's really on our minds. It's the price of a coffee a month and helps keep the podcast going.

Thanks so much for joining us. We hope you're feeling more understood, a little less alone, or that something we've discussed resonated with you. If you'd like to share, you can email us or message us on social media.

Please remember we're just two friends sharing personal experiences and everyday conversations. We're not therapists or coaches, and this content is for general support only. If you need professional help, we encourage you to seek support from a licensed therapist.

We acknowledge the Boon People of the Kulin Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which part of this episode was recorded, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present.