

Worth Beyond Usefulness

A companion guide for when helping feels like the price of having value

THE CONDITIONAL-WORTH LOOP



The aim is not to stop caring. It is to notice the loop early enough to choose rather than prove your right to belong.

A word about the title

This guide does not claim there is a score or a "true value metric" that can finally prove your worth. It is about noticing the old metric — "I matter when I am useful" — and building a kinder, freer relationship with yourself and other people.

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Welcome

This is an addendum to *From Feeling to Need*. It begins where that guide sometimes arrives: beneath a feeling is not only a need, but a question about whether you are allowed to have one.

Some people have learned, often without anyone ever saying it plainly, that their place in relationship depends on what they provide. They help, soothe, fix, anticipate, achieve, make themselves easy to be around, or put their own needs last. The care may be real and beautiful. The cost comes when care is the only way they know to feel legitimate.

This is not selfishness

Wanting care, rest, attention, boundaries or support is not a failure to be generous.

This is not a character flaw

The pattern can be an understandable way of protecting belonging, safety or attachment.

This is not about stopping care

The aim is care with choice, limits and reciprocity — rather than care compelled by fear.

This is practice, not persuasion

A person may understand these ideas long before they can feel them. Small lived experiences matter.

How it links with From Feeling to Need

When the old rule is activated, the person may feel shame, anxiety, guilt, emptiness, resentment or urgency. The feelings-and-needs process helps them name that experience, ground, listen for what matters, and make a request. This guide adds a question: "Do I believe I am only allowed to need this if I have first earned it?"

The Pattern — When Worth Becomes Conditional

Psychology describes contingent self-worth as a pattern in which the sense of worth rises and falls with success in a valued domain — here, being needed, approved of, or useful.

CARE FREELY GIVEN — OR CARE USED TO EARN A PLACE?

CARE AS A VALUE

I choose to help because it matters to me. I can also rest, receive, say no, and remain connected.

CARE AS A CONDITION

I feel I must help to be acceptable. Rest, need, refusal or limitation can trigger shame or fear.

Most people move between these. The question is not "Am I selfish?" but "Do I still have choice, a self, and room to receive?"

THE DISTINCTION MATTERS

Helping itself is not the problem. It can express love, responsibility, community and purpose. The warning sign is loss of choice: "If I do not do this, I am bad, selfish, unlovable, or of no use." That rule turns a value into a condition for belonging.

A useful reframe

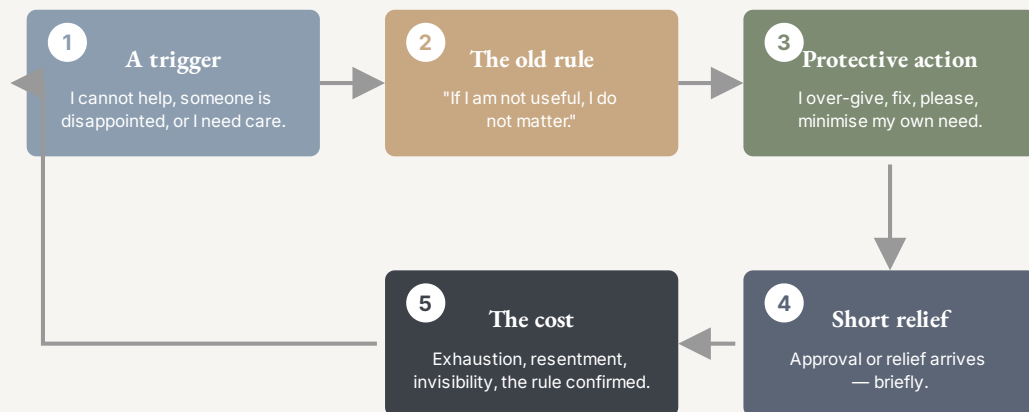
"I can value contribution without using contribution as the evidence that I deserve care."

STEP 1

Recognise Your Current Worth-Metric

The first task is not to replace the rule. It is to see exactly when it is running.

THE CONDITIONAL-WORTH LOOP



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COMMON SIGNS

- You feel uneasy, guilty or empty when resting, ill, unemployed, dependent, or unable to fix something.
- You offer help before checking whether it is wanted, sustainable or yours to carry.
- A "thank you" gives relief, but it fades quickly; praise may feel hard to believe unless it follows achievement.
- You struggle to let people help you without immediately repaying them.
- You feel resentful after saying yes, while still finding no difficult to say.

Notice without accusation

Try: "A part of me learned that usefulness keeps me safe or connected." This honours the strategy before asking it to change.

Find the Rule Beneath the Helping

A rule usually has an if-then shape. Putting it into words makes it easier to test.

Situation	The old rule might say...	A more spacious response
I cannot help someone.	"I am letting them down; I am not enough."	"I can care about them and still have a limit. My limit does not erase the relationship."
I need support.	"I am a burden."	"Need is part of being human. Reciprocity gives relationships room to breathe."
I receive praise.	"They are only being kind."	"I do not have to be certain for me to let this land a little."
Someone is disappointed.	"I have failed; they will leave."	"Their feeling is real. It is not a verdict on my right to belong."
I rest or do nothing.	"I am wasting my life."	"Rest is not a gap in my value. It is part of caring for a living body."

QUESTIONS FOR GENTLE EXPLORATION

- "What does helping allow me to feel about myself — safe, wanted, necessary, good, less alone?"
- "What feels dangerous about being ordinary, needy, resting, or not needed?"
- "Whose voice, expectation or atmosphere does this rule resemble?"
- "What does the rule try to protect me from?"

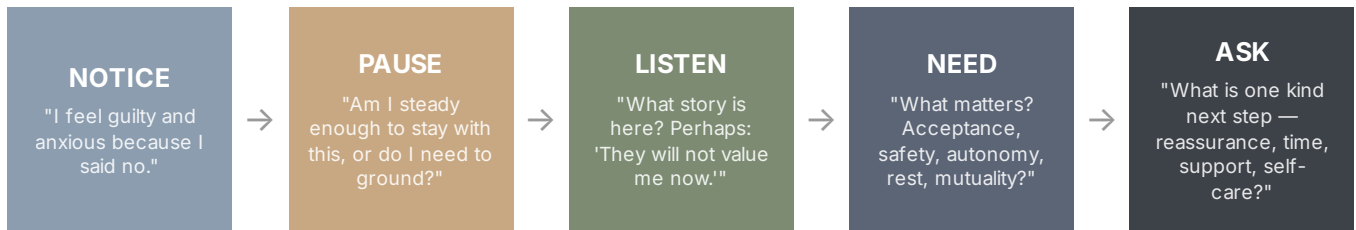
No single origin is required

Patterns can grow through family roles, relationships, culture, faith, work, trauma, illness, or repeated experiences of being valued for performance. You do not need to find one perfect explanation to begin practising something different.

STEP 3

Use Feelings as the Doorway

The feelings-and-needs guide becomes especially useful at the precise moment the worth-rule is triggered.



A short practice

"I notice the urge to be useful. I can feel the fear underneath it. This feeling may be asking for connection or safety; it does not prove that I have no value. What does this part of me need right now? What is one response that includes me as well as the other person?"

Guilt is not always a command

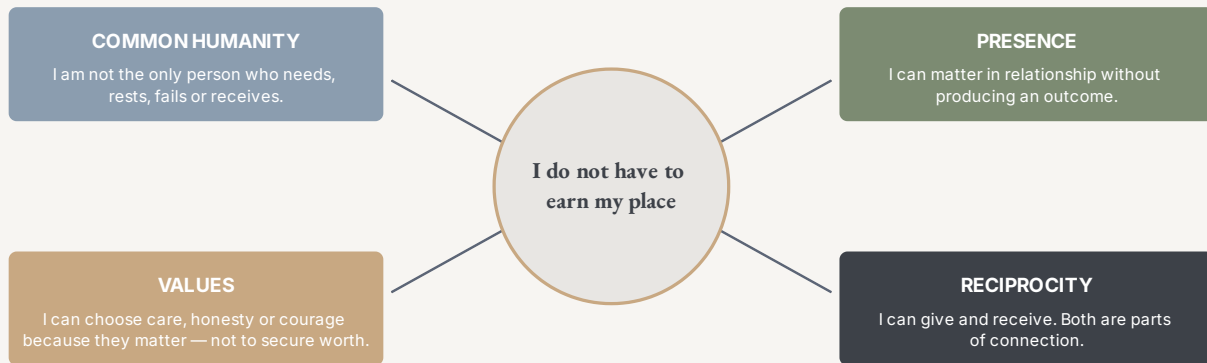
Guilt may point to a value or possible repair. It can also appear when you are breaking an old rule. Ask: "Have I harmed someone — or am I simply not meeting an expectation that costs me too much?"

STEP 4

Broaden What "Mattering" Can Mean

Rather than trying to create a new score for worth, practise noticing forms of value that are not dependent on output.

WIDENING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH WORTH



FOUR DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Direction	A question to try
Common humanity	"If need, rest and limitation are part of being human, why would I have to earn exemption from them?"
Presence	"What might another person receive from simply being with me: attention, humour, honesty, warmth, shared history?"
Values	"What kind of person do I want to be when I am free to choose — not when I am trying to secure approval?"
Reciprocity	"Can giving and receiving both be ways of participating in relationship?"

From metric to stance

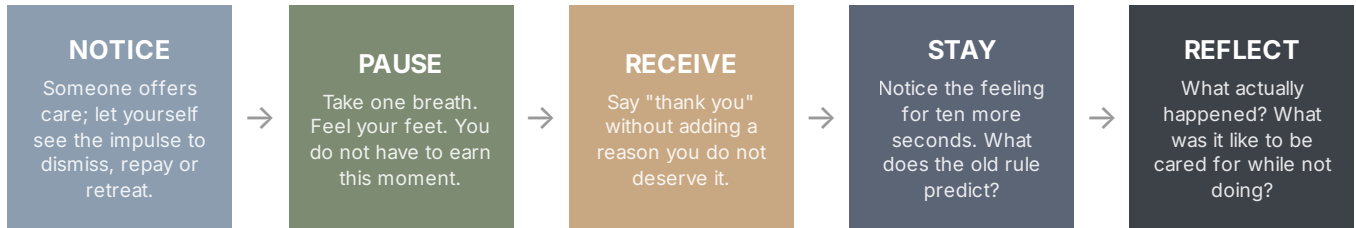
A metric asks, "Have I done enough to count?" A compassionate stance asks, "What does this human being need, and how can I respond wisely?" Apply the same question to yourself.

STEP 5

Practise Receiving Without Repayment

For someone used to earning their place, receiving can feel exposing. Work in small, chosen steps.

PRACTISE RECEIVING IN SMALL, SAFE DOSES



EXPERIMENTS TO CHOOSE FROM

- Accept a small compliment with "thank you", and do not immediately minimise or return one.
- Let someone make you a drink, carry something, or choose the plan — without rushing to balance the ledger.
- Ask for a small, specific form of support from someone safe.
- Spend ten minutes with someone without organising, advising or solving.
- Rest for a short, agreed period and record what the old rule predicts versus what actually happens.

▲ Consent and safety matter

Do not use receiving experiments with unsafe, coercive or unreliable people. Choose relationships where small requests and boundaries can be practised with care.

Step 6 — Make Care a Choice Again

The goal is not self-sufficiency. It is a more mutual relationship in which helping is one expression of love, not the price of connection.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Pause before yes
"Do I have capacity? Is this mine to solve? Has help actually been requested?" | 2 Name your limit
"I care about this, and I cannot do that today." |
| 3 Offer what is true
"I can listen for ten minutes, but I cannot take this on." | 4 Let disappointment exist
Another person can have a feeling without you having to remove it. |
| 5 Ask for mutuality
"I would like us to find a way of sharing this." | 6 Repair where needed
A limit may need care and explanation; it does not need self-erasure. |

A distinction to carry

"I can be kind without becoming responsible for everything. I can have a need without becoming a burden."

Practice Page — When the Old Rule Appears

Use this after a moment of urgency to help, shame about needing, or difficulty receiving.

What happened? What was the simple, observable situation?

What did I feel in my body and emotions?

What did the old rule say I had to do to be okay?

What did it predict would happen if I did not do it?

What need or value is genuinely present — for me and perhaps for the other person?

What facts support or complicate the old rule?

What is one small response that includes me as well as the other person?

What happened when I tried it? What would I bring to counselling?

A Week of Practice — Small Repetitions, Not a Test

Choose one practice only. Repetition makes it more believable to the nervous system than argument alone.

Day	A small experiment	What to notice
Day 1	Catch one "I should help" moment before acting.	The body sensation; the old rule; whether help was requested.
Day 2	Receive one small kindness with a plain "thank you".	The urge to minimise, repay or move away.
Day 3	Name one need privately, without immediately solving it.	Whether naming the need changes the intensity even slightly.
Day 4	Set one low-stakes limit.	Your prediction, the other person's actual response, and how you cared for yourself.
Day 5	Spend ten minutes in a relationship without performing a useful role.	What presence feels like when there is no task.
Day 6	Write three ways you mattered that did not depend on output.	Presence, honesty, shared experience, receiving, or being known.
Day 7	Review with compassion.	What was hard? What was one piece of evidence the old rule is not the whole truth?

A realistic measure of progress

Progress may first look like noticing the rule after you have over-given. Later, you notice it before. Eventually, a pause becomes possible. That is meaningful change.

Quick Reference — Five Questions for a Moment of Self-Erasure

Keep this close when the urge to fix, please or prove becomes strong.

1. WHAT IS HERE?	What am I feeling right now: guilt, fear, shame, urgency, resentment, sadness?
2. WHAT IS THE RULE?	What am I telling myself I must do in order to matter?
3. WHAT DOES IT PROTECT?	What belonging, safety, approval or identity is the rule trying to secure?
4. WHAT DO I NEED?	What would include my safety, autonomy, rest, connection or care as well?
5. WHAT IS ONE KIND STEP?	A pause, a limit, a request, accepting help, or bringing it to session.

Remember

Helping can be a value. It does not have to be the price of your place in the world.

Evidence & Notes — What Informed This Companion Guide

The language is deliberately practical and non-diagnostic. It supports counselling; it does not replace individual formulation or clinical judgement.

KEY LEARNING FROM THE RESEARCH

- Contingent self-worth describes basing one's overall worth on success, approval or fulfilment in a particular domain. In close relationships, it can make affirmation harder to receive and trust.
- Research distinguishes ordinary connection and care from "unmitigated communion": involvement with others to the exclusion of the self. The latter is associated with psychological distress; the guide therefore protects care while making room for limits and self-inclusion.
- Self-compassion and self-esteem are related but distinct. Compassion-based approaches show promising effects on self-criticism, self-reassurance and self-esteem, though research quality and intervention types vary.
- The guide uses autonomy, competence and relatedness as evidence-based psychological needs, while keeping the wider language of safety, care, meaning and repair as practical reflection prompts.

IMPORTANT LIMITS

- Helping, responsibility and care can be rooted in culture, community, faith, identity and real circumstances; they should not be pathologised.
- This pattern does not prove a particular childhood history or attachment style. Explore origins tentatively and collaboratively.
- If reducing helping places a person at risk, threatens housing, safety, dependent care, or a coercive relationship, practical safety planning comes first.

Sources — Further Reading

Selected research and professional sources used to shape the addendum.

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- Lemay, E. P. & Clark, M. S. (2008). "You're Just Saying That." Contingencies of Self-Worth, Suspicion, and Authenticity in the Interpersonal Affirmation Process. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44(5), 1376–1382.
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- Thomason, S. & Moghaddam, N. (2021). Compassion-focused therapies for self-esteem: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 94(3), 737–759.
- Muris, P. & Otgaar, H. (2023). Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion: A Narrative Review and Meta-Analysis on Their Links to Psychological Problems and Well-Being. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*.
- Self-Determination Theory. Basic Psychological Needs. selfdeterminationtheory.org

Using this alongside From Feeling to Need

When you notice a feeling, let this guide help you ask whether the deeper need has become entangled with permission to exist, rest or receive. Bring the answer — especially the uncertain parts — to counselling.