Co-regulation · About 4 minutes

When Helping Starts to Feel Urgent

Keeping care available without taking over the decision

Noor says, “Wait.” Callum’s hands are still on the keyboard. He's halfway into helping and hasn't heard what she wants.

This fictional scene began as help. Volunteers have cancelled from a neighborhood food collection, and Callum knows how to reorganize the rota. Noor, who coordinates the collection, needs a moment to decide what can be reduced. He tells her he can fix the schedule faster.

He may be right about his speed. Continuing would still take the decision away from her.

The point at which help becomes unwanted can be small and easy to defend. You were already doing it. It will only take a minute. You know this system better. Each explanation may contain truth while missing the information the other person has just supplied: this is not what they want you to do.

Let the correction affect your hands

For Callum, the next useful action may be taking his hands off the keyboard. He can then ask whether Noor wants him to telephone a volunteer, help reduce the collection area or leave the planning with her.

Her correction need not mean that all his care is unwelcome. She may value his skills and want a different arrangement for using them. He may also need to tolerate the embarrassment of having got the first offer wrong.

Tatkin’s PACT approach emphasizes mutual regulation, cooperation and repair through what people actually do under stress.[1] In this everyday situation, a changed action communicates more than an explanation of why the takeover was kindly meant.

That does not require Callum to agree with every accusation. If Noor says he wants to control everything, he can disagree with that description while acknowledging the specific conduct: he continued after she asked him to stop. A global verdict on his personality would make the repair harder to locate.

Urgency can narrow our attention

Watching somebody struggle can be uncomfortable. You may feel helpless or responsible, or simply see a solution that seems obvious. The feeling does not have to be diagnosed before you check the effect of your help.

Ask yourself: can this person’s answer still change what I do? If you have already decided that a refusal is foolish or ungrateful, their place in the decision may be shrinking.

There are genuine emergencies. Food may need refrigeration; an agreed delivery may be due. An immediate practical duty should be named and addressed. It should not become permission to take over every other decision in the situation.

Noor may remain irritated after Callum stops. She may prefer to finish alone. A correction in his behavior is worthwhile even if she does not immediately reward it with warmth. If he needs encouragement, he can seek it without requiring her to reassure him before he respects her request.

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Callum can feel that moment in his hands, before anything gets sent.

He can lift his hands off the keys. There is a moment here to find out what Noor was hoping he would hear.

Companion reading · You Can Help Me Without Taking Charge of Me

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Co-regulation (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Tatkin, S. (2026, January 29). Different doors, same aim: How PACT integrates with other couple therapy models. The PACT Institute. Source.

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