Caring Without Losing Yourself · About 4 minutes

When the Chore Is Done but the Job Stays With You

Sharing care includes noticing, deciding and following through.

The filter is replaced. Who remembers what size it was, which cupboard the spare is in, and when the next one is due?

The person who installs the cartridge may have completed a useful task while someone else remains responsible for the whole job. That difference can explain why “But I did what you asked” leaves both people frustrated.

Daminger describes cognitive household labor in terms of anticipating needs, identifying options, deciding and monitoring.[1] The description helps make visible work that often disappears from conversations about who does what. Remembering to ask is work too.

A handover with different meanings

Sal and Niko are fictional housemates. Sal has been keeping their drinking-water filter supplied and working. Niko agrees to take over changing it. When the replacement date comes, Niko asks Sal which cartridge to buy.

Sal feels the familiar irritation of still being in charge. Yet Niko may believe the agreement has been kept: changing the filter meant installing it, not researching and ordering the replacement. Before deciding that either person is avoiding responsibility, they need to find out what each understood.

They might agree that Niko will track the date, obtain the cartridge and fit it, with Sal sharing the necessary information once. Or Sal might prefer to retain ordering while Niko takes responsibility for another job. A fair arrangement need not divide every task into identical halves.

The handover should include what happens when the person responsible cannot follow through. Otherwise Sal may still be the unacknowledged backup, watching closely enough to prevent a failure while being told the job has moved.

Support belongs in the plan

Capacity matters. If memory is difficult, a useful reminder or agreed prompt may be part of Niko's contribution. If cost is the obstacle, a better calendar will not buy the cartridge. Disability, time and other commitments affect what each person can realistically take on.

Needing support does not make someone's participation meaningless. But the work of providing that support also needs to be recognized and agreed upon. “Just remind me” may be workable for both people, or it may leave exactly the burden they were trying to redistribute.

Essential care should not be withheld to prove a point. If the water needs attention, the immediate practical need comes first. The failure of an arrangement can then be discussed without making someone do without something necessary as a lesson.

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One useful question for Sal and Niko is: “What has moved, and what am I still carrying?” It can reveal an incomplete agreement. If an accepted responsibility is knowingly ignored, however, adding detail to a list may not address the real problem.

A new plan will need to meet ordinary life. Supplies run late. People get ill. The first attempt may reveal work neither person anticipated. They can use that information to revise the arrangement, rather than treating it as evidence that sharing responsibility is impossible.

A household filter makes the work of anticipating visible.

The next time the filter is due will tell them whether the work of remembering has moved too.

Companion reading · When Someone Else’s Pain Becomes Your Assignment

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Caring Without Losing Yourself (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Daminger, A. (2019). The cognitive dimension of household labor. American Sociological Review, 84(4), 609–633. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419859007 Source.

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