

## The Savior

I don't think I know of a single therapist who doesn't suffer from this face of the ego. I am sure most people in the helping professions have these qualities.

I spent my early twenties with a burning desire to help others. While this was a good motivation and propelled me to do many a kind thing, I went to the extreme. I didn't just want to help, I wanted to rescue. Not just rescue but cure. If I passed a bus stop in my car, I fought the urge to stop and offer someone a ride with little thought for my own plans. Or if someone was in financial duress, I wanted to step in and take care of all their woes for them.

I finally had to ask myself, Did they ask for help? The answer was no. My desire to excessively invade boundaries to help people hardly ever came from the other. It was something I made up in my head. This naturally led me to inquire, Where is this need to save coming from?

I soon came to see how this was a mask for something deeper. My "savior" had a darker side. Yes, it was loving and kind, but its extreme nature showed me that it was also fulfilling an inner longing. I had so much empathy and compassion for the pain of others that I wanted to ease their struggles. On the other hand, I was so uncomfortable with their tears that I was actually trying to save myself from the pain of seeing them suffer.

My longing was for many things:

My giving allowed me to feel significant and useful, valid, and worthy.

My giving allowed me to not confront my own pain about the other's pain.

My giving allowed me to ward off the discomfort of tolerating the unknown.

My giving allowed me to feel superior and competent, powerful, and in control.



My giving attracted broken people to me, allowing me to continue this cycle.

My giving allowed others to depend on me, which gave me a sense of power.

My giving allowed me to not learn to be a receiver.

My giving meant I could distract myself from my own self-care.

Those of us who are saviors deflect the loss of our authentic self by focusing on others. This allows us to maintain a persona of goodness, even superiority, which is our way of compensating for feeling inferior.

I still remember an early supervisory session when I was in my twenties. I was telling my supervisor how I went over time with my client by an entire hour because I was helping her with her broken car. This wasn't a one-off situation in which the client had unexpectedly found herself in an emergency. This was someone who repeatedly set herself up to be dependent on others. The problem she had with the car was one she had known she needed to fix.

When I told my supervisor that I offered to drive the client home, he nearly fell out of his chair. He looked at me with an odd mix of incredulity and pity. I knew then that I had done something drastically wrong. Whereas I thought I was being compassionate, he explained how I was operating out of a savior complex. I was fascinated. I had never heard of such a thing. He showed me how I had fused myself with my client and totally identified with her ongoing struggles as if they were my own. There were zero boundaries between her and myself. He then lovingly showed me how I was actually setting her up to be dependent on me, crippling her instead of empowering her.

This was my introduction to my savior complex. I thought this was it—I learned about it and now I could conquer it. Little did I realize that it would take decades to overcome and was actually part of a larger problem. As I continued my journey into wholeness, I began to realize how insidious this identification with the savior was and how I needed to detach from it. This is a hard thing



for us in the helping professions, as it is for most women, especially the more maternal and nurturing ones. One of the reasons we enter these spaces of healing and motherhood is that we have caring hearts and giving personalities. To put boundaries around these traits doesn't come naturally, but if we don't, our ego's defenses can grow so large that we imagine ourselves messiahs, here to heal others.

Many therapists have such delusions, as do many religious leaders who call themselves all sorts of labels, such as "guru" or a derivative of God such as "Reverend." Once I got in touch with my own savior complex and saw it for its hidden narcissism, I was appalled. Where had I developed this delusional idea that my influence over another was so great? How had I overestimated myself so egregiously?

I was able to let go of my savior complex once I understood how I was hurting my clients by taking away their own resourcefulness and the growing pains involved in their own development. I was robbing others of their own authentic struggles and snatching away their power to find solutions. Once I saw this clearly, I knew that I needed to immediately annihilate notions of saving anyone.

Ashley, my forty-seven-year-old client, was hell-bent on saving her children from feeling any strife or pain. She first came to me because both her children were violating her wishes in the home and wreaking havoc. Not only did they rarely help around the house, they used her credit card without permission. Ashley was at her wits' end when she came to see me. "I try so hard to do everything for them. I can't understand why they treat me so badly," she confided.

I asked her, "Why do you work so hard for them? What are you trying to achieve?"

"I just feel so bad for them," she replied. "Their father left us when they were young. Since then, I've carried the guilt of raising them without a male figure in their lives. Once I realized how traumatized they were when he abandoned them, I've tried hard to make it up to them, but nothing I do ever works."



I empathized with Ashley. She was coming from a loving place, as all of us are. I explained that her desire to over-give wasn't because this is what her children truly needed. The desire to over-give came from something deep within her, a guilt she experienced that was unbearable. Her regret and remorse at what her ex-husband had caused them to endure was something she couldn't let go of. As a way of compensating, she tried to save her children from their pain. Little did she realize that she was actually saving herself.

Now, after years of giving them everything they wished for, but setting none of the boundaries they needed, they were running amuck. I showed her how she had actually ended up doing them a disservice. She had made them believe that they lived in a world where their wishes would always be granted and they would always be saved by others. As a result, they treated her as the wish granter and their personal concierge. What mattered to her was irrelevant to them.

When I showed Ashley the pattern she had been living out, her jaw dropped. She was shocked at how she had been blinded by her own guilt, and how this had been the driver of her actions. With this realization, she immediately felt even more guilt! Her identity had been so wrapped up in her savior image that to learn she was self-centered came as a jolt.

Some facades of the ego go undetected because culture encourages them, especially in the case of women. We get stroked and endorsed for these facades. It's only when we begin to self-destruct that we are prepared to crawl out from under them. The ultimate reality is that we operate under these facades because we are afraid to show our true selves. We have learned over eons that these facades of the ego are the way to receive validation, which is why we continue to be enslaved.

The antidote to the savior complex is to learn to tolerate suffering, starting with our own. Most saviors create this persona as a way to avoid sitting with their pain. The idea that the other is in pain, particularly if caused by the savior, is so overwhelming that she seeks to eliminate it. She figures that if she rids the other of



their pain, they won't have to experience the feelings around it themselves. The savior feels a sense of competence by rushing to another's rescue. The "fixing" of another gives her focus and redirection. The only way out of this pattern is to realize that there is no one on the outside to save or fix. We cannot do this even for our children or our loved ones, which is a bitter pill to swallow. The only person we can do this for is ourselves.

When the savior realizes the other's pain is necessary, and even vital, for them to awaken to their own true self, she is able to turn to her own pain and the many ways she has avoided the discomfort it brings. She needs to go through a detox and resist the temptation to solve other people's problems.

Instead of turning toward others, she now begins to turn inward. She begins to ask, How can I heal myself from within? In doing so, she slowly begins to take care of her inner pain. She allows herself to cry where before she never did. She begins to tolerate her own pain better, and through this inches toward growth. As she sees the power in this and understands how this act of turning inward could have the same effect on another's life, she sees how her saviorship was preventing others from going within and addressing their own pain. Instead of rushing to save others from confronting their pain, she teaches them to invite it in with open arms.