

The Burden of Benevolence: Expectancy Traps, Pathological Altruism, and the Overthinker's Dilemma

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Abstract

This paper looks at why endlessly kind, highly agreeable people often end up exhausted, resentful, and unappreciated - a pattern we call the Overthinker's Dilemma. Using Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon), we show that people build expectations based on a person's past behavior. Someone known for being unhelpful is praised heavily for one small, good deed because it stands out against a low baseline - an example of the Contrast Effect. Someone known for being endlessly helpful, however, is judged harshly the one time they say no, because that single refusal breaks years of trust built on consistency. We then draw on Barbara Oakley's idea of pathological altruism to explain why over-accommodating people, here called "Hosts," keep saying yes even when it hurts them. We introduce the Cliff Metaphor: The Host imagines every request as someone hanging off a cliff, so refusing feels like letting them fall. But holding on without real strength drags out the pain for both sides. Using Aaron Beck's concept of catastrophizing, we show this fear is usually exaggerated - most askers stand safely on solid ground and can handle a "no." The paper ends with a clear message: a constantly agreeable "nice guy" acts out of fear, not true kindness, while a genuinely good person sets and defends boundaries even when it feels hard.

Keywords:

Expectancy Violations Theory; Pathological Altruism; Contrast Effect; Catastrophizing; Cognitive Distortion; Boundary-Setting; People-Pleasing

1. Introduction

Picture the moment: a phone buzzes at 9 p.m. with a request - could you cover this, look at this, take this on. The Host, already worn thin, feels the familiar tightening in the chest. There is no real deliberation. The answer is already "yes," and it was decided before the question was even fully read. This is not weakness. It is the predictable output of a psychological architecture that rewards a particular kind of person for disappearing into the needs of others, and quietly punishes them the one time they do not.

This paper exists to name that architecture honestly - first with empathy, and then with the kind of clarity that does not flatter. Chronic accommodation is not simply a personality trait or a deficiency of self-esteem. It is the predictable product of three interacting forces: an asymmetric social expectation system that punishes consistency and rewards inconsistency; an internal threat-perception system that treats ordinary requests as emergencies; and a cultural mythology that mistakes self-erasure for virtue.

The argument proceeds in four movements:

1. The Expectation Trap - why being known as kind is a social liability: consistency makes an occasional “no” feel like betrayal, while a habitually unhelpful person earns outsized credit for doing the bare minimum.
2. The Internal Psychology of the Host - why the highly accommodating individual keeps saying yes past the point of personal cost, driven by anxiety relief rather than genuine capacity.
3. The Reality Check - whether the Host’s threat perception is accurate, using cognitive distortion to show that much of what feels like a cliff is, in fact, solid ground.
4. The Paradigm Shift - a corrective quotation: the moment empathy gives way to accountability.

The first three sections of this paper are written in the reader’s defense. The fourth is written for their growth. Both are forms of respect.

2. Theoretical Framework

Four established frameworks anchor this analysis. They are summarized in Table 1 and discussed in turn below.

Table 1
Theoretical Frameworks Used in This Paper

Framework & Originator	Function Within This Paper
Expectancy Violations Theory - Judee Burgoon	Explains why a single refusal from a consistently helpful person registers as a severe negative violation, while the same refusal from an unhelpful person is barely noticed.
Contrast Effect - Sherif & Hovland	Explains why a small act of generosity from a habitually unhelpful person appears disproportionately impressive against their low baseline.
Pathological Altruism - Barbara Oakley	Explains why the Host keeps saying yes even when doing so causes clear, escalating harm to themselves and the relationship.
Catastrophizing - Aaron Beck	Explains why the Host treats ordinary, low-stakes requests with the same urgency and dread as a genuine emergency.

Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT), developed by Judee Burgoon, describes how people form expectations about others’ behavior based on social norms and on that individual’s own behavioral history. When someone acts in a way that departs from their established pattern, the violation is evaluated along a positive-to-negative continuum, and the magnitude of the reaction is calibrated against the prior baseline rather than against the act in isolation. The same behavior — a refusal, a missed favor - can therefore be read as neutral from one person and devastating from another, purely as a function of what each was previously expected to do.

The Contrast Effect, established by Sherif and Hovland, describes the tendency for a judgment to be shaped by the reference point most recently or persistently established rather than by absolute standards. An act of modest generosity appears generous or stingy depending entirely on what preceded it.

Barbara Oakley's concept of pathological altruism describes helping behavior that produces net harm - to the helper, the relationship, or even the person being helped — while still being subjectively experienced as virtuous. It is frequently a self-protective behavior, driven less by surplus compassion than by an urgent need to avoid the discomfort of refusal.

Aaron Beck's cognitive distortion of catastrophizing describes the automatic tendency to assume a feared outcome is both highly probable and unbearable, well beyond what the evidence supports. It is the cognitive engine that makes ordinary requests feel like emergencies.

These four frameworks form a single causal chain. EVT and the Contrast Effect explain the external trap. Pathological altruism explains the Host's behavioral response. Catastrophizing explains why that response persists even when it stops working.

3. The Asymmetry of Social Expectations (The Expectation Trap)

Every relationship operates on an implicit ledger of expectations, built not from any single interaction but from a pattern accumulated over time. That pattern becomes a baseline - an unspoken contract about what a person can reasonably be expected to do - and it is against this baseline that every future act is judged.

This creates a structural asymmetry that has little to do with how kind a person actually is, and everything to do with how kind they are known to be.

3.1 The Unaccommodator's Advantage

The Unaccommodator is someone whose baseline is low - known, gently or otherwise, for prioritizing themselves. Because so little is expected, the bar for praise sits correspondingly low. When they do one small generous thing, the act registers as a sharp departure from the established baseline. Per the Contrast Effect, it is perceived as disproportionately generous, and the social reward is outsized relative to the actual cost of the favor.

There is a second, quieter benefit: nobody pushes them. Because a "no" is already priced into the relationship, people calibrate their requests downward. The Unaccommodator is rarely tested, because they have already taught everyone around them not to expect much. Their boundaries are the most respected in the room - not because they fought for them, but because they were assumed from the start.

3.2 The Accommodator's Burden

The Accommodator - the Host - carries a baseline built from years of reliable yeses, and that height becomes a liability. Within an EVT framework, a high baseline means that even a single deviation registers as a strong negative violation. The Host's "no," when it finally arrives, is not read in proportion to its rarity. It is read as a betrayal of an implicit promise the Host never explicitly made but was nonetheless held to.

What follows is a particularly cruel cognitive move: the erasure effect. A single refusal frequently retroactively recolors an entire history of generosity. The Host who has said ‘yes’ a hundred times and ‘no’ once is accused, often explicitly, of “just acting” - of having performed kindness all along rather than embodied it. Their past generosity becomes evidence used against their sincerity the one time it falters.

The asymmetry is structural and self-reinforcing. Virtue, paradoxically, raises the cost of imperfection. The very behavior that should earn the Host more goodwill instead leaves them less room for being human.

4. The Internal Psychology of the Host

If Section 3 explains why society treats consistent kindness so unforgivingly, this section asks a harder question: why does the Host keep choosing it, even once the cost becomes obvious?

For many Hosts - often introverted or conflict-averse individuals - the answer begins with two intertwined fears: the fear of open conflict, and the fear of losing another person’s approval. These are not abstract anxieties. They are felt in the body at the moment a request arrives - a tightening, a rush of calculation, a sudden awareness of what the other person is expecting. The Host typically knows, often with quiet certainty, that they were asked precisely because a “yes” was anticipated. They are not being consulted; they are being counted on. And that distinction makes all the difference. Saying no to someone who is merely asking feels like a preference. Saying no to someone who is counting on you feels like a betrayal.

This is where the Host’s internal experience parts sharply from how the situation looks from the outside. To an observer, the request is ordinary: a favor, a task, an imposition that reasonable people navigate every day. But inside the Host’s mind, the person asking is not processed as a capable adult with resources, alternatives, and their own resilience. They become, in that moment, almost fragile - as if the Host’s answer is the single load-bearing wall between the asker and collapse. The question stops being “can I do this?” and becomes “what happens to them if I don’t?” The weight of the asker’s need transfers entirely onto the Host’s shoulders, and refusal stops feeling like a scheduling decision. It feels like abandonment.

Once this internal shift has happened, saying yes is not really a choice. It is a reflex. The Host reaches out and holds on - not because they have assessed their available capacity and found it sufficient, but because the alternative, in that moment, feels like causing harm to someone who cannot afford it. The agreement arrives quickly, and it is followed almost immediately by relief. That relief is genuine. It is also the problem.

Because what happens after the agreement matters enormously. If the Host genuinely lacks the strength - the hours, the energy, the mental clarity, the room in an already-full life - to carry what they have just taken on, holding tighter does not help anyone. The work gets done badly, or slowly, or not at all. The relationship collects a quiet debt of resentment that neither party fully names. The Host’s other obligations erode at the edges until something else fails. No one is rescued. The harm is simply relocated - spread thinner, stretched longer, made harder to trace - and the Host, who agreed specifically to prevent harm, ends up at the center of it.

This is Oakley’s pathological altruism in its most recognizable form. The help is real in intention and damaging in effect. What is being optimized at the moment of agreement is not the

quality of the assistance - it is the Host's immediate relief from an intolerable internal pressure. Kindness is the story; anxiety reduction is the mechanism. And the mechanism is powerful precisely because it works so quickly. The relief arrives before the consequences do, which means the pattern reinforces itself long before the cost becomes visible.

The harder truth is this: saying no at the moment the request lands - before the internal pressure has fully assembled itself - is almost always the kinder and cheaper option for everyone involved. An honest refusal at the start is a single, contained, unambiguous disappointment. A reluctant yes stretched past one's actual capacity is a slow-release harm: it erodes the Host incrementally, degrades whatever help is eventually offered, and strains the relationship in ways that are more diffuse and therefore harder to repair. The person who feared causing harm by saying no ends up causing more harm by saying yes. They just do it more slowly, less visibly, and while feeling, at least initially, that they have done the right thing.

5. The Reality Check: Cognitive Distortion

The internal experience described in Section 4 only produces self-destructive behavior if it is applied indiscriminately - if every request, regardless of actual stakes, triggers the same sense of emergency. This is precisely what happens for many Hosts, and it has a name in the clinical literature: catastrophizing.

Aaron Beck identified catastrophizing as a cognitive distortion in which a person automatically assumes the worst possible outcome, treating it as both likely and intolerable with little regard for more probable, milder alternatives. The distortion here is not that the Host perceives a request as weighty - some genuinely are. The distortion is the failure to discriminate: treating a coworker's casual favor with the same internal urgency as a genuine crisis, simply because both can be answered "no."

5.1 The "Ground" Reality

In reality, most askers are not dangling anywhere near an edge. They are standing on solid, ordinary ground. They asked the Host not because the Host was their last possible resource, but because the Host was accessible and known to usually say yes. A reasonable asker, told "no," experiences a moment of mild inconvenience and moves on. Their opinion of the Host does not collapse over a single refusal - they recalibrate their expectation of availability, not their judgment of the Host's character.

5.2 The Paranoia

If this is so, why does the paranoia persist? Because it is not entirely unfounded. The Toxic Asker - the person who genuinely does treat one refusal as grounds for relational punishment or character attack - does exist. The Host's fear is not a fabrication; it is a generalization built from a genuine, if statistically uncommon, category of experience.

The Host's actual deficit is not an excess of kindness. It is a discrimination failure: an inability to reliably distinguish a Ground Asker from a Toxic Asker in the moment a request arrives. Both use the same words, the same tone, often the same level of urgency. Sorting them correctly would require information the Host frequently does not have in advance, and the cost of misjudging a Toxic Asker feels, to the catastrophizing mind, unacceptably high.

Faced with that uncertainty, the Host adopts the crudest possible solution: treat every asker as potentially toxic, and say yes to all of them. The arithmetic is wrong, but the impulse is not stupidity. It is fear, doing the only math it knows how to do.

6. Conclusion & The Paradigm Shift

Everything written to this point has been offered in the Host's defense. The asymmetric social mathematics of Section 3 is real. The internal psychology described in Section 4 is genuine and sympathetic. The catastrophizing of Section 5 is not stupidity but a learned, fear-driven heuristic with real origins. None of this was the Host's fault to begin with.

But understanding why a pattern exists is not the same as excusing its continuation once it has been named. Consider the following:

"A nice guy is a people-pleaser who avoids conflict, whereas a good man holds firm ideals, sets boundaries, and defends them even when it is difficult."

This sentence functions as a deliberate disruption - a necessary corrective administered after several sections of careful validation. Its purpose is not to shame the Host. Its purpose is to dismantle a specific and seductive illusion: that endless accommodation is, in itself, a form of nobility.

It is not. What this paper has shown is that the Host's relentless yes-saying is not principally an act of generosity. It is avoidance coping - a strategy for managing anxiety about conflict and rejection, dressed up as selflessness. Saying yes out of dread feels, from the inside, indistinguishable from saying yes out of love - but the two are not the same, and the difference shows up exactly at the moment a boundary is needed and does not appear.

6.1 From Nice Guy to Good Person

The path forward is not the abandonment of generosity but its evolution. Table 2 summarizes this development.

Table 2
The Nice Guy Compared to the Good Person

Dimension	The Nice Guy	The Good Person
Motivation	Fear of conflict and loss of approval	Genuine care, balanced with self-respect
Basis for saying "yes"	Avoidance of personal discomfort	Actual available capacity
Response to requests	Treats every request as a cliff-edge emergency	Distinguishes Ground Askers from Toxic Askers
Outcome over time	Burnout, resentment, eroded trust	Sustainable relationships, respected boundaries
Effect on EVT baseline	Reinforces an unsustainably high baseline	Gradually resets the baseline to reflect real capacity

The Nice Guy operates from avoidance: every “yes” is purchased to prevent the discomfort of conflict, and every potential “no” is treated as an existential threat. Because giving is involuntary, it is unsustainable - eventually metabolizing into resentment, burnout, or the very relational ruptures it was meant to prevent.

The Good Person gives from capacity rather than fear. They help when genuinely able, and decline when not, accepting that a reasonable asker will absorb the “no,” and that a Toxic Asker’s anger is not evidence of failure - it is simply the predictable cost of having a self with limits.

Within EVT, expectations are not fixed; they are built from a behavioral pattern that can be revised. A Host who begins to set boundaries consistently is not committing a single dramatic violation - they are slowly resetting their own baseline. Over time, a “no” from someone known to set limits stops registering as catastrophic. It becomes the new, accurately calibrated expectation.

Boundary-setting is not the opposite of kindness. It is kindness’s precondition. Only a “yes” that could have been “no,” offered by someone capable of refusal, is actually a gift. The Host does not need to become less caring to escape this trap - they need only to become capable of refusal, and in doing so discover that the cliff they have spent a lifetime guarding was, most of the time, simply ground.

7. Discussion and Implications

The framework developed here carries implications across several domains:

- Clinical - the internal experience the Host has of requests as emergencies, and the Nice Guy / Good Person distinction, offers accessible language for therapeutic work with clients presenting people-pleasing patterns, codependency-adjacent dynamics, or social anxiety rooted in conflict avoidance.
- Interpersonal - relationships involving a chronic Host could benefit from explicit, mutual recalibration of expectations, with both parties acknowledging that an established pattern of generosity is not an unconditional contract.
- Cultural - this paper joins a broader critique of narratives that equate self-erasure with moral goodness, particularly as those narratives are applied unevenly along gendered and cultural lines.

8. Limitations and Future Directions

This paper is conceptual and integrative rather than empirical. Its central constructs - the Host, the Ground / Toxic Asker distinction, and the Nice Guy / Good Person typology - are theoretical heuristics intended to organize existing findings rather than independently validated measures. Future research could usefully pursue:

- Experimental testing of the EVT-based asymmetry by manipulating an actor’s prior helpfulness baseline and measuring observers’ affective response to an identical refusal.
- Survey studies on the correlation between trait catastrophizing and self-reported difficulty declining requests.

- Accuracy measures of individuals' real-time judgments when distinguishing benign from retaliatory askers.
- Cross-cultural and gendered analyses to test whether the Nice Guy / Good Person distinction resonates equivalently across populations for whom accommodation is differentially demanded or rewarded.

9. References

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