

Could you hold the ladder?

A short book about finding it hard to ask for help

unbry · Free to read, yours to keep

<https://unbry.com/read/could-you-hold-the-ladder>

First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

Contents

1. Before you start
2. The chest of drawers on the stairs
3. What not asking buys you
4. "They'll say no"
5. "I'd be a burden"
6. "They'll think I can't cope"
7. "Then I'll owe them"
8. "It's quicker to do it myself"
9. "If they cared, they'd notice"
10. "That's just how I am"
11. The decision
12. When the answer is no
13. The big asks
14. After you've done it alone again
15. The next ask
16. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book. You can read it in two or three evenings.

It's for people who find it hard to ask for help. I mean the small kind, like a lift to the station or a second pair of hands, and the large kind, like telling someone you aren't coping. If you're the person everyone else rings, and you can't remember the last time you rang anyone, it's for you.

You already know that asking is allowed. People have told you to "just ask" for years, and it hasn't worked, because the advice skips the part where asking feels impossible. So most of this book looks at the beliefs that make it feel that way. "They'll say no." "I'd be a burden." "They'll think I can't cope." "Then I'll owe them." "It's quicker to do it myself." Each of these is partly reasonable, and I'll try to treat each one fairly before I argue with it.

Some of the arguments rest on research, and the notes at the back say which studies and how far they can be trusted. The rest is my own reasoning, and I'll say so when it matters.

The practical chapter is number 10. It comes late on purpose. A method for asking is easy to write down, and you could probably write most of it yourself. The beliefs are what stop you using it, so they come first.

You don't have to wait for chapter 10, though. If a chance to ask for something small comes up tonight, take it. Nothing later in the book depends on you struggling on alone in the meantime.

A few chapters ask you to check a claim against your own memory. Please do those. You've been on both sides of a request for help many times, and what you remember is better evidence than anything I can tell you.

The chest of drawers on the stairs

Here's an example. You've bought a chest of drawers, and it needs to go upstairs. Your brother lives ten minutes away and has said more than once, "ring me if you need a hand". Your neighbour is in. You can hear her radio through the wall.

You carry it up yourself. You take it one stair at a time, resting the weight on your thigh, and on the turn you scrape a line in the paint. It takes forty minutes and your back hurts for three days. When your brother sees it the next weekend he says "why didn't you ring me?", and you say "oh, it was fine".

A second example, from work. It's eleven at night and you're on the fourth hour of a spreadsheet that won't add up. A colleague two desks away built the thing. She'd find the fault in ten minutes, and she'd probably enjoy it. You think about messaging her tomorrow, and then you think "I'll just have one more go".

And a third, which is harder. You've had a bad few months. A friend looks at you across a café table and asks how you are, and leaves a gap for the answer. You say "fine, busy, you know", and ask about her holiday.

If these are familiar, then you know you could have asked. You had the phone number. You had the words. What happened instead was quick. The idea of asking came up, and in less than a second it was gone, replaced by a reason. He's busy. It's not that heavy. I'll sort it.

I'm going to call that moment the swerve, because that's what it feels like from inside. You were heading towards a request and you steered round it.

The usual explanation is "I'm just independent". It's a flattering one, and there may be truth in it. But independence means you're able to do things alone. It doesn't mean you're unable to do them any other way. An independent person can carry the drawers up alone or ring their brother, and picks whichever suits the day. If only one of those is open to you, you aren't choosing.

So my argument is that not asking is a habit. For most people it started early, and it survives for the reason most habits survive, which is that it pays something every time.

The payments are real. When you swerve, you skip an exposed moment in which someone could see that you need something. Nobody can refuse you. You owe nobody anything. The job gets done your way, and you stay the person who copes. Each of those is worth having, and I'll go through them one at a time. I'll try to show that each is smaller than it looks, and that each comes with costs you've stopped counting, such as the scraped paint, the fourth hour, and the friend who still doesn't know how your year has gone.

Let me say what this book isn't arguing. It isn't saying you should do nothing alone, or that self-reliance is a fault. Being capable is good, and much of what you do alone you should carry on doing alone. The aim is narrower. I'd like asking to become available to you, so that doing it yourself goes back to being a choice.

I should also say that the habit isn't always irrational. Some readers learned it from people who mocked a request, or granted it and then held it over them for years. If that's your history, your caution made sense where you learned it. Chapter 9 looks at where the habit comes from, and chapter 11 deals with people who still aren't safe to ask.

One thing can't wait for a later chapter. For some people, behind the habit there's a settled belief that they're a burden on everyone and that people would be better off without them. That's more than a habit, and a book is the wrong tool for it. Please treat that thought as a symptom to report, the way you'd report chest pain. Speak to your doctor or a crisis line today, and ring the emergency services if you think you might act on it.

For everyone else, I can't promise that asking will ever feel comfortable. I don't think it does for most people, including the ones who look at ease. What I think you can have is a clear view of what the swerve is protecting you from, and enough doubt about its reasons to steer straight now and then and see what happens.

What not asking buys you

Think about the last time you swerved, and try to remember the second before. For most people there's a small physical wince. It's a quick mix of embarrassment and dread, a bit like the feeling before you walk into a room of strangers. Then comes the decision to manage alone, and the wince goes. That's the purchase. You paid with your evening, and you bought the end of an uncomfortable feeling.

The relief is real, which is why the habit holds. Any behaviour that switches off discomfort within a second tends to get repeated, whether or not it's good for you. You don't need to be weak or proud for that to work on you. It works on everybody.

Now look at what the wince was about. It wasn't about carrying furniture. It was about a conversation that would have lasted perhaps thirty seconds. "Are you free Saturday morning? I've got some drawers to get upstairs." The whole of the dreaded thing is that sentence, a short pause, and an answer.

So the trade is thirty seconds of mild exposure against forty minutes and a sore back, or against four hours of spreadsheet. Put like that, nobody would take it. You take it because the two sides aren't felt at the same moment. The wince is happening now, and the sore back is a vague idea about later. Now wins.

There's a second reason the trade looks better than it is. The discomfort you're avoiding is a forecast. At the moment of the swerve, nobody has refused you, sighed at you or thought less of

you. You've predicted that they might, and you've acted on the prediction without testing it. Because you never test it, it never gets corrected. A person who has swerved for twenty years is working from a twenty-year-old guess about how people respond to requests. The next three chapters look at how accurate that guess is.

The costs are easier to list than to feel, so I'll be specific about them.

The first is time and effort, the forty minutes and the fourth hour. Over a year these add up to a large amount of your life spent on things that were hard only because you did them alone.

The second is quality. Some jobs go worse solo. The ladder nobody is holding is more dangerous. The report nobody else has read still has your blind spots in it.

The third is slower to show. When you never ask, the people close to you get a picture of you as someone who needs nothing. They stop offering, which is reasonable, since you always say no. Then you're left in the position you dreaded, where nobody helps, and it feels like proof that nobody would have.

The fourth is what happens when something large arrives, such as illness, a redundancy or a death. Asking for help is a skill, and like most skills it's hard to perform for the first time under pressure. If you've never practised on lifts to the station, the first request you ever make will be the hardest kind there is.

You might object that you like doing things yourself, and that not every solo job is a symptom. I agree. The difference I'd draw is between a plan and a habit. If you thought about asking, weighed it, and decided you'd rather do it alone, that's a plan, and it's yours to make. If the thought of asking was gone before you'd looked at it, that's the habit. One quick test is to ask whether you could have made the request if you'd wanted to. If the honest answer is "not really", then what felt like a preference was the swerve.

Here's a short exercise, best done on paper. Write down three things from the last month that you did alone and that someone could have helped with. Next to each, write what doing it alone cost you, in hours, money, quality or sleep. Then write the sentence you would have had to say to get help, word for word, and look at how long it is.

"They'll say no"

You need to be at the airport for six in the morning. It's an invented example, though you may have lived it. You go through the people who could drive you. Sam has the kids. Priya has just started a new job. Dan did you a favour in March. Your sister would do it, but she'd be tired all day. You book a taxi for sixty pounds.

Nobody turned you down. You turned yourself down five times, on behalf of five people, without any of them knowing there'd been a question. The habit relies on this. It doesn't need anyone to refuse you as long as you can imagine them doing it.

So it's worth knowing how good people are at predicting refusals. This has been tested many times. The answer is that they're poor at it, and when they ask in person they're wrong in one direction.

In a set of studies by Francis Flynn and Vanessa Bohns, who published at the time as Vanessa Lake, students at Columbia University had to go out and make requests of strangers. Before they went, they estimated how many people they'd need to approach. To get five strangers to fill in a questionnaire, they guessed they'd need to ask about twenty. They needed about ten. To borrow a stranger's mobile phone three times, they guessed ten and needed six. To get one stranger to walk them to the campus gym, they guessed seven and needed two or three. Volunteers raising money for a charity expected to approach about 210 people to reach their target, and reached it after about 120.

Bohns went on to run many more studies of this kind, and in 2016 she added up the results. By then her participants had made requests of more than 14,000 strangers, and on average they'd underestimated how many would agree by about half.

The researchers' explanation is about where each side is looking. When you're the one asking, you think about what it'll cost the other person in time and trouble. The person being asked is thinking about something else, which is how awkward and unkind it would feel to refuse. You're weighing their Saturday morning. They're weighing what kind of person says no to a friend with a suitcase.

These studies have limits and I don't want to hide them. The requests were small. Most were put to strangers, face to face, by American students, and some students dropped out before asking anyone. When the request was made by flyer or by email to a stranger, the effect reversed and people overestimated their chances. So the finding is about asking a person directly. It doesn't show that any request made by any route will succeed.

You may have some objections, and I think they're fair ones.

The first is that these were strangers and small favours, and what you need is a morning of your sister's time. That's true, and large favours between people who know each other have been studied less. But consider which way closeness is likely to push. Your sister knows you and loves you, and will see you at Christmas. She has more reasons to say yes than a stranger on a pavement in New York has.

The second is that a yes from someone who couldn't face refusing isn't a yes you want. I agree. The next chapter has evidence on what helpers say they feel, and it's more cheerful than you'd expect. Chapter 10 is about asking in a way that leaves people a real chance to decline.

The third is that some people will refuse. They will, and chapter 11 is about that. I'm not claiming here that everyone says yes. I'm claiming that your forecast is a forecast, that forecasts of this kind run about twice as gloomy as the facts, and that you've been spending sixty pounds on taxis because of it.

You can test this on yourself. The next few times you think about asking for something, write down your guess first, as a chance out of ten that they'll agree. Then ask, and write down what happened. After five or six of these you'll have evidence about your own forecasts.

"I'd be a burden"

As an example, say you move flat on your own, over a weekend, with a hired van. A friend hears about it afterwards and says "you should have said, I'd have come over". You thank her, and you privately mark it down as politeness.

Of all the beliefs in this book, this is the one I have most sympathy for, because it comes from something good. You notice other people's loads. You know your friends are tired and busy. Adding to that feels selfish, and managing alone feels like consideration.

Before any research, try a reversal. Think of the last time someone you like asked you for help. Perhaps a friend wanted a hand with a move, or a colleague asked your advice on something you know about. Recall how you felt when they asked. For most people the honest answer is somewhere between "fine" and "quite pleased". Being asked tells you that someone trusts you and thinks you're capable. You probably didn't think "what a burden she is".

If that's how it was, you're holding two rules. When others ask you, it's normal and even nice. When you ask others, it's an imposition. Both can't be right, unless other people are a more generous kind of creature than you are, and I doubt they are.

The research says the same. In 2022 Xuan Zhao and Nicholas Epley published a set of experiments with over two thousand people. In one, visitors to a botanical garden asked a stranger to take their photo. Before asking, they predicted how the stranger would feel, and afterwards the strangers were asked. The askers

underestimated how willing the helpers would be. They underestimated how good the helpers would feel afterwards. And they greatly overestimated the inconvenience. On a scale from nought to ten they guessed about three, and the helpers reported about half a point. Three quarters of the askers thought the stranger had agreed partly because they felt unable to say no. Two per cent of the helpers said so. Other experiments in the set found the same pattern among friends.

That adds something to chapter 3. The explanation there was that people agree because refusing is awkward. In the garden the askers overestimated that awkwardness, and the helpers mostly said they'd wanted to help. I take both to be true. Reluctance to say no is part of why people agree, and it looks like the smaller part.

A photo is a tiny favour, and the helpers were describing their own feelings, so don't stretch this too far. It does fit a wider body of work suggesting that doing things for other people tends to lift the mood of the person doing them. The best-known finding of that kind, that spending money on others makes people happier than spending it on themselves, held up in a large repeat study in 2020, though the effect was small.

My own reading is this. Helping gives people something. They get to feel useful and trusted, and closer to you afterwards. If you never ask, the people around you never get that from you. They're left with a friend who'll do anything for them and lets them do nothing back, and that's a less comfortable position than you might think. Chapter 6 comes back to it.

An honest objection is that some requests really are burdens and some people really are stretched to their limit. A friend with a three-week-old baby isn't the person to ask for a lift to the airport. That's true. But it's a question about who to ask and when, and the belief treats it as a reason never to ask anyone.

For everyone who isn't obviously overloaded, I'd put it like this. You can't see into their week. They can. When you decide on their behalf that they couldn't manage it, you're making a decision that belongs to them, and there's a quiet unfairness in that, because it assumes they're unable to say no for themselves. Your part is to make the request clear, keep it a sensible size, and make it easy to decline. Whether they can spare the time is theirs to judge.

Notice, too, how small most of your unmade requests are. When you did the exercise in chapter 2, I expect most items were ten-minute favours. A ten-minute favour is a very small load to put on an adult who likes you.

One caution, which I also gave in chapter 1. The ordinary worry about putting people out is what this chapter is about. A fixed conviction that you're a weight on everyone you know is different, and it needs a doctor.

"They'll think I can't cope"

Say you're three weeks into a new job, and you don't know how the expenses system works. Everyone else seems to. You spend two hours clicking through menus and old emails to find out what a colleague could have told you in two minutes. You do this so that nobody finds out you didn't know.

The belief is that asking shows a gap, and that competent people don't have gaps. You're far from alone in fearing this. When researchers at Harvard and Wharton asked people how they'd come across if they asked a colleague for advice, they predicted they'd look less capable. Earlier work by Fiona Lee found that people at work ask their equals for help more readily than they ask anyone above or below them, which suggests that status worries are steering them.

So the fear is normal. The question is whether it's accurate, and the evidence is more mixed than either of us might like.

On one side there's the study those Harvard and Wharton researchers went on to run. Students worked on a hard brain-teaser and then got a message from a partner who'd be doing it next. The message said either "I hope it went well" or "I hope it went well. Do you have any advice?" The partner who asked for advice was rated as more competent. The authors' explanation is that being asked is flattering. You feel that anyone who wants your opinion must have good judgement.

The effect was small, and it had conditions. It appeared when the task was hard, when the person doing the rating was the one who'd been asked, and when that person knew the subject. On an easy task, asking didn't help, but it didn't hurt either. The partner was simulated by a computer, and the whole thing took minutes, so it says nothing about a reputation built over years.

On the other side, a small field study of business students on outdoor leadership courses found that male leaders who sought help were rated as less competent by their teams. Female leaders weren't. A follow-up experiment using written descriptions of a meeting found the same. So in some settings, and for some people, the cost you fear is real.

My summary is that the damage to your reputation from asking is usually smaller than you expect and often nil. Sometimes asking improves your standing, and now and then the damage is real. That's a long way from the habit's assumption, which is that it's large and certain.

Now consider what does harm a reputation at work. What follows is my view, from how workplaces generally run. The things that get remembered are the problem that surfaced on deadline day, the error a second reader would have caught, and the three days lost on something a colleague could have unblocked in an hour. Managers don't often complain that someone asked too many sensible questions. They complain that they weren't told sooner. If what you want is to look capable, then keeping a difficulty hidden until it can't be hidden any longer is about the riskiest plan available.

There is a kind of asking that does look bad. One kind is asking the same question three times because you didn't write the answer down. Another is asking before you've tried anything. Another is asking someone to do your job for you when what you needed was to be shown how. What they have in common is that they cost the other person more than they needed to.

That points to a way of asking that shows competence. Say what you've tried, where you're stuck, and what you need. "I've checked the formulas in the first two sheets and they're fine. I think the fault's in the lookup on the third. Could you give it ten minutes?" A request like that lays out your thinking for the other person to see, and nobody hearing it would conclude that you can't cope.

This isn't only about offices. New parents hide how hard they're finding it. People caring for an elderly relative insist they're managing. At home the belief is that needing help means you're failing at something everyone else does unaided. Mostly, everyone else is either getting help or hiding the same struggle. Looking after a newborn or a parent with dementia is too much work for one person, and needing help with it says nothing about your ability.

You might object that some workplaces do punish questions. Some do. If yours mocks people for asking, that tells you about the workplace, and it may be worth weighing when you think about how long to stay. Even there, you can usually find one or two colleagues at your own level who are safe to ask.

A practical rule for work is a time limit. If you've been stuck for half an hour and someone nearby knows the answer, ask. Your employer is paying for that half hour and would much prefer you spent two minutes of someone else's.

"Then I'll owe them"

Take a small example. Your neighbour offers to water your plants while you're away. You say "oh no, I couldn't", and spend forty pounds on self-watering pots. Or you accept, and on the day you get back you're at her door with a box of chocolates twice the size the favour called for, so that the account is closed by teatime.

Both versions come from the same idea, which is that help creates a debt, that debts are dangerous, and that the safe balance is zero. There's something in it. People do keep a rough sense of who has done what for whom, and someone who takes all the time and never gives does wear out their welcome. Some readers have also had help used against them. "After everything I've done for you" is a sentence that teaches a child to accept nothing.

But look at how your closest relationships actually work. I'd guess that neither of you could say who's ahead. She had you to stay for a week when your boiler broke. You drove her to the hospital twice. She lent you money once, years ago. Nobody has added it up, and if one of you tried, the other would be a bit hurt. The account is open and neither of you minds, and that's one of the things that makes the two of you close. People who owe each other things have reasons to stay in touch.

Settling up straight away is what you do with shops and strangers. When you pay a friend back the same afternoon, it's a little like handing your host a twenty-pound note at the end of dinner. The books balance, and you've told them something about the relationship that you didn't mean to say.

Now think about the person who helps everyone and accepts nothing in return. You may be that person. From your side it feels generous. From the other side, everyone around you is kept in debt with no means of paying. Some people find that uncomfortable enough that they pull back a little. It's hard to feel close to someone who never needs you.

I think there's also a less flattering side to staying at zero. If you never owe anyone, nobody has any claim on you, and you're always the one in the stronger position. I can see why that feels safe. It's also a way of keeping people at a distance.

There's an old experiment on this, and I offer it with caution. In 1969 Jon Jecker and David Landy had students win money in a contest. Afterwards the researcher asked some of them, as a personal favour, to give it back, because he'd been using his own funds. Those students ended up liking him more than the students who weren't asked. A small study in 2016, with Japanese and American students, found something similar. The evidence is thin. It does match a common experience, which is that people tend to warm to those they've helped.

A fear often sits underneath all this, and I'd like to answer it. It's the fear that once you start asking, you'll turn into a taker, one of those people who leans on everyone. Think about what those people are like. They ask without noticing the cost. They don't hear a no. They rarely give anything back. Meanwhile you agonise over borrowing a drill. The gap between you and them is very wide, and you could travel a long way across it and still be one of the more considerate people anyone knows.

It's true that some people use favours as leverage. If you know someone like that, don't ask them. Chapter 11 says more about sorting who is safe to ask.

For the rest, repay in the loose way. Thank them, and then let the account stay open. Be around when they need something, whether that's next month or in two years.

One easy place to start is with help that's offered. Offers don't even require you to ask. The next time someone says "shall I carry that?" or "do you want me to have a look?", notice the "no, I'm fine" on its way out, and say "yes, thanks" in its place.

"It's quicker to do it myself"

Your fourteen-year-old, in this example, has never used the washing machine. Showing him would take twenty minutes, including the conversation about why he has to. Doing the load yourself takes eight. So you do the load.

The sum is correct. It's correct today, and it'll be correct next Tuesday, and every time you do it you'll be right. That's why this belief is so hard to shift. It wins every single instance, and single instances are all you ever meet. Over a year, though, you've spent seven hours on his washing to save twenty minutes, and you've raised a fifteen-year-old who can't work the machine.

The same sum runs at work. A newer colleague could take over the monthly figures, but explaining them would cost you an afternoon and doing them costs an hour. Two years later you're still doing them, you can't take the last week of any month off, and you describe yourself as swamped.

My rule of thumb is that if a job repeats, the explaining pays for itself by about the third time. That's a guess and you can adjust it. What matters is doing the sum over the year, because the habit only ever does it over the afternoon.

Behind "quicker" there's often a second belief, which is "nobody else does it properly". This one deserves a closer look, because sometimes it's true and often it means something else. The towels get folded in half and you fold them in thirds. The dishwasher gets

loaded in a way that offends you. The slides go out in a font you wouldn't have picked. In each case the job was done. It wasn't done your way.

A useful test is to ask whether the difference shows in the result or only in your feelings. Towels folded in half dry people just as well. If the figures don't match the bank, that's a real fault and worth insisting on. I think most of what gets filed under "properly" is preference, and you're entitled to preferences. But you should know you're paying for them with your evenings.

I also think "quicker" and "properly" are sometimes covering for something harder to admit, which is that handing a job over means giving up control of it. Someone else decides when it happens and how. If you've organised your life around being the one who's on top of things, that's a real loss and it's uncomfortable. It's better to admit it than to call it efficiency.

Consider what the habit does to the people around you. A household or a team where one person knows how everything works has a weak point. When that person gets flu, nothing runs. The others have also been kept unskilled, and then, quite often, resented for it. The partner who's "hopeless with the school forms" may never have been left alone with one. People can't get good at things you won't let go of.

You might object that some jobs really are one-offs, and some really do need your standard. That's true. If it won't repeat, or a mistake would be expensive, doing it yourself can be the right call. That's a plan, in the sense of chapter 2. The habit is when the answer is always "I'll do it", and you haven't done the sum.

When you do hand something over, a few things help. Hand over the whole job and not an errand within it, so the other person owns the result. Say which part of your standard matters, such as "it has to be in by Friday and the totals have to match". Let the rest go. And don't redo their work in front of them. If you refold the towels while someone watches, they learn that helping you is pointless, and next time they won't.

"If they cared, they'd notice"

Picture the end of a big family dinner. You've cooked for twelve, and now you're in the kitchen with the wreckage while everyone else is in the living room. You stack plates a bit louder than you need to. You sigh. Someone calls through, "you all right in there?", and you call back "fine!" Twenty minutes later you're scrubbing a roasting tin and you're furious with all of them.

The belief is that people who care about you will see what you need without being told. A second belief follows from it. Help you had to ask for is worth less, because asking spoils it.

I understand the appeal. Having someone notice, unprompted, that you're struggling is one of the nicest things that can happen to a person. Compared with that, asking can feel like extracting something that should have been given.

The trouble is that people are much harder to read than they feel from the inside. Thomas Gilovich and colleagues ran a series of studies on this in the 1990s. In one, people sipped from a row of drinks, some of which tasted foul, while trying to keep a straight face. Afterwards they guessed how many of ten observers had spotted which drinks were the bad ones. They thought about half had. Observers did little better than chance. The researchers called this the illusion of transparency. Your own feelings are so vivid to you that you assume they're leaking out, and mostly they aren't.

Those studies were about people hiding their feelings. Applying them to help is my step, though others have made it too. In the kitchen you feel your tiredness at full strength. Through the doorway, what's visible is someone competently washing up who has just said she's fine.

There's a matching error on the other side. Vanessa Bohns and Francis Flynn found that people in a position to help underestimate how uncomfortable it is to ask. Because asking looks easy to them, they assume that anyone who needed help would say so. So each side is waiting. You wait for them to notice, and they wait for you to ask. Both of you take the silence to mean something it doesn't.

If you've been capable for years, this gets worse. You've answered "fine" a thousand times and turned down most offers, and the people around you have learned from that. The ones who look least in need get the fewest offers, and you've worked hard at looking that way.

Many people try a halfway measure, which is the hint. "Gosh, I've got so much on this week." "These boxes are heavier than I thought." A hint is a request you can deny having made, and that's why it appeals. It fails for the same reason. The other person can't tell whether it's a request or a remark, and if they guess wrong they risk insulting you by implying you can't manage. Usually they say "poor you" and carry on.

Studies of couples point the same way. In one, 93 couples were filmed while one partner talked about a personal problem. Partners who asked for support directly got more helpful

responses than those who went about it indirectly. Research of this kind can't prove which caused which. Still, it suggests that a clear request is more likely to bring good help.

What I most want you to see in this chapter is what silence turns into. When you need something, say nothing, and wait to see who notices, you've set an exam that nobody knows they're sitting. They fail it, because they didn't know about it. You then hold the result against them. Resentment of this kind is one of the running costs of the habit, and it lands on the people you're closest to.

You might still feel that if you have to ask, it doesn't count. Consider what happens when you ask and someone says yes. They could have said no. They got up, came into the kitchen and picked up a tea towel. You can see from that how much they care. Being good at noticing is a separate matter. It has to do with attention, and many loving people are poor at it. It's easy to confuse the two, and the confusion costs you help that was there for the asking.

Asking also teaches people. Someone who's been asked to dry up after three big dinners will often turn up at the fourth without being called. They couldn't see the need before, and you've shown them where it is.

So the practical point is to swap the sigh and the hint for a sentence. "Can someone come and dry up?"

"That's just how I am"

Many families have a story about it. "She's always been like that. At five she wouldn't let anyone do up her coat." It's told fondly, and it carries a claim, which is that you were born self-sufficient and nothing can be done.

I doubt it, and you can check for yourself. Look at where you do ask. You ask a shop assistant where the eggs are. You ring the IT desk. You pay a plumber, which is asking for help with an invoice attached. And many people who can't ask for themselves will ask on someone else's behalf without a flicker. You'd ring anyone, at any hour, for your child, or to get your team what it needs.

So the ability isn't missing. Particular conditions switch it off. For most people the conditions are that the request is for yourself, the person's opinion matters to you, and there's nothing you can hand over in exchange. A fixed trait wouldn't be so selective. Something that depends this much on conditions was probably learned.

Where you learned it is usually not hard to find. What follows is my interpretation, with some research behind parts of it.

In some homes, a child's request was met with a sigh, or "can't you see I'm busy?", or mockery, or nothing at all. A child in that position draws a sensible conclusion, which is that asking costs more than it gets. They stop. Nobody decides this. It just becomes the way things are.

In other homes a parent was ill, or overwhelmed, or drinking, and one child became the one who coped. That child was praised for it. "She's never any trouble." If being no trouble is what earned you warmth, then needing something can feel like risking it.

The study of couples from chapter 8 has something to say here. Some of the people in it were uneasy about depending on anyone, a pattern psychologists call avoidant attachment and trace partly to early experience. When those people had a problem to discuss, they tended to seek support in indirect and less effective ways. The couples were students and the study was a single conversation, so I wouldn't build too much on it. It does fit the idea that the habit starts early.

There are wider rules too. Many boys are taught that needing help is weakness, and many men still act on it. Michael Addis and James Mahalik, reviewing the research on men and help, note that men seek professional help for health problems less often than women do, and argue that how much less depends on the situation. In their account a man is less likely to ask when he thinks other men don't have the problem, when he can't return the favour, and when asking means giving up control. Much of that will sound familiar from earlier chapters, whatever your sex.

Many girls are taught that their job is to look after others, so asking for themselves feels selfish. Some families have a pride about it, of the "we don't take charity" kind. Some workplaces do too.

None of this is a life sentence. It explains the habit, and I think it also deserves some respect. The rule you learned was a good answer to the situation you were in. A child who stops asking a

parent who sneers is being intelligent. The trouble is that the rule came with you into adult life, and one of its effects is to stop you finding out whether it's still needed. The people around you now are probably not the people who taught it to you. You haven't checked, because the rule tells you not to.

Perhaps you like being the strong one. It's part of who you are and you don't want to become someone else. I don't think you have to. Think of the most capable people you know, and I expect most of them ask quite freely. A senior surgeon asks a colleague for a second opinion on a scan. A good manager says "I don't know this area, talk me through it". Nobody takes either for weakness. The change I'm suggesting to your picture of yourself is small. You go from "someone who needs nobody" to "someone who can do it either way".

If you'd like to test this chapter, think back to the earliest time you remember asking for something and it going badly. Work out how old you were, and who it was. Then ask whether the people in your life today would answer in the same way. For most of them, I expect you already know they wouldn't.

The decision

By now I hope the habit's reasons look less solid than they did. People say yes more often than you predict. They mind less than you think, and they often like being asked. Your reputation is in more danger from hidden problems than from questions. A debt between friends helps hold the friendship together. Doing it yourself is quicker today and slower over the year. Nobody can see that you need anything. And the rule you've been following was made for a household you no longer live in.

You won't really believe any of this until you've tested it, so this chapter is about testing it. Here is the rule I'd suggest.

When you catch the swerve, stop. If help would make a real difference, and your only reasons for not asking are the ones in this book, ask.

The rule leaves room for doing things alone. If you'd honestly prefer to, or the job's a one-off, or the only person available isn't safe to ask, that's a plan, and you can carry on. What the rule removes is the automatic no that comes before you've thought about it.

The wince from chapter 2 will still turn up. Nothing in this chapter prevents it. You make the request with the wince present, in the way you'd make a phone call you were slightly dreading. For many people it fades as their own evidence builds up. I can't promise that it will for you.

Here is how to make a request that's easy to say yes to, and easy to refuse.

Ask one person. A message to a group saying "can anyone help on Saturday?" lets each reader assume that someone else will answer. Pick a person and ask them by name. Choose someone suited to the kind of help you need, and ideally have a second name ready.

Say exactly what you want. Include what, when and for how long. "Could you give me a hand with the move?" is hard to answer, because nobody knows what they'd be agreeing to. "Could you come at ten on Saturday for a couple of hours and help me get boxes into the van?" can be answered on the spot. I don't know of an experiment that tests this directly, so treat it as my advice. It follows from chapter 8. People can't see what you need, so tell them.

Give the reason in a sentence. "My back's bad and I can't lift the big ones." A reason helps the other person judge how much it matters. It also makes the request sound like what it is, one adult asking another for a hand.

Leave room for a no. "If Saturday's no good, just say, and I'll try Tom." This is the answer to the worry from chapter 3 about people who agree because they can't refuse. You give them a way out and you mean it. It also helps you, because a yes from someone who had an exit is one you can believe.

Drop the preamble and the discount. The preamble goes like this. "I'm so sorry to bother you, I know you're really busy, and this is probably a stupid question." It makes the other person reassure

you before they've even heard the request. The discount comes at the end. "But honestly don't worry, it doesn't matter, forget I said anything." That talks them out of helping. One "sorry to interrupt" is fine. After that, make the request and stop talking.

Use your voice when you can. In a study by Mahdi Roghanizad and Vanessa Bohns, 45 people each asked ten strangers to fill in a short survey, either face to face or by email, using the same words. Face to face, most of the strangers agreed. By email, hardly anyone did. The askers had expected the two to work about equally well. Those were cold emails to strangers, and a message to a friend is a different thing, so I wouldn't lean on the numbers. For small favours between people who know each other, a text is fine. Just be aware that a written message can be a way of asking so quietly that you can be ignored, and the habit will choose it for that reason. For anything that matters, ring, or ask in person.

Say what it changed. Afterwards, thank them by telling them the result. "Thanks to you I was in bed by ten and not one in the morning." People like to know their help made a difference. Whether being thanked also makes them readier to help next time is less clear, because the research is mixed. Then leave it there. Thanking someone four times and turning up with a large gift are both attempts to close the account, and chapter 6 explained why you don't need to.

Start small. Asking is a skill and you're out of practice, so begin where a no would cost you almost nothing. Borrow a ladder. Ask a colleague to look over an email. Ask for directions when you could

have used your phone. Say yes to offers. Keep the record from chapter 3, with your guess before and the result after, because your own results will persuade you more than any study.

Then move up gradually to bigger favours, to people whose opinion matters more to you, and to requests for yourself. Chapter 12 deals with the largest kind.

One more tool. Habits run on cues, so it helps to decide in advance what you'll do when a cue appears. Research on plans of the form "when X happens, I'll do Y" finds that they improve follow-through across many kinds of goal. They work by taking the decision out of the moment, and the moment is where the swerve operates. Here are three you might adapt.

"When I've been stuck for half an hour, I'll message someone before I try again."

"When someone offers to help, I'll say 'yes, thanks' before I've had time to think."

"When a friend asks how I am and waits for the answer, I'll tell them one true thing."

Pick one, write it down, and say it aloud once. It'll feel silly. Do it anyway. My guess is that a plan you've said aloud comes to mind more readily than one you've only thought about.

When the answer is no

Suppose you ask a colleague to cover your Friday shift. She says "sorry, I can't, I'm taking my mum to the hospital". You say "no problem at all!" a little too brightly, feel your face go warm, and spend the afternoon resolving never to do that again.

Sooner or later you'll get a no, and how you read it matters. The habit's reading is "I shouldn't have asked". I'd like to offer a more accurate one.

A no is nearly always information about the other person's week. She has a hospital appointment. He's broke this month. They're more tired than they look. Check this against your own memory. Think of the last time you turned someone down. I'd bet you didn't think less of them for asking. More likely you felt slightly bad, and hoped they'd ask again some time so you could say yes.

There's research on the second request as well. Daniel Newark and colleagues found that askers expect someone who has refused them once to refuse again, and that they underestimate how often that person agrees the next time. The researchers' explanation is that refusing someone twice is more uncomfortable than refusing them once, so a person who has turned you down is readier to help with the next thing than you'd guess. Meanwhile the asker has filed them under "unhelpful" and never goes back.

There's another way to look at it. In chapter 10 you left room for a no on purpose. If people have room, some of them will use it, and that shows the arrangement is working. If nobody around you ever

felt able to refuse you, you couldn't trust their yeses either. A few honest refusals are the price of being able to believe the acceptances.

In practice, keep your reply short and mean it. "No problem, thanks for telling me straight." Then ask someone else. It helps to have a second person in mind before you ask the first, so that a no sends you to the next name and not back to doing it alone. And don't take one refusal as a verdict on asking in general. It's one result. You've been running on untested forecasts for years, and you need a lot more than one result to replace them.

Now the harder cases. Some people do respond badly to a request. They sigh and make a performance of it. They help, and then mention it for years. They tell other people. They treat your need as a weakness to store up. If you grew up with someone like this, you know it's real, and I won't pretend that everyone is kind.

What you can conclude from a response like that is something about that person. It tells you little about the next person you might ask. Most of us know a few people who are safe to ask and one or two who aren't, and it's sensible to sort them. It's also worth sorting by kind of help. Some people will drive across town with a toolbox and go stiff if you mention a feeling. Others will listen for an hour and never turn up with the van. Ask each for what they're good at.

Sometimes the answer is yes and the help comes out wrong. You wanted a second pair of hands and you got a lecture on how you should have done it. You wanted to be listened to and you got five solutions. Often this is because you didn't say what kind of help

you were after, and they guessed. You can say it at the start. "I don't need fixing, I just need you to listen for ten minutes." Or the reverse. "I don't need sympathy, I need an idea."

If one person who shares your life refuses most reasonable requests, such as a partner who won't take on any of the housework, then the problem isn't the way you ask. That calls for a direct conversation about fairness, with examples, and perhaps a counsellor if it doesn't move. And if your requests are met with rage, threats or punishment, that's outside the scope of a book about habits. A domestic abuse helpline can talk it through with you in confidence.

The big asks

So far most of the examples have been furniture and spreadsheets. This chapter is about the other kind. You've found a lump and told nobody. You're three months behind with the rent and you've stopped opening the post. Your father died in the spring, you haven't slept properly since, and everyone thinks you're doing well.

This is where the habit costs most. A small job done alone costs an evening. A symptom kept quiet or a debt kept hidden gets worse while you wait, and some of them get worse quickly.

The belief here is usually a version of "small things, maybe, but this is too much to put on anyone". It comes with a second one, "I ought to be able to handle this myself". I understand both. A big ask exposes more of you than a small one, and you can't pay it back in kind. Saying it aloud also makes it real, which is a reason people put off telling even a doctor.

Try the reversal again, because here it's at its strongest. Imagine your closest friend is in your exact situation, and hides it from you for six months to spare you the trouble. Then you find out. I doubt you'd feel grateful for being spared. I'd expect you to be hurt, and to ask "why didn't you tell me?" The people who love you would rather carry some of it than learn later that you carried it alone.

There's also a large body of research linking social ties to health. One large review pooled 148 studies and about 300,000 people. Those with stronger relationships had about 50 per cent better

odds of being alive at follow-up, which came on average seven and a half years later. These were observational studies, so they can't prove that the relationships did the protecting. They also measured having people around, which isn't the same as asking them for things. I mention it because it fits something I believe anyway, which is that relationships do you most good when you use them.

Professionals count as asking, and they're often the right place to start. A doctor, a debt adviser, a solicitor, a therapist. If your main fear is being a burden, notice that none of it applies to them. It's their job. You owe them nothing but the fee, and sometimes not even that, since many countries have free debt advice services and free crisis lines. With anything medical, please don't let the habit decide the timing. A symptom that worries you is a reason to book an appointment this week.

With friends and family, a big ask doesn't have to be made in one piece. The first request can be very small. "Something hard is going on and I haven't told anyone. Can I talk to you about it?" That's the whole ask. You can add "I don't need you to fix it", which takes away the pressure that makes people awkward. If you don't yet know what you need, you can say that too.

Nor does it all have to land on one person. One friend can drive you to the hospital. Another can be the one you talk to at night. A brother who's useless with feelings may be good with forms. Spreading it out is the practical answer to the fear of being too much, because nobody gets all of it.

At times like these people will say "let me know if there's anything I can do". They nearly always mean it, and as it stands nobody can act on it, so it gets left unused on both sides. Treat it as an open offer and fill it in. "Actually, there is. Could you walk the dog on Thursdays while I'm having treatment?" In my view most people are relieved to be given a job. They wanted to help and didn't know how.

If what you're carrying includes thoughts of harming yourself or ending your life, the first person to ask is a doctor or a crisis line, and today is the day. If you're in immediate danger, ring the emergency services. You can tell friends afterwards. That request is more important than any other in this book.

After you've done it alone again

Three weeks after finishing this book, you'll find yourself at midnight doing something alone that two people could have done by nine. You'll realise that you never even considered asking. And a thought will arrive along the lines of "there you go, that's just me".

Expect this. The habit is decades old and the swerve takes under a second. You're going to miss it many times, and at first you'll mostly catch it afterwards. Catching it afterwards is how catching it starts. Before, you didn't notice at all.

The first thing to know is that a late ask is still an ask. Most situations stay open longer than the habit says. "I should have asked you on Monday and I didn't. Could you look at it now?" is a complete request. It's slightly embarrassing, and it's much cheaper than another midnight. The friend you told "fine, busy" can get a message the next day that says "I wasn't fine, actually. Can I ring you?"

The second is to review what happened without reaching a verdict on yourself. Look for the swerve. Find the point where asking was possible, and recall what reason came up. Most people have a usual one. It might be "they're busy", or "I should be able to do this", or "it's not worth the fuss". Once you know yours, you'll start to recognise it as it arrives, in the way you'd recognise a salesman's patter the second time you heard it.

Watch for one particular kind of lapse. When requests go unmade for weeks, they tend to come out all at once, as an accusation. "I do everything in this house and nobody lifts a finger." It feels like finally asking. It isn't a request, though, because it doesn't name anything the other person could do, and what it gets is a defence. If that's happened, you can mend it by making the request it was standing in for. "I'm sorry about last night. What I should have said weeks ago is that I need you to take over the bins and the school forms."

Bad stretches will set you back, and the setback has a cruel shape. The more loaded you are, the less you ask, because asking takes a little spare effort and you've none left. So don't rely on deciding in the moment. In a calm week, set up something that doesn't need a decision. Tell a friend "when I go quiet, that usually means it's bad, so ring me". Agree with your partner that Sunday evening is when you both say what you need from the week.

I'd be careful about keeping score. A tally of asks per week turns a lapse into a broken streak, and then into a reason to give up. The aim was never a number. It was for asking to be possible when you need it.

Sometimes the habit doesn't shift with understanding and practice. If you can't make even small requests of safe people after trying for a while, or the attempt brings panic, or you were neglected or mistreated by the people you first depended on, that's a good reason to see a therapist. Start with your doctor if you don't know where to look. Do the same if you've been low or withdrawn for more than a couple of weeks, since pulling away from people is a

common feature of depression and it can pass itself off as independence. Seeing a therapist is also, you'll have noticed, a request for help. It counts.

The next ask

There are three things to do, and the first one can be done today.

Make one small request of one safe person. Pick something that barely matters, so that a no would cost you nothing. Borrow a drill. Ask a colleague to read a paragraph. Ask whoever you live with to make the tea. The point is to go through the swerve once with your eyes open, say the sentence, and see what comes back. Then compare it with what you predicted.

Tell one person about the pattern. "I'm bad at asking for help. If you see me struggling on with something, say so." This does two jobs. It gives someone permission to offer, which many people hold back from doing because you've always seemed fine. And it's practice, because telling them is a small request in itself.

Write one plan in the form from chapter 10. "When I notice I've been stuck for half an hour, I'll message someone before I try again." Make it fit the place where your habit costs you most, whether that's work, the house, or the conversations where you say "fine".

You'll swerve again, probably this week. When you notice, make the late ask if there's still time, and move on.

You're going to carry on being capable. Nobody's asking you to stop. But somewhere in the next few days you'll be halfway up a ladder with nobody holding it, and there'll be someone in the next room. Ask them.

Notes

The studies of predicted and actual agreement in chapter 3 are Francis Flynn and Vanessa Lake, "If you need help, just ask: underestimating compliance with direct requests for help", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2008, volume 95, pages 128 to 143. Vanessa Lake and Vanessa Bohns are the same researcher, so most of the evidence in that chapter comes from one group. The samples were small, between about 30 and 90 people per study, and a fair number of students dropped out before making any requests. They may have been the most pessimistic ones. The summary of later work is her paper, "(Mis)understanding our influence over others: a review of the underestimation-of-compliance effect", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2016, volume 25, pages 119 to 123. It's a review of her own research programme and not an independent pooling of studies. It reports that the effect was weaker in China than in the United States, and that it reversed for requests made by flyer or email.

The botanical garden experiment in chapter 4 is from Xuan Zhao and Nicholas Epley, "Surprisingly happy to have helped: underestimating prosociality creates a misplaced barrier to asking for help", *Psychological Science*, 2022, volume 33, pages 1708 to 1731. There were 2,118 participants across the set, all in the United States. The garden experiment involved 50 pairs. In it the askers overestimated how uncomfortable the strangers would find it to refuse, which is the opposite of what Flynn and Lake's explanation predicts. The finding about spending on others is Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin and Michael Norton, "Spending money on others

promotes happiness", *Science*, 2008, volume 319, pages 1687 to 1688. The original experiment was very small. The repeat is Lara Aknin, Elizabeth Dunn, Jason Proulx, Iris Lok and Michael Norton, "Does spending money on others promote happiness? A registered replication report", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2020, volume 119, pages e15 to e26. It found a modest effect when people made a real purchase, and a very small one or none when they only recalled a purchase.

The belief that one is a burden on others, in the fixed and general form mentioned in chapters 1 and 4, is one of the central ideas in Kimberly Van Orden and colleagues, "The interpersonal theory of suicide", *Psychological Review*, 2010, volume 117, pages 575 to 600. The authors hold that the belief is nearly always a misperception, and one that therapy can change.

In chapter 5, the advice study is Alison Wood Brooks, Francesca Gino and Maurice Schweitzer, "Smart people ask for (my) advice: seeking advice boosts perceptions of competence", *Management Science*, 2015, volume 61, pages 1421 to 1435. It concerns asking for advice, which is not the same as asking someone to do work for you. Several other papers co-authored by Francesca Gino were retracted in 2023 over data problems. I found no retraction of this one. On the Many Co-Authors website, where her co-authors report who collected the data for each study, the other two authors say she was involved in collecting the data for one of the paper's eight studies. That study is the one behind the condition that the rater must be the person asked. For the rest, including the brain-teaser study the chapter describes, they say they don't know. That's one reason the chapter treats the paper as suggestive. The work on

status is Fiona Lee, "When the going gets tough, do the tough ask for help? Help seeking and power motivation in organizations", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 1997, volume 72, pages 336 to 363. The field study of leaders is Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, Jennifer Mueller and David Lebel, "Are male leaders penalized for seeking help? The influence of gender and asking behaviors on competence perceptions", *The Leadership Quarterly*, 2015, volume 26, pages 749 to 762. In the field study, surveys came from 65 students. The follow-up experiment had 358. The account of what harms a reputation at work is my own view. I couldn't find a sound source that puts a figure on the cost of not asking, so the chapter doesn't give one.

The favour experiment in chapter 6 is Jon Jecker and David Landy, "Liking a person as a function of doing him a favour", *Human Relations*, 1969, volume 22, pages 371 to 378. The later study is Yu Niiya, "Does a favor request increase liking toward the requester?", *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 2016, volume 156, pages 211 to 221. I know of no large modern repeat of the original. The description of how accounts between friends work is my interpretation.

In chapter 8, the drinks study is from Thomas Gilovich, Kenneth Savitsky and Victoria Husted Medvec, "The illusion of transparency: biased assessments of others' ability to read one's emotional states", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1998, volume 75, pages 332 to 346. The helper's error is Vanessa Bohns and Francis Flynn, "Why didn't you just ask? Underestimating the discomfort of help-seeking", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2010, volume 46, pages 402 to 409.

The study of couples, used again in chapter 9, is Nancy Collins and Brooke Feeney, "A safe haven: an attachment theory perspective on support seeking and caregiving in intimate relationships", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2000, volume 78, pages 1053 to 1073. A related paper reports two interview studies. Among 116 women on low incomes, fear of rejection went with hinting. Among 177 women who had been abused, hinting went with less supportive responses and direct requests with more supportive ones. That one is Stacey Williams and Kristin Mickelson, "A paradox of support seeking and rejection among the stigmatized", *Personal Relationships*, 2008, volume 15, pages 493 to 509. All of this is correlational. I found no experiment that compares a vague request with a specific one and counts who helps.

The review in chapter 9 is Michael Addis and James Mahalik, "Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help seeking", *American Psychologist*, 2003, volume 58, pages 5 to 14. It's a review and an argument with no new data, and it's mainly about health care in North America. The three conditions the chapter lists are proposals from that argument and weren't tested in the paper. The account of how children learn not to ask is my interpretation.

In chapter 10, the email study is Mahdi Roghanizad and Vanessa Bohns, "Ask in person: you're less persuasive than you think over email", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2017, volume 69, pages 223 to 226. It's a short report on one kind of request put to strangers. I couldn't read the full paper, and the summaries I found disagree on the exact face-to-face figure, so the chapter says only "most". The research on thanks is Adam Grant and Francesca Gino, "A little thanks goes a long way: explaining why gratitude

expressions motivate prosocial behavior", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2010, volume 98, pages 946 to 955. Adam Grant has said publicly that Francesca Gino collected the data for the first two of its four experiments and that he never saw the raw data. The third, a field experiment with 41 university fundraisers, wasn't collected by her. It found that a director's thanks in person was followed by more calls that week. A later and larger test is Anurada Amarasekera and colleagues, "What types of gratitude expressions promote prosocial behavior? A registered report", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2025, volume 121, article 104805. I've read the authors' own summary of it and not the paper. They report that among more than 600 students, a thank-you made no difference to later helping. Among more than 800 adults, those who were thanked gave a little more to a second charity. So the chapter calls the research mixed. The "when X happens, I'll do Y" plans are known in the research as implementation intentions. See Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 2006, volume 38, pages 69 to 119. None of the studies it pools were about asking for help.

The study of second requests in chapter 11 is Daniel Newark, Francis Flynn and Vanessa Bohns, "Once bitten, twice shy: the effect of a past refusal on expectations of future compliance", *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2014, volume 5, pages 218 to 225.

The review in chapter 12 is Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith and Bradley Layton, "Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review", PLoS Medicine, 2010, volume 7, article e1000316. The link was strongest for broad measures of how involved people were with others, and weakest for the plain fact of living with someone.

The rule and the method in chapter 10, the idea of the swerve, the difference between a plan and a habit, and the advice on refusals, big asks and lapses are my own reasoning, built on the research above. Test them against your own experience, as the exercises ask you to.

This book is general information and is no substitute for medical or psychological care.