Beyond Blame

Taking Responsibility Without Blaming

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From *Beyond Blame* by Jeffrey A. Kottler

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Now that you are sufficiently uneasy with the ways you have handled conflicted relationships in your life, as well as with the core issues at the heart of your troubles, allowing yourself to feel uncomfortable can just as easily lead to more blame as to more action. The object of this stage in the process, therefore, is to learn to take responsibility for your less-than- satisfactory relationships—*without* blaming either yourself or anyone else for the predicament.

If you spent half as much time changing the ways you respond in conflict situations as you do trying to figure out who is at fault, most of your troubles would soon vanish. Most people are obsessed with identifying the culprit who is responsible for a dispute. On the one hand, if you can justify that it is *they* who were negligent or irresponsible, you may rub your hands together in glee and rest easy in the knowledge that at least you are not the one who created the mess, even if you do have to live with it. If, on the other hand, you frankly admit (or you are trapped into doing so) that *you,* not they, are responsible, then you can just as easily fall into the trap of feeling guilty and remorseful.

Since most of the time adversaries are not willing to accept blame, even when all evidence points toward them, it is largely a futile exercise trying to figure out who is at fault. Of course, it is helpful to determine the causes of disastrous situations for the purposes of not repeating the same mistakes and learning from these failures, but only when the focus is on enlightenment rather than on assigning guilt.

This distinction is especially important when you consider that interpersonal conflicts are almost always the consequence of collective efforts. Even if it were possible to discern who is at fault, what difference would it make? You are still both stuck with the problem.

Who Is to Blame?

In order to apply what you have learned from the previous stages in the process you must realize that determining who is at fault is an impossible task. The process described in this book requires that you identify who and what sets you off, understand the causes and origins of your entrenched patterns, and work through your discomfort until you are willing to accept greater responsibility for your troubles. You may not always be able to discover a single person or event that is causing your difficulties.

Conflicted relationships tend to perpetuate themselves, playing off interactions, carrying forward with a momentum that appears to have a life of

its own. Any intention on the part of one person is predicated on the best prediction of what another person might do. If you are expecting a person to act deviously, you will prepare yourself for betrayal by cloaking your own behavior in deception. Conflicts are thus self-sustaining cycles of response and counterresponse, as illustrated in the following case of a mother- and daughter-in-law.

From the very beginning, Fran and Tina regarded one another with suspicion. Fran believed her son was making a mistake by getting married too young, and she channeled these feelings into resentment toward Tina (it is often easier to show disappointment or anger to a stranger than to a loved one). Tina, in turn, resented her mother-in-law for what she felt was excessive meddling. Each was convinced the other had ulterior motives for sabotaging her relationship with Brian, the son/husband. And, naturally, both were acting out a struggle that was a reenactment of something they had experienced before: Fran did not want her son to repeat the same mistakes she had made, and Tina had been so dominated by her own mother throughout much of her life that she was determined not to let this new mother control her life.

Tina held out an olive branch to her mother-in-law, inviting her to go to lunch one day. Fran, expecting some hidden agenda, accepted reluctantly and behaved with a certain amount of antagonism during the meal. Tina, perceiving her mother- in-law as ungrateful, launched her own defensive campaign, an

attack that Fran was expecting and so interpreted as aggression on her part. When Brian heard the report that night from both combatants, each tried to convince him that the other was at fault for the conflict.

The central theme of this stage in the process, taking responsibility without blaming others or yourself, involves understanding the reciprocal nature of interpersonal difficulties. One of the most fascinating aspects of human behavior is that we do not always obey the laws of the physical world, at least with regard to what causes us to act. Whereas the laws of physics are based on a model of "linear causality," human behavior is best described as being based on "circular causality." What this means is that unlike the physical world, where it may be determined that one thing *causes* another, which in turn *causes* something else, human interactions are both causes *and* effects of what transpired previously.

This is as true for what is going on in your life now as it was for the circumstances of your past. At one time, I used to blame my mother for neglecting me, for instigating the continual arguments we had throughout my childhood and adolescence until I moved out at age seventeen. After all, she was an alcoholic. She was addicted to prescription tranquilizers, to food, to misery. When she died prematurely of cancer (and probably chronic depression), she provided me with the perfect scapegoat: it was *her* fault that I was continuously in conflict with other women in positions of authority.

Eventually, after studying the matter in depth over years of reflection, family research, journal writing, and therapy, I came to realize that my mother was only reacting to the forces of her own life—the ways she had been treated by her own parents, by my father, and even (it was difficult to admit) by my brothers and me. I realized that it was impossible to figure out who was at fault for the conflicts with my mother in the past, just as it is for those in the present.

It may appear as though a conflict results from a linear progression: I treat you disrespectfully because I am insensitive (or so you believe). Most situations are more complex: I felt slighted by you, even though you are unaware of this offense. I then approach you more tentatively in our next meeting, which you interpret as a lack of interest on my part. You begin to respond curtly, thereby reinforcing my feelings of rejection. I lash out next time, feeling totally justified but thereby appearing to be the one with the problem. You then innocently complain: "What is *his* problem?" never realizing your own role in the conflict. Most situations are even more complex than this since they involve more than two people.

You observe a family in action, for example. Thinking linearly, you see a child misbehaving, note that the parents argue between themselves before they decide what to do, and then, somewhat ineffectively, attempt to intervene to control their child. When you examine the situation in greater depth, you find that assigning blame is not as simple as you first thought. When the child

misbehaves, his sister tattles to the mother, who promptly becomes angry. She then complains to the father, who punishes the child. The boy starts to pout and cry, sparking guilt in his sister, who got him in trouble. She then starts to act out herself, whining and complaining. The father and mother start arguing about whose fault this is. The boy then misbehaves again as a distraction, so his parents will stop fighting. The circular pattern continues round and round, each participant reacting to the other family members.

Who is at fault in this conflict? Is it the child who misbehaves? The sibling who manipulates the parents? The mother for being passive? The father for taking over? It is impossible to find the *single* source of this conflict, just as we cannot isolate who is causing whom to do what. All of their actions are interdependent, playing off of and reacting in response to each other's behavior. More often than not, circular causality is the most appropriate model for explaining what takes place during conflict situations.

The Introspective Process of Accepting Responsibility

Tanya and Samantha, two sisters who live in the same town, continuously bicker with one another over various imagined slights. Tanya invites their parents over for dinner one night but decides not to include her sister and her family at the gathering. Samantha becomes indignant when she learns of it and vows not to include Tanya and her family the next time there is a holiday get-

together.

So who is at fault in this situation: Tanya for not including her sister at the first dinner? Samantha for being so petty that she reciprocated in kind, thereby escalating the conflict? How about their parents for constantly comparing the two sisters? Each time one sister checks in with her parents, she hears an up-to-date summary of all the successes the other sister has enjoyed during the previous week.

Of course, whatever conflict exists between them has its roots in interactions that began long ago, during childhood. The sisters grew up in competition with each other—vying to be the one who could get the best grades, the most popular boyfriend, the most successful husband, the most promising career, the largest home, the fanciest car, the brightest children. Clearly, neither one of them is solely responsible for their long-standing conflicts. Nor is it relevant, at this juncture, to blame their parents for pitting them against one another, or at least failing to neutralize their mutual antagonism.

The conclusion as to who is at fault for any situation is thus predicated on answering these questions: Is anyone responsible for what happened? What is the cause of the conflict? Who is to blame? When a person is held responsible for an event, does that mean that he or she is at fault? What am I doing inside

my own head to deny responsibility for what has been happening in an effort to place blame elsewhere?

These are the questions Tanya considered when she came in to see me. She was sick and tired of enduring the constant strain in her relationship with Samantha. Was there anything she could do to stop the squabbles between them?

In order to break the blaming cycle in which each sister took turns finding fault with the other, collecting evidence to prove that the other one was to blame for the situation, it was necessary for Tanya to move away from such obsessive focus on what Samantha was up to and instead concentrate on what she could do to think more constructively about what was going on. This involved figuring out what button Samantha was pushing that elicited such resentment (the implication that she wasn't good enough), discovering where the origins of their struggles lay (a reenactment of their competition for their parents' approval), and harnessing her feelings of rejection and hurt as motivators to look inward rather than outward for the source of the difficulty.

Taking responsibility for the conflict does not mean blaming yourself instead of blaming the other person. Such a strategy can be just as counterproductive, sometimes even more so since it can involve a tendency toward self-pity and helplessness. At least when you are finding fault with

others you are feeling feisty in the act of fighting back instead of withdrawing into a shell surrounded by the trophies of your failures.

Taking responsibility for the relationships in your life that are not going well without accepting blame for the troubles involves an internal process wherein you address a series of introspective inquiries. This procedure proved useful for Tanya in her efforts to regain more control over her perceptions of her sister and their relationship, even if she could not change their interactive patterns.

1. How Are You Disowning the Problem?

Notice the tendency to sidestep responsibility for what has happened before and what continues to take place in the conflicted relationship. For Tanya, this task proved to be quite easy with the assistance of her husband, who had listened far too long to her list of complaints.

"My husband pointed out to me how much time I spend thinking about my sister, bitching about what she is doing. He kids me that I may forget to make the kids' lunches, or to pick him up at the car dealership, but I have never forgotten a single episode of any injustice Samantha has inflicted on me. He is right. I do spend an inordinate amount of time denying that the problem between us is in any way my fault. Yet I can provide you with the longest list of reasons as to why I am so sure she is the one who is so unreasonable. I guess

that only supports the argument that I am unwilling to take some responsibility for this mess."

2. In What Ways Are You Making Excuses for Yourself?

Part of the strategy for avoiding responsibility for the conflicts in your life is to construct a list of excuses, preferably as long as possible, that get you off the hook. If you are particularly bright, then you probably have developed especially good excuses that may not easily be discounted. Even if you are an amateur at this internal activity, it is likely that you have collected a list of favorites, such as:

I didn't do it.	I couldn't help it.
It was just dumb luck.	I didn't mean it.
I wasn't even there.	Don't look at me—she did it.
She asked for it.	Yes, but…
I didn't mean to do it.	Anyone would have done the same thing.
I was just following orders.	She was asking for trouble.
I was just kidding.	I wasn't really trying.
It was just meant to be that way.	A bad temper runs in my family.
It wasn't me, it was the…	It was just an unfortunate situation.
It wasn't me, and I don't know who did it.	I didn't know the rules.
It wasn't a big deal.	Nobody told me.
I had no choice.	It wasn't my fault.

Recall a time recently when someone leveled blame at you for something that you did. What was your initial response? Before you had time to even think through your role and responsibility, to reflect on your degree of culpability, the first excuse was already out of your mouth. Note, for instance, how this automatic defense works for a twelve-year-old boy who has been accused by his father of some alleged misdeed:

father: I notice someone left the ice cream out all night.

son: It wasn't me!

father: There was nobody else home last night who had anything to eat.

son: Maybe someone got up in the middle of the night and had a snack. Why do you always assume it is me?

father: Are you saying that you didn't do it?

son: I *may* have done it. I really don't remember.

father: You don't remember?

son: Okay. Big deal. So it was me. But it wasn't really my fault.

father: No? Whose fault was it?

son: Well, the phone rang when I was scooping the ice cream. And then you asked me to get something for you. Then I had to do my homework. I was preoccupied because I had too much to do.

father: So now you are pleading mitigating circumstances.

son: Excuse me?

father: I was just saying that you admit you did it, but it wasn't your fault?

son: Exactly! I mean, I didn't plan to do it. It is one of those things that just happened.

Almost every possible defense against an accusation is manifested in this dialogue between a parent and child. Under such circumstances, when a person is most interested in disowning responsibility for his or her behavior, the interaction becomes comical as well as extremely frustrating. These excuses are designed to maintain our good standing in the face of negative implications of our actions, and sometimes the stretch reaches ridiculous proportions.

Such is the mechanism of excuse making as a self-protection cloak. You remain safe from criticism and keep assaults to a fragile self-image at bay, but in the process you never take the opportunity to identify the triggers that provoked your defensiveness. You are not able to understand what it is within you that feels threatened and vulnerable, nor are you able to talk things through, with yourself and others, to prevent further distortions in the future.

In the preceding dialogue between a father and son, once they were able to put the issue of blame aside, they were able to sit down and discuss what their interaction was all about. The son explained that he felt constantly criticized by his father, that he could never measure up to his expectations. The father, aghast at this perception of himself, at first tried to make some excuses

of his own. After recognizing that he was essentially doing the same thing that his son had been doing, circumventing responsibility, he began to look at his critical behavior and how it originated from his family of origin. Eventually, they were both able to learn a lot from this exchange over melting ice cream.

If facing conflict without blame presents such wonderful opportunities for growth, why don't we do this more often? The answer is that it takes a tremendous amount of work. If you can get away with an excuse that deflects blame away from you, initially you keep your image clear. You stave off, at least temporarily, any of the effort associated with having to make changes.

In an example from my own life, I made a joke to someone that was taken offensively. If it is true that I was insensitive when I made this joke, then that means I must (1) admit that I was wrong and still feel all right about myself, and (2) monitor myself more closely in the future so that I engage in more socially appropriate behavior. That is a lot of work.

If I choose to sidestep responsibility, however, I may avoid the effort involved in dealing with myself and others but I also miss an opportunity to become more effective. By sloughing off the joke incident as a case of the other person being "oversensitive," or of me "just kidding," I do not learn anything from the experience, nor do I adjust my actions in the future.

Sometimes it feels so potent to be able to say, "I was wrong" or "It is my

fault." It is empowering to acknowledge the truth: "Yes, I made a mistake. So?" This is thrown out not as a challenge, but as a demonstration of your own power. It takes a very secure and strong individual to be able to shoulder the consequences of mistakes without feeling personally threatened. Accepting partial responsibility diffuses blame and excuses on your own terms. What more is there to say about blame during a conflict after one person acknowledges her role in its creation? More often than not, such courage helps the other person reciprocate in kind: "Well, yeah, I appreciate your admitting that. I guess I got out of hand as well."

It is clearly a distortion of reality to deny your share of responsibility in *any* conflict. Even if you can convince someone you had no role in the disagreement (and that is doubtful), *you* know deep down inside that you are not totally blameless. Kidding yourself in one set of circumstances only leads to further self-deception in others. After a while, you will find it difficult to separate your fantasies about what is taking place from the actual objective events. In other words, you will believe your own lies and distortions, which further insulates you from receiving accurate information about the world and honest feedback about how you are perceived by others.

3. What Are Your Favorite Scapegoats for Diverting Blame Away from Yourself?

What are your favorite ways to divert attention and responsibility away

from you and place it elsewhere? Is it poor genes? Bad luck? No support? A misunderstanding? Perhaps somebody else did it.

As with any self-respecting defense mechanism, blaming others for misdeeds allows you to maintain a positive self-image in light of attacks that are perceived as threatening. It buys you time until you can prepare a better excuse. It spreads around the focus of responsibility so that you do not bear the burden alone. Perhaps more important than rehabilitating your image in other people's eyes, blaming allows you to live with your own imperfections and still feel all right about yourself.

When a person is cornered into admitting that he or she did, in fact, do something, that it was intentional rather than accidental, and that he or she accepts responsibility for his or her actions, there is still a way to avoid blame: simply deny that there was anything wrong with what was done.

"Yes, you did tell me your concerns in confidence and ask me not to say anything to anyone else. Yes, I did promise I would honor your request. However, by keeping your feelings under wraps, by not confronting him with your concerns, by confiding in a few of us privately, you were only creating more divisiveness. I went to him and suggested that he approach you because I wanted the two of you to work things out. I felt an obligation not only to our relationship but also to the way we all get along."

Appealing to some greater good to explain one's actions is not the same as denying one's responsibility for creating a conflict. By offering a seemingly viable explanation, the individual accepts responsibility but denies any wrongdoing. The more comprehensible and rational the reasons, the more likely it is that he or she will not be held accountable.

Another means by which to disown responsibility is to *focus on the issue of intentionality:* you may have done it, but you did not mean to. This avoidance of blame goes something like this:

"There was no way I could have imagined that things would get this far out of control. I should not have been placed in this situation to begin with. I was just trying to be helpful."

A third possible response to an accusation is to imply that *you were coerced into acting this way.* You had no other choice; you were forced to do it.

"Hey, what would *you* have done? I could not risk doing anything else. I was in jeopardy, in such a vulnerable position that I was virtually forced to do it. I wish I could have acted otherwise, but there was just no other alternative."

Each of these denials of blame will only be employed when responsibility can be proven. Always the first choice is to *deny that you had anything to do with the situation in the first place.*

One of the best examples of using this type of excuse as a defense against blame comes from a favorite story of comedian Bill Cosby. It seems that one evening late at night, when Bill and his brother were supposed to be sleeping, they began wrestling around in bed. These tussles led to progressively more vigorous games, eventually culminating in "trampoline," in which they determined who could bounce the highest. When the bed came crashing down, the boys' father rushed into the room, ready to seek some revenge for his sleep being disrupted. "What is going on in here? Who broke this bed?"

Bill and his brother looked at one another. Even then showing signs that he was fast on his feet, Bill confidently proclaimed, "It was a robber! He came in through the window when we were sleeping. He woke us up jumping on the bed. Then he broke it! He escaped before we knew what happened."

"Son," his father calmly pointed out, "You don't have a window in this room. How could a robber come in through the window?"

Desperate to escape blame but never skipping a beat, Bill replied, "Well, Dad, he took it with him."

The lengths people will go to to avoid responsibility are indeed humorous. If only blaming others did not have such dangerous side effects. For when you believe that your troubles are the result of what someone or something else is doing to you, you are powerless to stop them. Your only recourses are to duck,

endure, or get out of the way.

It is apparent that people are most likely to blame others for their misfortunes under the following circumstances:

- When someone else is present (such as in all interpersonal conflicts)
- When the other person involved in the conflict is in a higher position of power or authority (boss, parent, and so on)
- When the other person is disliked or not respected
- When the outcome is severe
- When people are unaware that the patterns of their conflicts are replications of unresolved issues from the past

It is counterproductive to blame others, but it can be just as destructive to blame yourself for unpleasant circumstances. Rather than dwelling on who is at fault, it is far better for you to accept responsibility for overcoming the problem and get on with the business of taking charge of this process and working things through. This effort is easier said than done, for the chief obstacles that get in the way of resolving conflicts are those unresolved issues that you have been ignoring.

4. What Might I Do Internally to Feel More in Control Over What Happens Externally?

The consequence of accepting responsibility for a conflict is that you then have to do a tremendous amount of work on yourself in order to rectify matters. This has a lot less to do with things you do on the outside than with internal strategies you can adopt to feel more personal control and take responsibility for your internal feelings.

Attributing blame for conflict to someone or something outside of yourself represents a gross distortion of reality. Cognitive therapists (so called because they emphasize changing internal thinking patterns) have been writing for decades about the irrational beliefs people subscribe to that insist that feelings are reactions *caused* by what other people do:

> "You *make* me so angry." (implying that the other person did something that created this feeling)
>
> "You *made* me do it!" (insinuating that what the other person did necessarily caused this person's response)
>
> "Why did you do that *to* me?" (signifying that the other person's actions were deliberately directed toward the speaker)
>
> "If it were not for you…" (implying that if the other person did not exist, this person would not have any problems)

Actually, interpersonal struggles involve more than just one's chosen reaction to what has taken place. Certainly cognitive activity—that is, one's interpretation of others' actions—does influence how he or she feels about and responds to them. But in a complicated interaction between two people,

individuals often trigger reactions in one another not only through their present behavior but through their unresolved issues as well.

When you attempt to assign blame for a problem, you are likely to follow one of three possible scenarios, none of which is strictly accurate.

1. *External blame:* "It is all your fault. If only you were different, then we would not have this problem between us."

2. *Scapegoat:* "We got manipulated into this conflict. If they had handled things differently, then you and I would not be having this problem."

Both of the above cognitive styles attribute blame to circumstances outside your control. You bear little responsibility for the situation, and so you have little power to change it. In the third case, you take total responsibility for the conflict.

3. *Internal blame:* "It *is* my fault. If I had reacted differently, then we would not be in this mess."

This is also a distortion of reality, since it is highly unlikely that anything is ever entirely one person's fault. Nevertheless, given a choice among the three blaming strategies, even with the remorse and guilt that accompany self-blame, this is still a more empowering way to think about your plight. At the very least, you are implying that you *choose* your reaction to what happened, meaning that

you still can choose to think or act in a way that will produce a different reaction. Such personal responsibility is only possible, however, when you avoid the tendency to make excuses.

Counteracting External Blame

It is virtually a requirement for resolving any conflict that both adversaries must share responsibility for its continuation or its resolution. Since you cannot force someone else to do or think something they do not wish to, since you cannot patch up a dispute by yourself, the first and most useful direction for your attention ought to be to reclaim your own power. Ironically, the quickest way to dispel feelings of helplessness is to acknowledge your own role in creating the problem. As long as your troubles are other people's fault, you have no choice but to wait for them to see the error of their ways. If, however, you acknowledge the interactive nature of conflict and recognize what you have done, and are presently doing, to keep the struggle going, you then have choices about what you might do differently.

There is no more vulnerable feeling than the *perception* that something is being done to you against your will. It is far better to look inward rather than outward for the problem and the solution. This works, however, only when you can take the heat, a prospect that will seem formidable indeed unless you have fortified your own internal strength.

Bolstering Self-esteem

If you can accept yourself as flawed and imperfect, as sometimes doing and saying stupid things, and still maintain a sense that you are basically a good person, then it is not so threatening to say "I'm wrong." You can afford to take some heat because the security of your core is not at stake, even though it sometimes feels that way.

During your inward journey, you will notice certain inclinations and predispositions to tear yourself down (and thereby decrease the internal strength you have to face conflicts more directly). This tendency comes from several sources, most of which you are in a position to alter if you so choose. Most notably, certain unrealistic attitudes you hold will consistently get you into trouble, such as the following:

> • That you are perfectly fluid and graceful in everything you try, even the first time. *When he brought up that stuff from the past, I should have seen it coming. I know that I had never been in that position of responsibility before, but still, I should have been able to adapt more quickly. Then when things started to unravel, I should have anticipated better what would happen next. I seriously question whether I should even be in this position. Why did they promote me so quickly? It is their fault for putting me in a role for which I am not prepared.*
>
> • That you will be successful all of the time. *I don't know how many times I rehearsed what I would say once we were alone. I have been in similar situations dozens of times before, and I have always handled the conflict without losing my cool. All I had to do was follow my plan, but no, I had to try and fix the whole mess. I guess I am not cut out for this kind of relationship. I probably don't even deserve it.*

• That when you do not meet your standards of perfection, it is because you have discovered evidence that deep down inside you are really a fraud. *I knew it! I knew it all along! How could I have let myself think that this time things would be different? I don't know why I even bother trying any more. No matter what I do, or how hard I try, I am still going to get what I deserve—nothing. This is just another example that proves that I am just pulling the wool over other people's eyes. The ones who can see what is underneath realize only too well that I am not worth the effort.*

These self-defeating attitudes are pervasive in your internal dialogues during times when you feel most distraught over a conflict in your life. If you are not busy reciting a list of excuses for why things should be different, or finding fault with others who have made your life unnecessarily uncomfortable, then you are probably taking big chunks out of your own self-esteem through your unrealistic expectations. These distortions and exaggerations that take place inside you may be counteracted by reminding yourself that:

• *Just because I prefer things to happen a certain way does not mean I need them to be so in order to function effectively.*

• *No matter how hard I try and how badly I would like to be even more skilled and accomplished in what I do, I will still come up short of what I want.*

• *Just because I make mistakes and occasionally fail to do what I want, it does not make me a failure as a person.*

Fear of Failure

Another characteristic you may find when you look inward is a systematic

series of defenses designed to protect you from facing your imperfections and flaws. Most often appearing in the form of rationalizations, they involve constructing elaborate excuses to deny your role in a conflict.

Throughout my life I have been obsessed with failure, so much so that I coauthored a book on the subject. I had hoped that by interviewing accomplished practitioners of my profession, asking them about their experiences with failure in life, I would feel better about my own lapses. You see, in life, we often only talk about success. We may broadcast to all the world instances of our victories—promotions at work, conquests in relationships, arguments in which we prevailed, winnings at the gambling tables—but rarely will we talk about disappointments and failures.

In training to be a therapist, for example, all we were ever exposed to were demonstrations of perfection. Our professors and supervisors related numerous stories in which seemingly hopeless cases were cured by their brilliant interventions. We observed videos of the great masters doing therapy, conducting perfect sessions in which they helped an individual resolve a lifelong struggle and still saved a few minutes at the end of the half hour to explain how and why they were so effective. All the cases we read about in our texts involved incredibly complex situations in which the author knew exactly what to do and then did it quite smoothly.

As beginners, we compared our experiences to those of our mentors. I felt awkward and confused much of the time. Often I did not know what to do with my clients, and even when I did know, I could not do it as well as I would have liked. Yet I could not talk about these cases. It was not safe to admit that I did not know what to do. During group supervision sessions, it became the norm to bring up only those cases in which you already knew what was going on; that way you could defend yourself properly. The object was to keep away any inkling that we were somehow deficient.

I have since learned that my experience was not unique. Not only in the practice of therapy, but in virtually every field it is not acceptable to admit that you do not know what you are doing. You must pretend that you are perfectly competent in everything you do. And if you do not feel that way, fake it. If you do not believe this, imagine how you would react if your doctor, lawyer, or car mechanic were honest with you and told you: "I don't have any idea what is going on. But stick with me, and maybe I can figure something out."

When you are able to come to terms with your own imperfections and faults, when you can readily accept the fact that sometimes you fail but it does not make you a failure, then, only then, can you embrace mistakes as opportunities for learning. Yes, you heard me correctly: *embrace* failure as potentially growthful. Think of failure as constructive feedback telling you that something you tried did not work. Feel grateful for the clarity of the message so

that you do not repeat the same mistakes. Allow your misjudgments to help you be more flexible in the future, more determined to improve your effectiveness. Forgive yourself for being imperfect. Treat failures as merely useful information about what works and what does not.

The Need for Internal Control

I will sometimes take the need to feel in control over my life to such great lengths that even when something happens that clearly has nothing to do with my actions, I will still find a way to feel responsible. I engage in this magical thinking not because I am a glutton for punishment but because I enjoy the feeling that things are not done *to* me without my participation and consent.

A store clerk, whom I have never met in my life, yells at me because I was too slow advancing in the line. (This was not the case.) All the while I recognize that this lady is having a bad day, or maybe she is not a very nice person. I also begin to look at what I might have done, even oh so subtly and unconsciously, to invite this abuse. Do I project an air of "kick me?" What is it about my appearance, or the way I present myself, that encouraged her to lash out at me?

Now I realize, of course, that I take this internal control business to an extreme. Events of the world sometimes fell upon all of us simply because we are occupying a certain space at a particular moment. But I so like the feeling that what happens to me is a direct or indirect result of what I do that I prefer to

assume first that I am partially to blame.

That does not make me an easy mark to take advantage of, for I may not tell *you* what I am doing. I may even try to make you believe that you are solely at fault for our conflict, but inside my own head, where it really counts, I am searching furiously for my role in the struggle.

The Search for Excuses

Before you can take back your power you must first be able to recognize that you are giving it away. This involves catching yourself in the act of trying to place blame elsewhere. Staying within the boundaries of reality—engaging in neither excessive self-blame nor excuse making—can help you discover the specific ways that you attempt to externalize responsibility.

By way of review, the excuses that are commonly used fall into four main groups: (1) "I didn't do it." (2) "I didn't mean to do it." (3) "They made me do it." and (4) "I couldn't help it." Monitor the dialogue going on inside your head anticipating, during, and after an argument. When you hear variations of the themes "That's not fair!" "How dare she do that to me!" "I didn't do anything! Why pick on me?" and "It wasn't my fault," it is likely that you are in an excuse-making mode.

When you listen to yourself during a heated exchange (a skill that requires

tremendous resolve), you will notice a marked tendency to try and score points or land punches by trying to get the other person to admit that he is at fault and you are not. This almost never works.

Augmenting Options in Other Arenas

Relying on excuses and blaming others are acts of desperation. If you had other options, both internally and external strategies such as being assertive, debating convincingly, mediating, compromising—methods designed to negotiate outcomes that are satisfying to both participants—you would find them much more effective in settling disputes. Before experimenting with alternative means by which to deal with conflict, you must first commit yourself to action. As you will find in the next stage of the process, described in Chapter Five, this is not as easy as it sounds.

About the Author

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On Being a Therapist (1993, revised ed.)

Teacher as Counselor (1993, with Ellen Kottler)

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Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients (1992)

Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

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Private Moments, Secret Selves:

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Mouthing Off: A Study of Oral Behavior, Its Causes and Treatments (1981)

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