

THE RESPONSIBILITY LOOPHOLE BY GINGER E. BLUME, PH.D.

Some people behave as if they were phobic of taking responsibility for their own lives. You know the type I'm talking about. Sometimes, this avoidance of responsibility represents the formation of a "bad habit," a lack of maturity before moving into adulthood, or perhaps, a personality flaw as evidenced by someone with a personality disorder. Regardless of the reason for avoiding responsibility, let's take a look at how this plays out in adulthood.

By becoming an adult, we all gain numerous freedoms, as well as opportunities for making personal choices. I'll explore in this article what Gerald W. Johnson reminds us: "No man was ever endowed with a right without being at the same time saddled with a responsibility." Yes, there's the rub!

Free Choice comes with a price

Regardless of cause, it is impossible to become a fully *actualized* individual without learning to take personal responsibility for your own behavior. In the majority of situations in our lives, nobody is holding a gun to our head. In other words, we usually have free choice to decide how we're going to behave. Quite simply, we can either own or disown our decisions. We can blame our actions on others, or admit to our wrong doings. Author, Ken Keyes, Jr. clarified where responsibility lies, when he said, **"You are not responsible for the programming you picked up in childhood. However, as an adult, you are one hundred percent responsible for fixing it."**

What happens when people pretend they are not in the driver's seat of their lives? They become collectors of various "explanations" for why something isn't their fault. For instance, they'll say: "The circumstances were out of my control;" "I had no say over what was done by the others;" "I was too anxious (or depressed, or unfocused, etc.) to pay attention;" "I had too much to drink that night; nobody warned me of the consequences;" etc. These excuses are supposed to exempt them from personal responsibility. However, in the final analysis, when you blame others, you actually relinquish your power to change. Your growth as a person is stymied.

Self Deception

Excuses are simply mental lies to ourselves. Unfortunately, we come to believe these self-deluded lies after we've repeated them often enough. We deceive ourselves with various thoughts, such as, "If only someone had told me... I would have done something." Our excuses move us further and further from reality. Excuses are an attempt to locate "an easy way out" of some fix we've gotten ourselves into or some type of emotional pain we'd like to escape.

Responsibility avoiders are looking for a "free pass" in the game of life. However, there is no free pass. There are consequences for every decision and every action we take in our lives. Some people call this fact, "karma." Whatever name you call, it, you must realize the bottom line stops with you. Sidney Harris said,

We have not passed that subtle line between childhood and adulthood until... we have stopped saying "It got lost," and say "I lost it."

Life is clearly not easy and this is a fact, not a complaint. In fact, life becomes easier to manage when we allow ourselves to experience legitimate suffering. Through such suffering, we have an opportunity to personally grow. When we hang onto excuses and refuse to take responsibility for our actions, we either stay stuck or begin to shrivel as a human being. Legitimate suffering (not neurotic suffering that is created out of fear) can function like a weight for a weight lifter. It can help you build character muscle so that you slowly develop the ability to handle future pain much more effectively and honestly.

Stepping Up to the Plate

How do we begin to acknowledge our own responsibility? This takes self-awareness and self-discipline. First, we must commit to being honest with ourselves. Don Miguel Ruiz wrote a book, The Four Agreements in which he outlines how to “be impeccable with your word.” He offers this advice:

Speak with integrity. Say what you mean.

Avoid using the word to speak against yourself or to gossip about others.

Use the power in the direction of truth and love.

Honesty with ourselves requires that we notice why we behave the way we do. We must also begin to experience what it feels like to behave in a restrained and disciplined manner rather than act on impulse. People who act impulsively are oftentimes unable to delay gratification. They want “immediate satisfaction” gained by reacting without restraint. For instance, they may enjoy stating what is on their mind (i.e. “You’re a total jerk. Look what you made me do!”), rather than restrain their comments and think before they speak. More often than not, when we blame someone else, we are, at least partially, to blame ourselves.

Bargaining doesn’t work

Sometimes clients tell me they are willing to admit they are wrong, “If only.....” They want to qualify their own truthfulness, based on whether the other person will also admit to their own wrongdoings, as well. Realize, that when you say, “I’ll do this, but so-and-so must do that,” you’re still seeking an excuse. Your truthfulness and personal responsibility are not contingent upon another person’s behavior, but instead, are something you do because it is “right.” You choose truthfulness and responsibility because you are committed to always doing your very best (regardless of others).

Louis Nizer warns us, “When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing at himself.” We can all start this New Year to become a better person by choosing to own our actions and stand behind our own words. George Bernard Shaw wisely said, “We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future.”