

Practice Radical Responsibility in Relationships

We love blaming! It starts early: “It’s not *my* fault that there’s mud on the carpet; it’s Stacy’s fault!” “Is not!” “Is too!” We appeal madly to Mom or Dad, blaming frantically, every word calculated to convince the parents that we’re still the little angel, and our sibling comes straight from the outer circles of Heck.

You’ll notice that blaming really had nothing to do with the other person. It was all about us appealing to a higher authority—Mom and Dad—to prove our innocence. Many times, we even knew we were at fault, and the blaming helped us perfect the Fine Art of Denial (see tip XXX).

Most of us keep on blaming right through school. “We would have finished our group project, if only Pat had spent less time reading gossip magazines and more time working.” If we’re graded individually for our group project, this scheme might even work, reinforcing the notion that blame works.

Once we’re in the work world, blame *still* seems like a survival strategy. “Billy didn’t order the paper on time, so we had to delay our print run.” Hopefully, our latest authority figure, our Boss, will be deeply sympathetic and will shower us with beaming approval while casting pursed looks of disapproval in Billy’s general direction.

But have you noticed that blame doesn’t actually help you live your life? And it certainly doesn’t help cement relationships. In fact, when someone blames too much, we start to think they’re a “whiner.” The Internet has revolutionized the whining world. Every whiner can now find a forum or online community to gather with similar whiners and whine about what victims they are. Whining is an extremely flexible bonding tool. People can whine about race, expectations, politics, accomplishments, wealth distribution, weight, plastic surgery, and celebrities.

The opposite of whining.

If you want your relationships to take off, whining rarely works. Remember, you learned to whine because it would bring you *and your parents* closer together. Whining and blaming *never* actually got the person you were blaming to change. While it can bring a satisfying feeling of self-righteousness, it doesn’t actually help us reach our goals. And even though we’ve long forgotten that we’re blaming to avoid looking at how we might have been the one at fault, deep down we cling to blaming others because we know if we stopped, we would have to look at ourselves. And that, my friends, is not nearly as much fun.

But if you want to heal and grow your relationships, the secret is to do the opposite of whining. Take full, 100% responsibility for making the relationship succeed.

Radical Responsibility means dropping our expectations and taking others' actions as information.

When we hit a rough spot in the relationship, we often think about how it's the other person's fault. If only they would change, everything would be fine. It's all about them, them, them. We even verify that with our friends. We say, "Can you believe that Billy? Late with the paper order, *again!*" Our friends nod, knowingly. We all share a hearty glass of Guinness, as we proudly proclaim how right we are. We get to feel "right," and ... the paper still hasn't been ordered, and we still miss our deadline.

If, on the other hand, we take full responsibility, then we skip the whole blame and whining part:

We have a job to be done that requires paper. And we have a work relationship with the Billy, whose job it is to order paper. We've asked Billy several times to order the paper and even emailed reminders. Nothing has worked.

Instead of getting upset, we simply accept this as information: Billy isn't ordering paper, and asking Billy hasn't worked. We can count on Billy to be late with the paper order; counting on Billy to suddenly start being on time is silly and unrealistic.

So we can look for other solutions. Maybe we can set up automated reminders for Billy. Or maybe we can sit down with Billy and help place the order. Or maybe we can redistribute responsibilities so Billy can do something where the deadlines don't matter so much.

This isn't about fairness; it's about making your relationships easier.

"But I shouldn't have to sit down with Billy and place the order. That's not my job!" True. But remember, the goal here is to make your relationship go well. In terms of job responsibilities, Billy's failing. But you have a job that needs doing. It would be easier if you could count on Billy, but you can't. So you take responsibility for making everything work and do what it takes to help Billy succeed enough so you can get your job done.

If you notice that we all behave as who we are, and accept that, you can put your effort into making the relationship work *given who the other person is*. This plays out with our husbands, wives, spousal equivalents, and polyamorous family units all the time. You come home and the kitchen *still* hasn't been cleaned up.

Scenario 1: Blaming. You immediately yell at your sweetie, "Clean up!" Maybe your sweetie reluctantly cleans up, or maybe they don't. Or maybe you clean the kitchen together. Or maybe you do it, muttering under your breath. The kitchen may or may not get clean, and you'll be miserable, upset, angry, and resentful doing it.

Scenario 2: Taking 100% responsibility. The kitchen's dirty and you want it clean. So you simply stay calm, take responsibility, and clean it up, even though you didn't make the mess. The kitchen now gets clean and you stay calm and happy. Without wallowing in blame and whining, you could simply get what you want directly.

Taking responsibility doesn't mean you have to be a doormat.

What if this happens every day? "Surely, I shouldn't have to clean up their mess every day!" I hear you cry. Well, what's the alternative? Asking hasn't worked. Reminding hasn't worked. Take their behavior as information: they aren't cleaning the kitchen. You know that.

Now, *you* have a decision to make. The daily dirty kitchen is a given. What do you want to do about it? Lecturing your sweetie(s) won't work. You know that. So... you could hire a house cleaner. You can clean it yourself. Or, you can decide that it's really so bad that you are ready to end the relationship over it. The funny part is that when you fully take 100% responsibility, you feel free to make any of those choices, but without anger or resentment.

But what about teenagers...?

I'm always amazed watching people deal with teenage children. This whole "clean your room" thing leaves me mystified. I see parents work themselves into a frenzy, alienate their kids, and scream their throats raw because they want their kids to clean their room. Why?

Imagine you're that parent. If you want the room clean, go in and clean it yourself. And don't expect your teenager to thank you for it. You're cleaning it because *you* want it clean, not because they want it. And you get to be happy. And *really* clean it. Don't just throw stuff away in anger. Take responsibility and clean it the way you want it cleaned, from a place of love. Otherwise, just close the door if you don't want to look at it.

Besides, after you've cleaned a teenager's room from top to bottom a couple of times, with strategically dropped comments about how you didn't *mean* to read the open diary page as you were putting it away, the kids just might decide to pre-empt you by cleaning on their own.

(If your kids aren't teenagers yet, a good coat of industrial paint and institutional carpeting is a good preventative measure. It makes cleanup a snap. Leave your teenager's mess untouched until they leave home, then a single sandblasting and antibacterial steam-cleaning session makes the room habitable again.)

Radical Responsibility at work.

At work, if you're depending on someone who isn't delivering, pretend for a moment that it's *your* responsibility to get the team's work done. Depending on your colleague hasn't worked. What else could you do? Instead of running to your friends to engage in impotent blaming, run to your friends and have them brainstorm with you. You are still free to go to the boss and try to get a new co-worker who will pull their weight, but you will do it from a place of responsibility, not a petulance.

Using the I'm-no-doormat principle, if you try everything and find yourself doing the work of several people, from a place of full responsibility, you can decide that this job isn't meeting your needs and go elsewhere.

Radical responsibility is awesome when we all do it.

When you practice Radical Responsibility and the people around you are slackers, life goes from miserable to good, at least emotionally. But when you find others who also practice Radical Responsibility, it becomes sheer joy. That's because when each person takes full responsibility for everything getting done, you're all looking out for each other, offering help, and doing what it takes so the relationship itself is a success. We all end up taking each other, yet not expecting it, so it's one continual surprise.

Start acting with Radical Responsibility.

1. Make a list of people you have relationships with.
2. For each one, ask yourself how you wish they would change in the relationship.
3. Now assume they won't change. Figure out what you can do to fully accept their current behavior and take emotional responsibility for making the relationship work anyway.
4. If that translates into specific behavior, note that down. Add it to your to-do list. Then go do it, and enjoy knowing you're taking full responsibility.
5. If at some point, you decide that taking responsibility for what you want out of the relationship isn't working for you, let the other person know, and end the relationship if that seems appropriate.