

# Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

## **THE EMPOWERMENT OF CHOICE – Part 1**

This article first appeared in the March, 2001, issue of the Gazette on <teachers.net>.

*The ultimate freedom is the right to choose my attitude  
in any given situation.*

Viktor Frankl

Teaching young people about choice-response thinking—that *they need not be victims*—may be one of the most valuable thinking patterns we can give them. Students become more responsible when they learn that in almost any *situation*, or with any *stimulus*, or with any *impulse* or *urge*, they still have freedom to choose a response.

## **CHOICE-RESPONSE THINKING**

### **Situation**

We all experience situations that are beyond our control, either momentarily or permanently. We are confronted with weather and other natural forces, with inconveniences, unpleasant assignments, unrewarding family or work relationships, and numerous situations that we cannot change. However, *we can choose our responses to these situations*.

Victor Frankl, the psychiatrist who survived the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, experienced situations beyond his control. Yet, he taught that a person has the power to choose his thinking, his independence of mind, even in the most terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. Although conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food, and various mental stresses suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it became clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision—not the result of camp influences alone. Even under such extreme circumstances, a person still has one freedom: “the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to chose one’s own way.”

### **Stimulus**

In addition to having the freedom to make a choice in a *situation* over which we have little control, we also have the freedom to make a choice after something *stimulates* us. This is the case when a parent smiles at the infant, and the infant smiles back. Such stimuli become less “automatic” with growth, as when the parent smiles at the teenager, but the teenager does not reciprocate with a like facial expression. Assume for a moment that you are looking forward to watching a special broadcast on television. You have had your dinner, are comfortably reclining, and are engrossed in the program. The telephone rings. You can choose to answer it, or choose to let it ring, or choose to let the telephone-answering device respond to the call.

Similarly, when you are driving and approach a red light in a busy intersection, you choose to stop. Your initial response to answering a phone which rings or stop at a red light are learned responses to stimuli. None of these stimuli *makes* a person do anything. Consciously or

nonconsciously, we choose our responses to stimuli. These examples of reactions are everyday occurrences in daily living. In practical application, it doesn't make a particle of difference if these reactions are conscious or nonconscious. There is a problem, however, when we think our responses are automatically controlled by external stimuli. The harm comes when, by implication, we think that the ringing of the phone or the stopping at a red light *causes* us to react—as if an outside force or person causes our behavior.

This same choice-response situation is operating when stuck in traffic, and we start to get angry. The traffic does not care; it is simply a situation which stimulates us. We allow ourselves to become angry. We could play a tape, a compact disk, or listen to the radio. We could think about past pleasant thoughts or future plans. *We can choose our responses to situations—as unpleasant as the situation may be.*

Anyone who has lived with another person for any length of time discovers that no one can really *make* or *cause* another person to change. People change themselves. The environment can certainly be established where the person *wants* to change. This is the reason why very young people do things adults would like them to do. Youngsters value adults and *want* to please them. This is also true in the classroom. Young students like their teachers. Unfortunately, many teachers and parents use rewards and punishments thinking that these external manipulators *cause* young people to change.

When confronted by a stimulus, a person needs to realize that a choice of responses exists. Imagine that in a classroom the teacher sees a student hitting another student. The teacher did not see the first student do the instigating; the teacher only saw the retaliation of the second student and calls him on it. The youngster tells the teacher, "He made me do it." Even though this student was stimulated to act, he still made the choice to hit back. No one else made the choice for him. The student had the freedom to choose a response, and he chose hitting. Students need to learn that regardless of the stimulus, each person still has some choice of responses.

## **Impulse**

We also have the freedom to choose our response to an *impulse* or *urge*. Infants are given diapers to wear because they are not able to control their natural urges. As they grow, diapers are no longer needed. We learn to respond to our physiological urges. The same holds true for emotional impulses. When we become angry, there is a moment of awareness before the emotion takes over—before we become "emotionally hijacked." As normal, healthy individuals—at that moment—we can exercise some choice of response. A response will occur, but the how, when, or where is often our choice.

Freedom to choose one's response is fundamental in a civil society. It is incumbent upon the adults of our society to teach young people that they have a choice in controlling their behaviors and that it is in young people's own best interests to choose appropriate responses.

Regardless of the situation, the stimulus, or the impulse, people choose their responses. To do otherwise means we would operate from compulsion. Jeffrey Schmitt, a UCLA psychiatrist refers to the beauty of being human, and not a rat or monkey. The difference is that humans need not succumb to our emotions every single time. The less we succumb, the less we are bothered by tyrannical obsessions.

Because we have the freedom to choose our responses, we are responsible for our own choices (behaviors). By teaching young people that they choose their own behaviors, they begin to

become conscious of the fact that no one else chooses their behaviors for them. Choice-response thinking encourages self-control and responsibility. In addition, having young people become aware of choice-response thinking can have a liberating effect, especially with those who feel they are helpless or victims.

**(Concluded next month)**

-----

**To read about the failings of punishments and rewards, go to**  
<[www.AboutDiscipline.com](http://www.AboutDiscipline.com)>.

Subscribe to the free monthly newsletter, **PROMOTING RESPONSIBILITY**, at  
<[www.DisciplineWithoutStress.com](http://www.DisciplineWithoutStress.com)>.

Enter e-mail address and click on "Subscribe."

-----  
<[www.MarvinMarshall.com](http://www.MarvinMarshall.com)>  
Copyright © 2001 Marvin Marshall