

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

THE EMPOWERMENT OF CHOICE – Part 2 (Continued from last issue)

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*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.

VICTIMHOOD

As a young student explains his report card to his parents, he says, “No use debating environment versus genetic causes. Either way, it’s your fault.” 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.

Victim-type thinking is counterproductive to engendering responsibility. Examples of such thinking can be heard in comments such as, “He made me do it,” “I couldn’t control myself,” “I couldn’t help it, and “I had no choice.” *Merely being aware that such thinking relinquishes control has an empowering effect.*

A student has a test returned. The student did not do well and concludes, “I’m not good in this subject.” The student sees a flaw in himself that he believes is beyond his control and becomes pessimistic. He gives up; he stops trying. Another student, an optimist, who receives the same grade concludes, “I guess that means I should have studied more.” This student sees a setback as something *over which he has control*. The critical difference between optimistic thinking and pessimistic thinking has to do with the perception of control which, in turn, depends upon perception of choice. We feel psychologically healthy when we believe we have choices.

Research on the value of choice is solid. Our brain generates different chemicals when we feel optimistic and in control than when we feel pessimistic and a loss of control or power.

Choice, control, and responsibility are so woven together that one significantly affects the others. Make a choice, and control is enhanced. Fail to choose, and control is diminished. The more responsibility that is chosen, the more control follows. Deny responsibility, and control is given up. We become responsible by exercising choice-response thinking. *This realization can play a dominant role in how a person directs one’s life.*

People who regard themselves as victims do not see themselves as in control and often see the world as unfair to them in particular. Whatever happens in their lives only happens *to* them—as if they have no choice as to their responses. Victimhood people are often angry people. People who

have chosen to regard themselves as victims cannot allow themselves to be happy because being happy would challenge their perceptions as victims. Such was the case on October 1, 1997, when a 16-year old in Pearl, Mississippi, came on to his high school campus and shot two students. When chased and caught by the school's assistant principal, the teenager was asked "Why?" The shooter replied, "The world has wronged me." Lack of a feeling of control is a prime factor in young people's anti-social behavior.

In an attempt to assist students with special needs, new categories of disabilities have been created. Students are labeled and classified with behavioral disorders. Too often, socially disruptive behavior is viewed as a "condition," resulting in students' being excused for socially irresponsible behavior. Thus, viewed through the prism of special handicaps, these students are too often not held accountable for irresponsible behavior.

When these students leave school and behave in socially unacceptable ways, giving excuses such as, "I'm compulsive," and "I couldn't help it" do not impress law enforcement or society generally. A disservice will have been done to these students because the school world in which they have grown up is unlike the greater society. All young people need to learn that they have the freedom to choose their responses and that they will be held accountable for their choices.

Language shapes our thinking, particularly when it comes to self-talk. Taking conscious control of inner chat can act like a magic wand to shift to more empowering mental states. Victimhood is the result of thinking of outside forces rather than internal responses. Common thinking patterns are "Someone else is at fault," "Something else caused my behavior; I am not responsible for it," and "I'm a victim."

Young people can be taught to self-talk in enabling and self-powering ways. Phrases such as "prompts me" and "stimulates me" can be substituted for the powerless "made me" and "caused me." Additional words that reduce "victim" thinking are references to "influence," "persuade," "arouse," "irritate," "annoy," "pique," and "provoke." These words do not give away power; they merely describe the effect on oneself.

Another strategy to reduce powerlessness is to change adjectives into verbal forms. Notice the difference between, "I am *angering*," and "I am angry." As soon as we phrase it as an action, we become immediately aware of a choice.

Also, instead of thinking, "The task is too difficult" young people can be taught to take charge by eliminating the "too" and by changing the word "difficult" into "challenging," thus "The task is challenging." Another more subtle language pattern is the ill use of "try." "Try" merely conveys an attempt. Self-talk should convey commitment. A person does not get out of bed by *trying* to get out of bed or make a phone call by *trying* to call. You get out of bed and you make a call. This type of self-talk is the hallmark of success. As Henry Ford so aptly put it, "If you think you can, you can; if you think you can't, you can't. Either way you are right."

Another approach that can be used is to teach young people to ask themselves proactive questions. "What would be the best way to act in this situation?" "How can I best respond to that?" "How can I prevent that urge from directing my behavior?" These types of questions empower people and assist in fostering individual as well as social responsibility.

It is no kindness to treat people as helpless, inadequate, or victims—regardless of what has happened to them. Kindness is having faith in people and treating them in a way that encourages and empowers them to handle their situations, stimulations, and urges.

KEY POINTS

People can choose their attitudes and responses to any situation, stimulus, or impulse.

Students should be taught they are products of their choices as well as their circumstances.

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.

The critical difference between optimistic thinking and pessimistic thinking has to do with the perception of control which, in turn, depends upon perception of choice.

Choice, control, and responsibility are so woven together that one significantly affects the others.

Students can be taught to self-talk in enabling and self-powering ways.

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