

Understanding Emotional Responsibility

beyond fault and duty

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The **emotional responsibility** “movement,” so to speak, emerged as a remedy to a pattern of behavior that plagues so many interpersonal relationships, that of emotional projection.

Projection is the pattern of believing: *You are responsible for how I feel*, or alternately, *I am responsible for how you feel*.

The behaviors that typically emerge out of emotional projection include blame, bulldozing, control, demands, unhealthy attachment, unhealthy dependence, trying too hard to please, guilt tripping, and self-blame.

Emotional responsibility’s answer to this pattern is for individuals to step back and step up, saying, *I take responsibility for how I feel*.

Rather than saying, “You make me miserable,” the emotionally responsible thing to say is, “I feel miserable as a result of this situation. Some of that has nothing to do with you, and I can work to make myself feel better.” What a wonderful trick, right?

Often times, yes. But not so fast. Like emotional projection, emotional responsibility has a helpful side and a harmful side.

“Emotional Projection”

At its best: You punch me in the face and I say, “Stop hitting me.”

At its worst: I grab your hand, punch myself in the face with it and say, “Stop hitting me.”

1. I am responsible for how you feel.

Helpful: I care about you. Your happiness matters to me. I will take actions that make you happy.

Harmful: It is my job to constantly make you happy and alleviate your pain. I will do this even at the expense of my own needs. Everything you feel is my fault. I do not believe you are capable of meeting your needs yourself.

2. You are responsible for how I feel.

Helpful: I understand how your actions impact me, and will be open and honest with you about what I need and how I want to be treated.

Harmful: My happiness is your job and you are the only person who can alleviate my pain. Meet my needs before your own. Everything I feel is your fault. I am not capable of meeting my needs myself.

“Emotional Responsibility”

At its best: I punch myself in the face and you say, “Stop hitting yourself.”

At its worst: You grab my hand, punch me in the face with it and say, “Stop hitting yourself.”

1. I am responsible for how I feel.

Helpful: I understand that my feelings come from all kinds of sources, not just your actions. I have the agency to change my own feelings.

Harmful: No one can help me to feel happy or alleviate pain. I don’t need anyone, and no one will be there for me. Everything I feel is my fault. If I can’t meet all of my needs, my needs will never be met.

2. You are responsible for how you feel.

Helpful: Not everything you feel is something I can change. You have the agency to meet your own needs, and I am not at fault for every single thing you feel.

Harmful: Making you happy or alleviating your pain is not my problem. I can do whatever I want, and whatever you feel about that is your problem. My actions aren’t responsible for your pain. Everything you feel is your fault.

A reaction to dependence

Emotional responsibility is really just a belief in emotional **independence**: my emotions are wholly independent of your actions. Emotional projection is really just a belief in emotional **dependence**: my emotions are wholly dependent on your actions. When looked at from this view, it becomes obvious *both* of these models are sometimes true and both are sometimes false.

It is frightening to me that we've started to treat emotional independence as emotional responsibility. In a way, it's unsurprising; this is so indicative of our time. Ours is the era of individuality and hammering out your own identity. Ours is also the era of atomization and isolation.

Independence is an understandable and necessary step towards growth from total dependence, but it is a step. It is a movement in the direction of a healthy equilibrium. Healthy balance is the goal.

If you blame others too much, or you take blame for others too much, the helpful side of emotional independence can help you. If you feel isolated, alienated and alone, the helpful side emotional dependence can help you.

Ultimately, independence is no more responsible than dependence, and actual emotional responsibility is **interdependent** — sometimes independent, sometimes dependent, and almost always a mix of both.

Actual emotional responsibility comes from understanding two things: emotions, and responsibility.

What are emotions?

Emotions are feelings. We typically think of them as distinct from physical feelings, but they are feelings all the same. Feelings are ultimately **states of being**, and they arise due to unmet needs.

Needs are also states of being, and they arise due to feelings. The two arise together.

***Example A:** I feel cold; I need warmth. I feel cold because I do not feel warm enough. I need to be warmer because I feel too cold.*

***Example B:** I feel rejection; I need acceptance. I feel rejected because I do not feel accepted. I need to feel accepted because I feel rejected.*

When we talk about emotional feelings, we're talking about emotional needs. The two are inseparable.

Remember: needs are only ever states of being.

Desires arise for tools or strategies we can use to meet our needs. We often confuse desires and needs. Desires can be interchangeable; needs cannot.

***Example A:** I feel too cold. I need more warmth. I desire a blanket.*

Interchangeability: A campfire, sunlight, a heater, and a warm embrace could also work.

***Example B:** I feel rejection. I need acceptance. I desire being told I'm accepted.*

Interchangeability: A comforting smile of approval could also work.

Emotions are feelings. Feelings arise from needs. Needs arise from feelings. You cannot just stop needing something you need. You cannot stop feeling a feeling without meeting the unmet need. You *can* usually find multiple methods of meeting your need.

Some needs are easier to meet for yourself than others. Some of us know better than others how to meet our needs for ourselves. Some of us know better than others how to get our needs met by other people. No, none of it is “fair.”

For a helpful tool for this process, you could try my emotional needs game, LookinGlass, available at: www.lookinglass.one

What is responsibility?

We usually use *responsibility* as a synonym for either *fault* or *duty*. When we say, “You’re responsible for this,” we tend to mean, “You caused this. You are at fault. You must fix it. Fixing it is your duty.”

But responsibility is not the same as fault or duty. Fault and duty are constructions, simplifications of cause and effect that ignore the vast majority of an infinity of variables that lead to any situation taking place.

I invite you to take responsibility to mean, “**ability to respond.**”

A thing happened. I cannot make the thing unhappen. That isn't how time works. Now, in this moment, what ability do I have to respond to the thing?

Have you heard the phrase, “With great power comes great responsibility?” It is not that with great power comes being at fault for more stuff. What comes with great power is a heightened ability to respond to things.

True emotional responsibility is about relinquishing questions of *fault* and looking only at *ability to respond* to feelings and needs.

When ability is fluid, nebulous, or held in multiple places, we return to desire. We’ll get to this later.

How do we determine ability?

Ability requires two things: **power**, and **awareness**.

If you do not have the **power** to take a certain action, then you do not have the ability to take it. For example: If I am thirsty, but I am lost in the desert with no water, I do not have the power I need to meet my need for thirst.

If you do not have the **awareness** of what action you could take, then you do not have the ability to take it. For example: If I am thirsty and lost in the desert with no water, and I do not know that there is an oasis just over the next hill, I do not have the awareness I need to meet my need for thirst.

Typically, when it comes to emotions and interpersonal relationships, power and awareness are less cut-and-dry.

If I need to feel acceptance, but I have never known real acceptance from other people in my life, how would I determine my power and awareness to meet that need?

If I need to feel safe, how aware am I of what usually makes me feel safe? Are there any actions I have the power to take that could increase my feeling of safety?

Often, we believe our abilities are constrained by a lack of power, and so we seek more power. In many cases (particularly on the societal level), this is true. But in many other cases (particularly on the personal-interpersonal level), we look for power over others instead of deepening our awareness of ourselves.

Who has the ability to respond?

As a general rule, we usually have a greater ability to respond to our own needs than we do the needs of others. We usually have a greater ability to respond to our own needs than others do to our needs.

However, this heuristic is broken by two things: power imbalance, and lack of conscious power.

Power Imbalance

If I have power over you in some way, I may well have a greater ability to respond (responsibility) to your needs than you do. For example, parents and children — a parent has a greater ability to respond to their baby's needs than the baby does. A boss, landlord or ruler might also have a greater ability to respond to the needs of their employee, tenant or subject.

Lack of Conscious Power

In cases where my ability to make conscious decisions is inhibited, you may have a greater ability to respond (responsibility) to my needs than I do. For example, in the case of addiction — by definition, an addict is someone who does something to the point of their own detriment, unable to stop themselves from doing it. Other examples might include phobias, traumatic triggers, or delusion/psychosis.

But it's not always this obvious. Sometimes, situations that keep us from being able to respond to our own needs are very subtle. Power imbalances can be subtle. Lacking consciousness can be subtle. There is constantly some negotiation of these variables in every relationship.

Even if everyone had a perfectly equal ability to respond to the situation, who would respond? It's at this level of questioning we realize how little ability actually matters in taking responsibility.

The question of will

Like everything, who responds to what is determined far less by who is *able* to respond than simply who wants to.

Sometimes, increasing our awareness of actions we could take to respond to a given situation makes us feel more willing to respond. Sometimes, increasing our power to take actions makes us feel more willing to respond. And sometimes, even those with both the awareness and power to respond simply don't want to.

Constraints on ability are just that – constraints on ability. They don't necessarily speak to anything about **will** – our needs, our desires, and our choices as a result of them.

I am hesitant to use the term “free will,” because like ability, will is conditioned, constrained and caused by an infinity of variables. All the same, we cannot deny the autonomy we each hold over our own choices.

Ability (power and awareness) determines what choices we have available to choose between. But it is still our will to choose.

How to actually be emotionally responsible

There is no consistent right answer. There is no map. There is only ever a compass, and that compass is your experience itself.

Ultimately, you are responsible for deciding what you are responsible for. Only you can know what you are able to respond to.

But even your ability to respond to the question, “What am I able to respond to?” may well be limited by power imbalances and/or lack of conscious power. You may be conditioned to think that things are “not your problem” when you very well could help. You may be conditioned to think that you “have to do something” when you very well can’t help.

What we need to understand from “emotional responsibility” is that we feel things because of situations, not just because of other people’s actions.

What we need to understand from “emotional projection” is that people’s actions are integral to creating situations, and a change in actions going forward can lead to a change in the situation.

Real emotional responsibility looks like this:

- Accept that a situation happened, and now you feel something. Accept what you feel. Accept that you feel it. Accept that you are allowed to feel that way.
- Ask yourself what you can do to change the situation going forward. What ability do you have to respond?
- How aware are you of possible actions to take to meet your needs? Do you have the power to take actions to

meet your needs? Which ones? Do you want to take those actions? Are you comfortable taking those actions?

- Ask others what they can do to change the situation going forward. What ability do *they* have to respond?
- Ask others for help and support if and when they are able. Give others your help and support if and when you are able.
- Do the work of working on it.

Yes, this is complicated and difficult. Coming up with simplistic ideas for how emotions work won't make them any less complicated and difficult.

“Emotional responsibility” is not a miracle cure for pain or interpersonal conflict. You will always come across pain. You will always come across tension. You will always come across conflict. Stop trying to avoid them by taking on blame or casting off blame. Blame lives in the “fault and duty” paradigm; it is not based in reality. Try taking fault and duty out of your mind. Think less about *shoulds*, and more about *coulds*.

What **ability to respond** do you have? How can you increase that ability? What ability to respond do others have? Who has the will to respond?

To reiterate:

There is no consistent right answer.

There is no map.

There is only ever a compass, and that compass is your experience itself.