

Self-Responsibility

With Bob Wentworth

Taking responsibility for oneself is a cornerstone of practicing Nonviolent Communication. That is clear to me. At the same time, I've found it difficult to make sense of what the word "responsibility" actually means. Yet, I think I've made progress in sorting this out, so I want to share some musings on this topic, on the chance that they might be helpful.

What has made the question challenging is that the idea of "responsibility" is commonly associated with ideas that are part of the mainstream "domination" culture, but which NVC suggests we steer clear of. Some definitions say that being responsible involves being answerable, chargeable with being the cause of, or morally accountable for. I read this as, "Being responsible means you're the one who will be blamed or punished if people don't like the outcome." Another idea is that one has an obligation to attend to what one is responsible for. Yet, NVC suggests that focusing on blame, punishment and obligation tend to not be the most life-affirming ways of engaging the world.

Some people I've asked what it means to be responsible have offered the cute definition, " 'Response-able' means 'able to respond.' " Alas, I don't find this clear or satisfying — though it does point to the important idea that it makes sense to associate responsibility with what is in our locus of control.

One of my mentors, Robert Gonzales, offers (from my memory), "We are responsible for that which happens inside us — our thoughts, feelings, and needs — and that which emanates from us — our actions." This seems to me to be a useful characterization of what we are responsible for, yet it leaves me still wondering what it means to be responsible.

My worry that the word "responsible" might simply be incompatible with a compassionate worldview was alleviated when I realized that in designing computer software, one sometimes says that a particular subsystem is "responsible" for maintaining certain information and performing certain tasks. Clearly, in this context, responsibility has nothing to do with who is morally culpable or who gets punished if things go wrong. Rather, it's simply a matter of clarity about whose job it is to attend to certain things. So, perhaps being responsible for our inner experience means that we think of it as our job to attend to it?

Though, even this may have pitfalls. For example, I don't want to be told that I AM responsible for my inner experience, or it IS my job to attend to this — that smacks of a "should" or moralistic thinking or "have to," which I find painful and disempowering. Rather, I'd prefer to think that I'm uniquely positioned to be able to do this job (nobody else has nearly as much access to knowing my inner experience) and I am uniquely likely to benefit from having this job be done, and done well. So, it may be wise for me to choose to take on this job, choose to take responsibility for my inner experience and my actions, as a way of empowering myself and benefiting myself and others. Taking responsibility is not so much an obligation as a choice I find it beneficial to make.

In light of this, what might it mean for us to take responsibility for our thoughts, feelings, needs, and actions? What it doesn't mean is:

- When we have a concern about what we think or feel, we immediately turn to looking for someone or something to blame, or someone's behavior to try to control. (Maybe we focus on another, or maybe we blame ourselves or try to force ourselves to behave in a particular way — neither is self-responsibility in the NVC sense.)
- When we want something, we jump straight to expecting someone else to provide it for us, or trying to force them to do so, or to blaming them for not doing what we would like.

What I think taking responsibility does mean is:

- When we have a concern about what we think or feel, we turn our attention to understanding what inner processes contributed to what we are noticing. What are the assumptions and interpretation we've made, and what were our actual observations? Can we be open to the possibility that our thoughts might not be true, and hold our interpretations loosely? What needs are alive for us? What would we ideally want to have happen? Does our reaction really relate to the present, or is the present situation re-awaking old wounds involving needs that were deeply unmet long ago?
- When we want something, we connect to what needs we are trying to meet. And we choose to honor those needs and optionally try to meet them. Honoring a need might involve acknowledging it, letting it matter to us, yet choosing to leave it unmet for the moment and simply mourn it. Or we might try to both honor and meet the need, either by taking an action to directly meet the need, or by making a request to someone else to do something that we hope will help to meet the need. Taking responsibility for our own needs doesn't mean that we have to be able to meet all our needs without others' help. It does mean that we can choose to seek help or collaboration as a strategy for meeting needs.
- We seek to increase our awareness of all our needs — having taken on the job of being the one in charge of honoring and meeting our needs. Awareness of all our needs tends to contribute to the possibility of our experiencing more wholeness, integration, and integrity. In light of our need to contribute to others' well-being, meeting our needs will likely involve becoming more aware of others needs as well.
- We are aware of our ability to choose, including the possibility of choosing to pause after we are stimulated, before deciding on a response.
- We notice what our actions are, and what effects follow from our actions, and we use this as a source of learning to inform our future actions.
- We are discerning in our awareness that our actions affect and yet do not determine what others experience. (This is a rich topic that I hope to write more about on another occasion.)

For me, being self-responsible is all about empowerment — via noticing what is potentially in my locus of control, getting to know myself better, and making conscious choices to do what is in my power to do to make life more wonderful.

One of the pit-falls of coming to appreciate the value of self-responsibility, is that it can be tempting to blame others who we see as not choosing to take responsibility for themselves in this way. When faced with this temptation, I want to remember that blame and believing that others “should” be a particular way is likely to contribute to my suffering and theirs. So, while I might experience some sadness around a longing for others to be fully empowered, I also want to trust that on some level there are good reasons for the choices another has made, be curious about those reasons, be aware of how much I don't know, and remember my intention to live in an energy of love.

I encourage you to choose to take responsibility for your own life — as a means of self-empowerment — and to refrain from using this idea as a basis for judging yourself or others.

I wish for you love and empowerment.

(If this essay has contributed to you in some way, I'd enjoy hearing from you what in particular you found helpful.)