

Replacing Blame With Compassion For Impact

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Blame rests on the belief that if only you can name the cause of a current instance of suffering, you will feel better. There are parables about this in many spiritual traditions that include stories about someone refusing to be healed until they know how they became injured.

In your heart, you know blame will not really bring relief. Yet the habit of trying to get away from something aversive has you impulsively turn towards blame. This act of turning toward something external to avoid pain is encouraged by advertising, the push to be ever more productive, and to accumulate money. Habits like blame are symptoms of a larger system that promotes alienation from self and others.

At one level, blame can be thought of as a confusion between cause and impact. Your behavior has an impact on others, but that doesn't make you the cause of their reactions to your behavior.

Cause and effect are infinite. There is no way to trace cause and effect because it is infinitely complex. This is why we say things like "immediate cause," knowing that we just see a small piece of the picture every time we connect cause with effect. This is perhaps most obvious in human relationships in which everything we experience with another is filtered through our own biases and history. Our experience in a given moment arises from a complexity of causes and conditions.

Blame is an oversimplified thinking in which you imagine one person is the one cause for an experience you are having, thus if you stop or manipulate that one person, it will bring you a more preferred experience (e.g., make you happy). This is the basic premise for most superhero movies—find and stop the "bad guys" and then everyone will be okay.*

Of course, you don't think all of this through. Habit energy takes over in a millisecond. Blame gains momentum because it is positively reinforced by the momentary distraction it provides from underlying painful feelings and unmet needs. Let's look at an example from a Wise Heart student:

The other day when I came back to the kitchen after getting my youngest child into bed and saw that my eldest, sitting at the table next to my partner, was eating cookies after her dinner and hadn't eaten her salad, my first thoughts were full of blame: "I'm the only one checking if she eats her vegetables. If I'm not around she doesn't eat properly. He doesn't make sure our kids eat healthy." When I looked deeper, I realized that the blame was protecting me from the pain: my concern around my eldest's eating habits and health. It was also helping me avoid examining

my own choices or actions in the situation: Could I have taken other steps in the past to inform and motivate her to eat healthy?

I saw how blame and its accompanying feelings (resentment, anger, bitterness...) have an impact on my physical well-being and health (arguably worse than not eating vegetables). I saw how blame also keeps me stuck in one place, because I can't make people (or the weather, or the government...) change. It disconnects me from my own true sense of choice and agency.

This student's partner's decision to let their daughter eat cookies before salad had the impact of stimulating her concern for her daughter's well-being as well as doubts about collaboration with him. Ideally, her partner could express compassion for this impact without blaming himself for her experience. Without the reactivity of blame the two might be able to have a connected conversation about dinner and cookies relative to the care of their daughters. It is this longing for care, mutual responsibility, and consideration that is usually underlying blame.

When you can speak in terms of impact, you leave room for layers of self-responsibility and for the other person to take responsibility for what is truly theirs to own. This opens the door to compassion and connection, which lays the foundation for new more effective decisions and agreements.

Practice

This week, notice when you have thoughts of blame and then replace your thoughts with something like this: "This person's decision had an impact on me, but they are not to blame for my experience. I too have responsibility in creating the experience I am having. I also live in a system, a culture, which has a large influence in creating my experience. For now, I ask myself to just notice my experience without trying to get away from it through thoughts of blame."

Notice what changes as you shift the direction of your thoughts.

*The most recent Spiderman movie, however, took a surprising turn away from the typical plot line. Inspiring to see some attempts at emotional maturity and healing in this context.