

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

By Charles Holland, Ph.D.

It is a common thing that we hear referred to; "you need to take responsibility for... (something)". Yet when it comes to "being responsible" it often seems like people have wildly differing ideas about that "responsibility" means. It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "I take responsibility for... (that)". But appear to make no outward indication of just how or what they might be doing/changing as a result of taking that responsibility.

It seems as if we are lacking an agreed upon sense of what responsibility is and what would be required for one to "be responsible" in a complete and effective manner. I do not claim to know the "truth" in this matter but thought it would be helpful to explore this idea of personal responsibility.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines responsibility as: "the state, quality or fact of being responsible". Responsible is given eight different interpretations that include being legally, ethically, morally accountable for one's actions or the care of someone or thing. Perhaps it is in the diverse way that we use the word that it's meaning gets diluted.

Being responsible for something connotes a sense that one has a certain control over that thing and thus should be held accountable for it. "Control" is a word that also has varied meaning applied to it. The way it commonly appears to be used implies the power to override, to force compliance. We say things like "He's in control of that", meaning it is beyond us, to control "it". It seems to me that to understand personal responsibility one must also define control as it may be used in this context. In this context, can we agree that control, real control, means something more or less absolute? This type of control implies that one has the final say, the final decision about how the issue will come into reality. If we agree to this "definition" of control we may proceed to look more deeply into personal responsibility. I for one and most people I know would agree that we would not want to be held accountable for something that we did not make the final decision for. Here is the rub! When you get right down to it, we as individuals only have "control" over three things in life; our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Yes, it is true, we often say things like "s/he made me feel (something)", or s/he made me do (something)". However the assertions are neither accurate nor truthful!

Imagine that you are in a deserted parking lot and as you attempt to get into your car a man with a gun accosts you. He points the gun to your head and says, "Give me your money or I'll shoot". We could say that we have no control in this situation, meaning that we have no choice. But are either of these assertions really true? If we have choice does it not mean that we have control

of ourselves? You could say to the man "No, I won't give you the money" or you could say "Ok" and hand over your wallet or purse. Is this not a choice? Granted we may not like or want the consequences of either course, but that does not literally mean that we have no choice. We **can** say "No". The mugger then has a choice to shoot or otherwise attempt to force our possessions from us. Sometimes, when faced with difficult choices we may "decide" not to choose. It is important to recognize that not choosing is a choice and as such has its own set of consequences that are just as much "ours".

I assert that this choice is the essence of personal responsibility. Accepting that we choose, accepting that consequences arise as a result of those choices is the accountability inherent in taking personal responsibility.

What does it mean to take personal responsibility for the three areas of which we have "control"? First, to take personal responsibility for our thoughts, feelings, and behavior, one must accept the control, the final choice we make about these. At this point the reader may object and say "But I don't have complete control of my emotions. My feelings just happen. How can you say that I should be responsible and control things that I can't?"

I will acknowledge that there are some emotional experiences that are strongly influenced by a person's brain chemistry, hormones, etc. However, feeling is based in perception, how we choose to look at an experience. Our perceptions are changeable. Experiments with "figure/ground" images point out clearly that what we see is a product of which visual cues we attend to. For most, choosing to focus on a different aspect of such images allows a "new" perception of the object. This general phenomenon exists in most of our perceptual experiences. Put more plainly, if you choose to look for things to be threatening, sad, fun, etc. you are likely to find them so. Taking personal responsibility in this area then is most readily captured by a statement such as: "I **choose** to look at it this way". Taking ownership of the choice is the key factor. If you choose to perceive another's actions as provocative and you allow yourself to anger, it is not the other's "fault" that you anger. True, they have given you an opportunity to perceive the provocative, however, you choose both to see it as such and to react to it with anger. If negative consequences come from these choices should one not take responsibility for those consequences; i.e. accept the consequences with ownership?

This said, I have made my second point about personal responsibility. This is, the acceptance of intended and unintended consequences of our choices. Both ownership of the control over the choices we make and ownership of the consequences are fundamental if one is truly to accept personal responsibility. It is common for us to not want negative consequences to come into our lives. To accept ownership of consequences of our own making is not the same as

inviting, (i.e. seeking) negative consequences. Actually, the healthy acceptance of consequences is a powerful motivator to avoid creating similar experiences. Simply said, it helps us learn from our mistakes. Often in my practice, when I see someone who appears to repeat problematic behavior or experiences, the root of this issue is a failure to own their choices so as to avoid the negative consequences. Invariably, the person does not perceive what they are doing in this way. The use of cognitive distortion (thinking errors) is how they can accomplish this miracle of denial and avoidance. The very definition of a cognitive distortion includes an avoidance of responsibility for one's thoughts feelings and/or behavior. Thinking errors are how we allow ourselves to not take control of these three critical areas of our lives.

Living with personal responsibility, acceptance of ownership of all of our choices and the consequences of those choice, results in some predictable outcomes in that life. For example, when we own that we are responsible for damage of some sort, whether it be physical, emotional, financial, spiritual, etc. we are obliged to attempt to make repair, compensation or both when possible. Obviously, there will be times when such will be inadequate or impossible. The responsibility is to be willing to do what you can do! If you feel guilty as a result of some perceived misdeed on your part, correction and compensation are the proper response. People often tell me that they have a hard time letting go of their guilt. It seems to me that this is simply another way of saying that they are unwilling to completely take personal responsibility.

Guilt is the emotion we feel when we have done something we believe we should not have or failed to do something that we should. This negative feeling is present to motivate us to take responsibility for our choices. If we are really personally responsible and have done what we need to do to accept and honor that responsibility, then guilt is no longer a needed nor appropriate emotion. If we are stuck in guilt either we are in denial about what else we need to do to fulfill our responsibility or we have failed to change our perception of ourselves in light of these efforts. This being "stuck" in guilt is most often more appropriately labeled shame. Shame occurs when we have behaved in a guilt-provoking manner but instead of taking personal responsibility in the ways I have described, we choose to perceive the misbehavior as due to some personal flaw. By choosing to perceive our core self-being as the cause of our misbehavior there is little or nothing that can be done to correct, amend, or give restitution for the act, at an acceptable level. Thus, the shameful person has only to feel bad about themselves and is provided the perfect excuse for not changing and/or taking real responsibility. "I do it because it is who I am – I can't change that."

Does taking personal responsibility guarantee that I will never make such a mistake again? No? But it is as close to a guarantee as you will ever achieve.

Really taking responsibility and accepting all the accompanying consequences do provide strong motivation to prevent future misbehavior.

Really taking personal responsibility also requires that you allow others to take responsibility for what is theirs. That is to say, that you accept that other people can and will be responsible for their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We often believe that we are the "cause" for another's emotions, or behaviors. However this belief is the same distortion as when we tell ourselves that someone else made us do or feel something. When someone you are interacting with becomes angry as a response to something you say, it is not literally true that you caused that reaction. You may have given them an opportunity to perceive threat and thus to choose anger as their response to it. However, you do not control their emotions, only they have the ability to do so.

One aspect of taking personal responsibility that often pressures us to avoid it is that we may often feel isolated and different if we choose to be truly responsible personally! Many of those around us will probably continue to avoid this responsibility and to try to control us, but not themselves. This appears to be a dilemma. However, the willingness to allow the responsibility chips to fall where they may soon sorts this seeming risk into the appropriate stacks.

To act with personal responsibility is to attempt to live life without creating regret. If we take responsibility for our thoughts, feelings, and behavior, we are much less likely to create the mistakes that will cause lasting damage in our lives. The concept represented by the Native American expression "Today is a good day to die" is that of living in a personally responsible manner! If today were a good day to find the end of our lives, it would necessarily be a day when we were living in a regret free manner. In the end, is there a more powerful life concept? Most religions have at their core a goal of living in a personally responsible fashion. Despite the promise that creator may forgive our lack of responsibility, few would argue that it is desirable to live irresponsibly. We all would do well to look a fresh at ourselves and ask the question "How do I fail to be personally responsible in my life." Perhaps it is not morbid but rather desirable to search for that day when we can say to ourselves. "Yes, today is a good day to die".