

Taking responsibility for your experience – What does that mean?

Responsibility might best be understood as the *ability to respond*.

One goal in relationships is to be able to *respond* to situations with equanimity, courage, curiosity, and caring (for self and others). And rather than reacting (fight, flight or freeze), which tends to create disharmony and disconnection, to stay compassionately connected through whatever arises.

These notions are over 2,500 years old. Read what these practitioners have to say:

Kelly Bryson [Therapist in California, near Santa Cruz]

What stops you from being honest, from being transparent, from telling the whole truth?

Is it *the great myth* about the "hurt" thing? [the notion that we "hurt" other people - as if we can get into their minds and turn a switch and "make" them feel a certain way] And are you really responsible for the other person's reaction, or are we just responsible for our own *intentions*, and not the other person's *interpretations* or *reactions*?

Miki Kashtan [NVC Practitioner, Oakland]

To take responsibility for our feelings means to connect *our feelings* to *our needs*, as opposed to what someone else happens to have said or did. It's helpful to see what goes on as a *neutral stimulus*, and to see how we are all just doing the best we can to try and get our needs met, and to see how our experience relates to who we are, our history, and how we might happen to get our needs met. And in fact, whether our needs are met or not can sometimes hinge on *our thoughts* – the *meaning* that *we happen to make* of other people's actions. Thoughts and stories that we make up in our mind. And even the notion of whether our needs matter is just another thought as well. We can even be happy with unmet needs. It's amazing how much of our experience is in our own hands and how potentially empowering that is! It takes the blame off others and frees up people to be seen for who they are.

NVC can be summed up by these four principles:

Anchor ourselves in our needs and what's true for us;

Say our message with as much consideration and care for how the words might land;

Practice being open to hearing what's true for another person;

And finding solutions that meet everyone's needs.

To take responsibility for our words & actions is more than just owing our part by saying, "yes, I said this, and yes I did that." It's not a license to be a jerk. We do everything in our power to be "nice", but at a certain point – ultimately – other peoples' experiences are out of our hands.

Even kindergarteners are taught this basic principle:

We don't have a say about how other people speak; All we have a say about is how we hear them.

Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson [Therapists and authors in California, south of San Francisco]

One reason for focusing on yourself is because it's the only thing you have a fighting chance at changing. Granted, our lives might be so much better if only the other person would change (!). But when reactivity is happening, you can't count on that. Everyone's out of their "right" minds (having shifted from the cognitive brain to the emotional brain to the survival brain - e.g., "fight, flight, freeze or submit") and knee deep in their own sh*t (as Peter Pearson says). So the only thing you might change is your own end of the equation - how you respond to what's going on.

Recognize that what your partner does is a "problem", but it's not *the problem*. The problem is how you react to what your partner does. The feelings that arise in *you*. If you make your partner the problem, all you can do is hope that s/he changes or try to get him or her to change. That's a disempowered position. As you increase your ability to respond to the "negative" things your partner does, you are going to empower yourself and increase your own self-esteem. This single concept is the driving principle behind almost all books on improving relationships.

Harriet Lerner [Therapist and author of *The Dance of Anger*]

It is tempting to view human transactions in simple cause-and-effect terms. If we are angry, someone else *caused* it. Or, if we are the target of someone else's anger, we must be to *blame*... The more our relationships in our first family are fused... the more we learn to take responsibility for other people's feelings and reactions and blame them for our own. ("You always make Mom feel guilty." "You give Dad headaches." ...) ... Likewise, family members assume responsibility for *causing* other people's thoughts, feelings, behavior.

Terry Real [Therapist and author of *The New Rules for Marriage*]

Avoid phrases like: "you made me feel ..." or "it made me feel ..." or "I feel like you are ..." or "I feel that you ...". These are more about what you may be thinking rather than feeling.

David Schnarch [Therapist and author of *Passionate Marriage, in Colorado*]

People who can't control themselves control the people around them. When you rely on someone for a positive reflected sense of self, you invariably try to control him or her.

So focus on you. Manage your self. On a physiological level and on an identity level. That means keep your cool. Breathe. Shift your focus away from others, the past, and the stories in your mind about right and wrong. Affirm your own sense of self. Validate and listen to yourself. Connect to your heart.

Jack Pransky [Therapist in Vermont]

We see how the world operates from the inside out, not from the outside in.

François Beausoleil [NVC community in Canada]

We only feel pain in relation to the *meaning* we attribute to things; not to the *things* themselves.

Jose Ortega y Gasset [Spanish liberal philosopher, and essayist, 1885-1955]

Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are.

George Harrison [1943-2001]

"It's all in the head, you know?"

And check out these blasts from the past:

Gautama Buddha [Sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE]

The Buddha's discovery was that everything going on outside has a corresponding sensation inside. In the end, what we are reacting to is the sensation inside our own bodies. The good news is that you can learn to work with this, to sit with what's present in you without reacting, cultivating equanimity, and then, from that place of calm and compassion, you can respond differently to what's going on outside of you. You can ultimately strive to be present, stay connected, and wish everyone well.

Epictetus, The Stoic Philosopher [55 to 135 AD]

People are disturbed not by things, but by the view that they take of them.

Marcus Aurelius, The Stoic Philosopher [121-180 AD]

Our life is what our thoughts make it.

Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.

The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts.

You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.

Rumi [Sufi mystic, 1207-1273]

Out beyond ideas Of wrong doing and right doing There is a field I will meet you there

Shakespeare [1564-1616]

Why, then, 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. ~
Hamlet