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Victim Syndrome?

Are You a Victim of the Victim Syndrome?

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Abstract

People who suffer from the victim syndrome are always complaining about the “bad things that happen” in their lives. Because they believe they have no control over the way events unfold, they don’t feel a sense of responsibility for them. One moment, they present themselves dramatically as victims; the next, they morph into victimizers, hurting the people trying to help them and leaving would-be helpers with a sense of utter frustration.

People with a victim mentality display passive-aggressive characteristics when interacting with others. Their behavior has a self-defeating, almost masochistic quality. The victim style becomes a relational mode—a life affirming activity: I am miserable therefore I am.

In this article, I present three examples of people with this syndrome and a checklist that can be used to identify sufferers. I also discuss the concept of secondary gain—the “benefits” people get from perpetuating a problem—and the developmental origins of the victim mind-set. The article ends with advice on how to help people who suffer from the victim syndrome.

KEY WORDS: Victim syndrome; rescuers; masochistic; passive-aggressive; self-defeating behavior; blame game; secondary gain.

Self-pity is easily the most destructive of the non-pharmaceutical narcotics; it is addictive, gives momentary pleasure and separates the victim from reality.

—*John Gardner*

If it's never our fault, we can't take responsibility for it. If we can't take responsibility for it, we'll always be its victim.

—*Richard Bach*

Take your life in your own hands, and what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame.

—*Erica Jong*

Introduction

Do you know people who always behave like victims? People who blame others when bad things happen to them? And do they blame their family, partner, people at work, or any number of things that they perceive to be victimizing them? The world these people live in appears to be peopled by victims, victimizers, and occasional rescuers. And if you have ever tried helping them, have you discovered that “rescuing” them from the trouble they are in can be an excruciating process? Do you resent the way every bit of advice you offer is brushed aside or rejected, often contemptuously?

If any of these observations apply, you may be dealing with people who suffer from the victim syndrome (Fenichel, 1945; Zur, 1994). These are people who always complain about the “bad things that happen” in their lives, due to circumstances beyond their control. Nothing feels right to them. Trouble follows them wherever they go.

This is not to suggest that they are making it up. On the contrary, there is always truth in their stories. Bad things happen to all of us; that's life. It's not a rose garden. But there are many different ways of dealing with the difficulties that come our way. Most of us,

when faced with life's obstacles, do something about them and get on with it. But people with a victim mentality are incapable of doing so. Their negative outlook on life transforms every setback into a major drama. Even their way of absorbing information causes chaos and stress. To complicate this already difficult equation, people suffering from the victim syndrome are prone to aggravate the mess in which they find themselves. Strange as it may sound, they are often victims by choice. And ironically, they are frequently successful in finding willing victimizers.

Worse, people with a victim mentality are very difficult to handle. They have an extremely fatalistic outlook on life. Because they believe they have no control over the way events unfold, they have a poor sense of responsibility. Every negative outcome in their life is attributed to people or circumstances beyond their control. Every effort made to help them, or to present a solution to their predicament, is met by a huge arsenal of reasons why it will not work, some of them quite ingenious. Their problems are apparently unique and therefore insoluble. They appear always to be trying to prove the helper wrong. Anyone prepared to help them is left with a sense of utter frustration.

Personality styles

People with a victim mentality are passive-aggressive in their interactions with others. The passive-aggressive style is a very subtle, indirect, or behind-the-scenes way of getting what they want and expressing anger without openly acknowledging it, or directly confronting the source of it (APA, 2000; Millon, 2004). People who feel powerless usually resort to the passive-aggressive mode. Because they have difficulty acknowledging their anger directly (given the way they feel about themselves), they seem superficially compliant to others' needs, but are experts in passive resistance.

The blame game is part of victims' repertoire. Although their own actions are responsible for whatever situation they find themselves in, they are very talented at finding excuses why things don't work out. A common means of getting their way is to lay guilt trips on others through various kinds of emotional blackmail (Simon, 1996). They will sulk, pout, withdraw, bungle, make excuses, and lie. Their talent at sending mixed messages catches others off guard. With these people we can never be entirely sure what was said or what is expected.

This behavior has a self-defeating, almost masochistic, quality. It is as if people in the grip of the victim syndrome welcome the process of getting hurt and are attracted to problematic situations or relationships. They fail to accomplish tasks crucial to their wellbeing. They set themselves up to fail, associating with people and situations that end in disappointment, failure, or mistreatment, even when better options are clearly available. They reject opportunities for pleasure, or are reluctant to acknowledge that they are enjoying themselves. Self-sacrifice is more their thing—even if unsolicited by the intended recipients of the sacrifice (Millon, 2004). They have a persistent and detrimental pattern of behavior that, in its extreme expression, includes playing Russian roulette, drunk driving, excessive smoking, drug abuse, obsessive gambling, risky sex addictions, self-mutilation, and suicide.

The victim, victimizer, rescuer cycle

The world is a dangerous place for people with a victim mentality. They have always to be prepared for the worst, as it is full of people who are out to hurt them. It is a harsh environment of victims, victimizers, and occasional rescuers. Their locus of control is likely to be external, that is, they believe that what happens to people is contingent on events outside their control. Powerful others, fate, or chance primarily determine the events in their lives (Rotter, 1966). This kind of belief system is highly congenial to a victim mentality.

To compound the negativity of this outlook, people with a victim mentality know how to inflame others (although this may not be a conscious process). They have a knack for dragging others into the emotional maelstrom they create, keeping them off-balance with their talent for shape-shifting. One moment, they present themselves dramatically as victims; the next they are morphing into victimizers, hurting the people who are trying to help them. Victim, victimizer, rescuer: it is a very messy and very fluid process (Schaef, 1986; Zimberoff, 1989).

People prone to the victim syndrome are also masters of manipulation, which can make interactions with them infuriating. It is almost as if they invite people to help them, only to prove subsequently that their rescue attempts are futile. To add insult to injury, they are very good turning things upside down, claiming that their would-be rescuers' efforts to help are actually damaging them. This can affect their behavior in such a manner that

it actually causes these expectations to be fulfilled (Berry and Baker, 1996; Maher, Zins and Elias, 2006; Doerner and Lab, 2011).

When asked why they behave in this way, they will say that they “have their reasons.” If pressed for an explanation, the “reasons” for their (at least superficially) non-sensible behavior, often appear muddled and incomprehensible. People suffering from the victim syndrome are not clear why they do what they do. They have only a limited insight into the reasons for their self-destructive behavior. And even when the reasons are clear—and the means of improvement obvious—they don’t want to hear what is being said. They seem to prefer being stuck in their muddle. This is what makes their behavior so puzzling and irritating.

Victims’ talent for high drama draws people to them like moths to a flame. Their permanent dire state brings out the altruistic motives in others. It is hard to ignore constant cries for help. In most instances, however, the help given is of short duration. Like moths in a flame, helpers quickly get burned; nothing seems to work to alleviate the victims’ miserable situation; there is no movement for the better. Any efforts rescuers make are ignored, belittled, or met with hostility. No wonder that the rescuers become increasingly frustrated—and walk away (Worschel, 1984; Kets de Vries, 2010).

Of course, the essential question is why these “victims” are asking for help in the first place. Do they really want to be helped? Given the endless holes they keep on digging for themselves, they may just be looking for attention. And even negative attention is better than no attention at all. We notice how the victim style becomes a relational mode—a life-affirming activity: I am miserable therefore I am. This is a common scenario for people prone to the victim syndrome. Let’s look at an example.

John, the CEO of a sustainable energy company, was wondering about the best way to deal with Amelia, one of his vice presidents. Although she had many positive qualities, Amelia was very high maintenance. She took up more of his time than any of his other direct reports and managing her was far from being a pleasure—she was such a drama queen, making scenes if things didn’t go her way. And it didn’t take much to make her feel wronged.

John was puzzled why such a highly competent professional always needed to play the role of victim. How was it possible for someone so bright and so talented, to be so blind about her inappropriate behavior? It grated on John, who had been the great advocate of gender diversity in the firm, that whenever Amelia got herself into trouble, she always blamed the “old boy” network. John knew that was a poor argument. None of the other women in the company had ever mentioned it. He had bent over backward to increase the ratio of women at senior management in the company. The idea that there was such a thing as an old boy’s network in the company that was holding back women was ridiculous.

Meetings with Amelia were like walking on eggshells. Going through her bi-annual feedback report with her was the worst. You never knew how she was going to react. John genuinely dreaded these sessions. Telling her how she could have handled a specific situation more effectively was an exercise in master diplomacy.

And now it was time for Amelia’s next appraisal. John was having sleepless nights. He still had vivid memories of Amelia’s overblown reactions the last time when he gave her what he thought was constructive feedback. When he talked about how a specific situation could have been handled more effectively, she went into overdrive, starting a heated argument about his input, and denying any responsibility for the way things had gotten out of hand. Couldn’t she see how remarkable it was that every time something went wrong, it was always somebody else’s fault? When John persisted, and tried to show her that she had not just been an innocent bystander in the example he had given, Amelia lashed out at him, again presenting herself as a victim. After these exchanges, John would feel thoroughly miserable, wondering why he had bothered to go through the exercise in the first place. He felt as if he had victimized her. A typical feature of their particular *pas de deux* was that he would end up feeling sorry for her and try to calm her down. John wondered how effective this approach really was, as the same scenario kept on repeating itself.

There are many Amelias—professional “victims” who act out a great variety of “scripts” in both the private and public sphere. Let’s take another example.

In an hour's time, Victor, the CEO of a global bank, was due to meet Adam, one of his key people in the retail side of the business. He guessed Adam would probably want to talk about the new regional vice president position that had become available, as the present incumbent was retiring. Victor didn't think Adam was ready for the job and he was wondering how he could handle the issue if it arose.

Victor thought Adam was psychologically immature and lacked the emotional intelligence he'd need to handle the various stakeholders with whom he would have to interact. There were numerous reasons for his doubts. Adam would never take personal responsibility when things went wrong. He was always making excuses, and blaming others. He tried to weasel out of mistakes that were made on his watch. And he was vindictive. People who had "done him wrong" were never forgotten. Adam could reel off a list of them—a list that never got shorter.

On a previous occasion when Adam hadn't received a promotion he was expecting, he had stormed into Victor's office and asked him point blank whether it was because a colleague had badmouthed him. Victor denied it and explained that Adam hadn't been given the promotion because of a recent foul-up—but Adam didn't want to hear what he was saying. He refused to recognize that it was his own mistake that had "put him on ice," as he termed it, for a period.

It was not the first time that Adam had handicapped himself. With his knack for putting himself in situations that inhibited his capacity to succeed, he could be his own worst enemy. On that occasion, Victor had managed to calm him down a little by convincing him that the setback was only temporary. But he was at a loss to know what could be done to get Adam out of this conspiracy mindset and prevent him getting involved in situations that led to difficult consequences.

Adam's volatile moods were a real problem and inappropriate for a banker. Emotionally, he had a lot to learn, as their most recent interaction had proved. Adam had mailed Victor, asking to have lunch with him. Victor had responded

immediately, explaining that it was too short notice; he had to be abroad all week taking care of some personal matters. He assumed that would be the end of it, but he was much mistaken. On his return, his assistant told him that his refusal to see Adam had created high drama. Apparently, Adam had blamed him for not being there for him, convinced (despite all assurances to the contrary) that Victor didn't really care for him when it mattered.

Adam had his qualities, but Victor was frankly tired of his dramatics. Why were things always exaggerated? Why was he being subjected to this emotional blackmail? He felt trapped. Adam had a victim mentality; he radiated negativity. Could his mood state be contagious, and affect the other members of his team?

The world is full of genuine victims. But without negating the reality of victimization, being a victim is also a state of mind. We can reframe difficult life situations positively or regress to a victim mindset. There is always the option to make difficult situations look like things have been “done to” us. However, whenever we refuse to take responsibility for our behavior and actions, we unconsciously choose to act as a victim. We have lingering sense of betrayal, of being taken advantage of by others. Although the positive aspect of this position is the sense of being absolved from responsibility, the negative aspects—feelings of anger, fear, guilt or inadequacy—for outweigh it.

ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM THE VICTIM SYNDROME?

Most of us dislike seeing others in trouble and want to help. But when our desire to help goes unanswered or meets with contempt, no matter what efforts we make, we should be on our guard. If you work in a role that involves helping or mentoring people who are struggling with personal or professional issues you should remain vigilant for the warning signs of the victim syndrome. Use this checklist to see where the person you are trying to help fits on the victim syndrome scale. The more affirmative answers you can give to these questions, the more likely that person is to have a victim mindset.

- Are you dealing with people for whom always something goes wrong?
- Does every conversation end up centered on their problems?
- Do they have a tendency to play the “poor me” card?

- Do they engage in negative talk about themselves?
- Do they always expect the worst?
- Do they tend to act like a martyr?
- Do they feel that the world is “doing it” to them and that there is nothing they can do about it?
- Do they believe that everyone else has an easier life?
- Do they focus solely on negative events and disappointments?
- Do they never feel responsible for their negative behavior?
- Is their misery contagious, affecting the mood state of others?
- Do they seem to be addicted to misery, chaos, and drama?
- Do they feel that the world is out to get them?
- Does blaming others seem to improve their state of mind?
- Do they have a tendency to make others take responsibility for them?
- Do they have a knack for finding rescuers and victimizers?

What’s so attractive about being a victim?

How does the victim mindset benefit the “victim”? What is the advantage of playing the victim role? And what makes these people keep on doing it, despite the misery involved?

To answer these questions, we have to look beyond the obvious. A considerable amount of this behavior is beyond conscious awareness. But just as every cloud has a silver lining, every problem has its upside somewhere. To understand what is going on, we need to consider the positive aspects of being a victim. The apparent pure misery notwithstanding, there are benefits attached to playing the victim role.

Secondary gain

With victimhood, there is always the question of “secondary gain,” a phenomenon with which people in the helping professions are very familiar. Secondary gains are the external and incidental advantages derived from a victim’s misery, even though the person in question may not consciously aware of them (Freud, 1926 & 1959; Fenichel, 1945; Leahy, 2001). Secondary gains are the “benefits” people get from not overcoming a problem. They occur when an individual’s problems persist because of the

advantageous impact of the attention, affection, remuneration, access to medication, and other incentives that accompany them. Sometimes people are aware of these sources of secondary gain, but more often they lack the insight that this psychological process is taking place. They need to be shown the ways in which they are gaining from their injury.

People resort to secondary gain get some benefit out of something that otherwise appears completely irrational. Although objectively, secondary gain doesn't advance a life situation, subjectively it may do so, because of the benefits that accrue. Secondary gain is an important mechanism in explaining why people remain stuck in dysfunctional behavior patterns, why they persist in their misery and do not change things for the better. Some people get a perverse pleasure from their emotional dysfunction.

However, people are not usually aware of secondary gain. These "victims" are not being consciously manipulative or faking their distress. Their misery feels very real and their reasons for holding on to it are hidden from them. The pull of the unconscious is very strong and prevents them from realizing that the cost of holding onto the condition is far greater than the gain.

Secondary gain may be a significant perpetuating factor in victimhood. Unfortunately, it is a process that is poorly understood and can be confused with malingering. Psychology 101 tells us that when people repeat specific behavior patterns, we can be sure that they are getting some kind of payoff from them.

The benefits

Playing the victim can satisfy a variety of unconscious needs. The "poor me" card elicits others' pity, sympathy, and offers of help. It's nice to be noticed and validated; it feels good when others pay us attention; and it's pleasant to have our dependency needs gratified. Being a victim is a great excuse for not questioning difficult life issues. We can remain passive and not take responsibility for our actions. We can take refuge in victimhood to accuse others of the behavior for which we are really responsible. This is particularly tempting because blaming others for life's wrongs can have a cathartic effect. We should never underestimate the sense of relief that comes with shifting the responsibility for our misery onto someone or something else. Resorting to this tactic is

a relatively low-risk proposition. We don't have to take any chances.

Assuming martyrdom is also a highly effective cover for our own aggressive inclinations. The blame game combines helplessness with self-protection—passivity and activity. As the world is perceived as a dangerous place where nasty things can happen, people suffering from the victim syndrome strike out in this surreptitious way in order to defend themselves against the inevitable aggression of others.

There are other advantages to treading water in a sea of misery. Misery loves company, meaning that people who are miserable find solace in others who share their feelings. People with a victim mindset attract others. The feeling we are not alone creates a sense of solidarity, support, and interconnectedness. Perhaps we are also nurturing a secret desire for a “white knight” to materialize, and help us out of our misery—at least temporarily—until the victim, victimizer, rescuer cycle repeats itself.

So playing the victim can be a combination of coping strategy, form of manipulation, and attention-seeking device. Of course, there are limits to how far others will go in their support of a “victim.” Constant complaining can be very tiresome. Victims will eventually lose out if a situation continues to be insoluble whatever solution is provided and otherwise willing helpers fail to get a handle on victims' behavior.

Where does the victim mindset come from?

Personality development can be as diverse as grains of sand on a beach. Each life experience is unique, although as we are all human, there are patterns in personality development that largely remain the same. Character development is always an outcome of the interface between nature and nurture. Within the context of our genetic matrix, our personality evolves through developmental processes. Much of what creates a victim mindset finds its foundation within the family of origin. Victimhood, however, is not the natural state of things. It is taught (Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Mullings, Marquart, and Hartley, 2004; Harris, 2009). If bad things happen to people while they grow up, they will have a pessimistic outlook on life.

Depending on their own sense of victimhood, parents can either create a supportive, trustful environment for their children, or do exactly the opposite and perpetuate a bad

situation. Thus they create a generational problem of victimhood, in which secondary gain gets the upper hand. For children growing up in these family situations, suffering is a way of soliciting attention and forestalling parental criticism and indifference. It makes for a paradoxical relational style in which life seems to improve when it is going badly. The parents become kinder when the child feels bad. Presenting a suffering exterior gives the child respite from an otherwise hostile and neglectful family environment.

Unfortunately, this is a very dysfunctional form of relating. Parents in these families do not recognize the harm they are doing to their children, just as their parents were unaware of what they were doing to them. But that is no excuse for bad parenting. The continuation of a dysfunctional developmental cycle is not a given. Parenthood comes with certain obligations. We can't ignore the basic needs and rights of our children. We expect adults to take a stand against abuse and create a different developmental cycle.

What gives this issue urgency is that many people with a victim mentality have been physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused. But children do not have the emotional or cognitive capability to see abuse for what it is, and get out of an abusive system. They are forced to remain in their one-down position and may even come see these dysfunctional forms of relating as the norm, perpetuating such self-defeating pathological behavior. Their family background may prompt them actively and repeatedly to look for situations that preserve their suffering. The script in their head runs, "See how much I am suffering? You *must* love me." This pathological way of relating is preferable to their fear of abandonment.

A common "solution" to this dysfunctional equation is that these people may feel loved only if they are punished. They may even feel insecure if punishment is missing for any length of time. Their background may make them gravitate toward the kind of people who are prepared to inflict some form of punishment, as it is the only kind of intimacy they understand. They learn to seek out situations that recreate their early experiences.

However it is reinterpreted, child abuse always evokes feelings of hurt and insult. Because children are essentially powerless to stop the abuse or to convince anyone to help, they begin to perceive the whole world as "unfair" and have to find ways to cope with it. One logical human reaction is retaliation, doing to others what has been done to

them. Although they may find it hard to metabolize these unacceptable feelings, the remnants of these hurts contribute to feelings of hate and desire for revenge. The experience of feeling wronged may also lead to problems of anger management. At the core, however, is the vindictive drive to get even with their parents. If violent, abusive behavior was the norm, they may join the abusers, and behave similarly.

Many of these children harbor such deep anger toward their parents that they unconsciously desire to remain dysfunctional, as a way of getting back at them. Dysfunction is their way of showing their parents how they have messed up. It's a self-destructive way of dealing with the issue but they have no conscious awareness of the defense mechanism at work. These unconscious feelings of revenge permeate all their behavior. While they deny that things are not well, they fail to acknowledge their unconscious bitterness about their fate, refusing to see how much they have been hurt.

Children who find themselves in destructive situations may wonder why this is happening to them. As they learn that blaming the world does not provide any immediate gratification, some of them learn to blame themselves for not being "good enough." Blaming—and punishing—the self can provide an immediate, controlled, but convoluted form of satisfaction. These children cannot see, let alone consciously accept, that they are now causing most of their own pain. They hope that by acting in this way they will hurt others. However, the bad feelings about being wronged are still there, pushed into the unconscious, and continue to have an effect. Consequently, these people create filters through which they interpret their situations and circumstances in life, each time reaffirming their sense of powerlessness (Seligman, 1975; Abraham, Seligman and Teasdale, 1978). These unconscious feelings, no matter how much they are denied, will continue to color all their interpersonal relationships.

So the abused child grows into an adult embittered by the unfairness of the world (represented by its caregivers). Powerless as they feel, at every disappointment, they find some convenient, secret means of (unconscious) self-sabotage—and will then say triumphantly, "See, they did it again. Life is unfair." This is a self-destructive way of coping. In showing the world the wrongs it can do, they mobilize a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Self-saboteurs are masters at snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory, provoking the failure, humiliation, or punishment they feel they deserve, and undoing any good luck that comes their way. Their only sense of worth comes from self-sacrifice.

Another person's suffering evokes strong natural responses of wanting to help, or be supportive (at least initially). People suffering from the victim syndrome are likely to exaggerate or dramatize their misfortunes, to make the need for rescue even more compelling. Unfortunately, satisfying this need does not bring a "cure." Others' sympathy is precisely the reason for remaining stuck in this victim mentality. Worse, as I suggested earlier, it may even turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as people with this mindset will eventually begin to sabotage their own success and happiness—after all, things will always turn out badly for them, so why try? This self-sabotage becomes a form of protective reaction and brings with it the unconscious satisfaction of inflicting guilt on others—that is, they secretly hope their self-inflicted suffering will make others realize the damage they have done to them. This is a convoluted way of inflicting harm on the people who have harmed them. Whether it's expressed as overt social aggression or silent self-sabotage, revenge—a dark and cruel wish to inflict harm on the people who have been hurting them—is at the core of these processes. Let's look at another sample case.

As a child, Peter was forever in trouble of one sort or another. Some of his problems seemed inevitable, given his inauspicious family circumstances. His mother had a hard time holding on to the men in her life. His father, a hard-drinking, abusive man, left his mother, moved to another country and remarried. Peter and his older brother, who had borne the brunt of their father's abuse, were glad to see him go.

Peter's mother was famously a drama queen, blowing things way out of proportion whenever she had the chance. Chaos and drama followed her wherever she went, and if there was a lack of drama, she knew how to create it. She was often the author of her own misery, good at playing the victim. Most of the people who dealt with her ended up emotionally exhausted. Unsurprisingly, she found it difficult to hold down a job and the financial situation at home was always precarious.

Men drifted in and out of her life, leaving Peter and his brother with a half-brother and half-sister. Looking back, Peter was subliminally aware that it had been tough growing up in his mother's household. However, some of his friends had commented on how like his mother he was.

Early on, Peter had serious difficulties at school. He was dyslexic, had poor concentration, and was easily distracted. He often skipped class, claiming he didn't feel well. His mother's gullibility was a great truancy aid, and she colluded with him. Helping him find excuses for his absence fed into her own sense of victimhood. Whenever Peter found himself in trouble, his mother would do what was necessary to bail him out. Although she might castigate him for what he had done (or not done), she would eventually rescue him. But by constantly alleviating the natural consequences of his choices, his mother deprived him of the opportunity to learn from his mistakes.

This dysfunctional way of dealing with life made Peter increasingly dependent on others. His mother's well-intentioned rescuing sent a disempowering message, creating the foundation of a victim mentality. As time went on, things got worse. As a teenager, Peter discovered drugs and his school record worsened with his new dependency. Apart from mathematics, which he was good at, he couldn't see the point of school. But at least there was math. Helped by his teacher, who was supportive, he managed to pull himself together enough to graduate from high school and get into a local college.

During his college years, Peter discovered women. Initially, he seemed to seek out women who let him down but eventually he moved in with a woman who seemed really to care for him. They both came from dysfunctional families and like their parents before them, their relationship quickly became very difficult, characterized by constant shape-shifting: victim, victimizer, and rescuer. Looking back, Peter understood that they were both unconsciously validating their respective childhood dramas by projecting their painful beliefs and judgments on to each other. He would blame her, and she him, to help each other out of their predicament. Fighting seemed to be their default form of relating,

even though it was a strange kind of intimacy. Later, Peter came to see that he tended to reject people who treated him well—making the help others provided ineffective.

Growing up with this victim mentality, Peter found himself becoming angrier as time went by. At home, he expressed his anger self-destructively toward his own children. He also acted it out at work. For example, when he was promoted to a more senior position in the company, he became extremely anxious and his poor functioning drew others' attention. He seemed to have a talent for self-handicapping and creating impediments that sabotaged a good performance. When things went wrong, it was always other people's fault, not his. When he lost his job, and his wife asked for a divorce, he realized that something needed to be done. Things couldn't go on like this.

With his family background, Peter had grown up expecting to be victimized. To fulfill these expectations, he re-created the dysfunctional patterns and feelings of helplessness he had experienced early in life. That was how he thought relationships were supposed to be. He anticipated future disappointments, and sabotaged things when they were going well. He encouraged others to take advantage of him, almost as if he enjoyed being exploited. At the same time, he rendered ineffective all attempts to help him. When he was promoted, he went into self-sabotage overdrive. After he was fired from the job, and took a less visible position, he felt much better.

Victims of childhood abuse may become victimizers, victims, or both. The pain and rage from the abuse and betrayal may turn inward, becoming self-destructive, or turn outward toward others, manifested in passive-aggressive behavior. Blaming everyone and everything for their predicament is a common pattern. Furthermore, victims are drawn to one another, programmed to be attracted to abusive relationships. There is an element of learned helplessness in their behavior. The psychological profile of victimization includes a pervasive sense of passivity, loss of control, pessimism, negative thinking, and strong feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame and depression. All these can lead to hopelessness and despair.

Peter's story shows that some people with a victim mindset may have inherited a chain of dysfunction passed down from generation to generation. Some parents unconsciously give their children the same damaging treatment they received themselves.

Living by design

Can people stuck with a victim mentality break out of this self-destructive cycle? How can they be helped to transcend their mindset? Are there ways to stop them sabotaging themselves? Can they start living by design? People who like to play the victim must challenge their ingrained beliefs, and learn to assume responsibility and care for themselves, rather than look elsewhere for a savior.

In helping people susceptible to the victim syndrome to live by their own design, it maybe useful to ask them whether they derive any benefits from retaining an apparently insoluble problem. What would they lose if they solved it? It may strike them as a strange question but as they try to answer it, they may realize that suffering has become an essential part of their identity. If they would give up this way of relating to others, what would their life look like?

Acknowledging the secondary gains attached to their present state could be the first step on a journey of greater self-awareness. People who suffer from the victim mindset need to understand that they own their misery. They are rarely aware of the extent to which they contribute to it. Have they ever thought why they naturally assume the victim role, seek out abusers, or invite abuse? Very often, when victims recognize secondary gain for what it is, it loses its value.

Helping people to overcome their victim mentality necessitates a careful analysis of the nature and quality of their interpersonal relations (Ochberg and Willis, 1991). Once victims have learned to understand and be upfront about the secondary gain mechanisms at work, they may find it easier to come to grips with the fact that those unconscious mechanisms have been at the core of their problems. Closer scrutiny will enable them to realize that secondary gain was all that was keeping these self-defeating patterns in place. This will be the beginning of a journey in which they learn about alternative ways of coping and finding other paths through life, rather than remaining stuck in self-destructive cycles.

However, what helps victims best is the development of a healthier self-concept. They need to become cognizant of their victimized self-image and exchange it for something more constructive. This kind of transformation necessitates cognitive and emotional re-orientation, new ways of thinking about themselves. They must ditch their self-projection as a martyr, because an identity based on helplessness is no longer acceptable. They need to learn to feel good about themselves. However, building a new identity and attitudes will take time.

Victims also need to learn how to stop attracting people who cause them grief. They need to recognize how their passive-aggressive, manipulative behavior evokes hostile reactions in others. They have to stop the kind of behavior that perpetuates victimization and find new ways of interacting that include space for their self-respect. They need to learn that relational experiences do not have to be exercises in victimization.

People dealing with individuals with a victim mindset should recognize that there is a difference between rescuing and helping. With rescuing there is no progress, and the victim remains stuck in a dependent state. Rescuing perpetuates their tendency to hand over control and responsibility for their condition to others, even though outsourcing their life to others creates this sense of powerlessness in the first place. It is not difficult to understand why they behave in this manner. For example, Peter had been exposed to so many unhealthy injunctions—such as don't trust, don't feel, don't talk about anything meaningful—that he questioned his own competence. He was caught up in a vicious circle of helplessness and hopelessness. If people are haunted by these feelings it is hard for them to be truly authentic. Anxiety, fear, and lack of self-belief all contrive to make them feel like victims until they take control of their feelings.

In all situations of change, including change for the better, adopting a different outlook on life is hard. Many people prefer to remain victims because they find it difficult to work toward healing and living a proactive life. If victimhood has been a major life theme, will is not be easy to put aside. It might feel more comfortable to carry on blaming external or uncontrollable factors for things that go wrong. This is an effective way of channeling their anger about their fate in life and absolves them from personal responsibility. But this just perpetuates the mindset that nothing can be done to control their lives.

To tackle this, people susceptible to the victim syndrome need to practice other forms of dialogue but this requires a solid dose of awareness about their predicament. If they are unable to think differently about themselves, they will fall deeper and deeper in a downward spiral of despair and unworthiness. They must give up the benefits of using victimhood as an excuse for their conscious or unconscious blame game and take responsibility for their own actions. They need to own their own life, which means being honest about how they manipulate others, put themselves in the victim role, and use self-deprecating stories about their own ineptitude to evoke sympathy.

These people need to realize that they are no longer as helpless as they were as children. They must learn that it is preferable to make conscious choices rather let their unconscious decide for them. However, this means breaking the downward spiral of helplessness and low self-esteem and being completely honest with themselves. They need to do away with learned helplessness (Abrahamson, Seligman and Teasdale, 1978), take charge of their lives and stop being dependent on other people for their security.

When people have a greater sense of empowerment, they begin to accept that they can be the masters of their own destiny. With the self-esteem and confidence that empowerment brings comes the courage to face the vicissitudes of life head-on, and search for their own “cure.” They will be able to move beyond the victim mentality and out of their funk of sadness and self-pity. There will no longer be any need for self-sabotage or blame.

We should not underestimate the challenge of letting go of such a fundamental part of their identity. Their history of hurt and trauma has defined who they are and they have been playing the victim over and over again in their mind. The bitterness of a grudge works like a mental poison that harms no one but themselves. The desire for revenge can be exhausting and in its worst case transform people into victimizers themselves. But it can be equally hard work getting to a place where they can let go of their feelings of resentment and thoughts of revenge and develop a sense of forgiveness. Even if they can forgive hurts and insults, it doesn't mean they will be reconciled with the person who inflicted them. Reconciliation requires that others recognize the injury inflicted, repent, and find a form of reparation.

Emotional sense-making is an essential element of overcoming the victim mentality.

However, many people have a very limited knowledge of their emotional life and may need help from others to become more emotionally astute. Professional help from psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, or coaches can help people deal with the hurts that are the source of their victim mentality. While seeking in every possible way to take responsibility for their lives, they will begin to see that even if they cannot control what happens to them, they can always control their responses. When they accept this, life's circumstances will no longer control them, because they have been freed to choose their response. Taking responsibility for our own life can be hard work, and implies making difficult decisions. But if we exercise control, we can get on with life. We need to remind ourselves that we are not only responsible for what we do, but for what we don't do. As the novelist Joan Didion once said, "The willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life is the source from which self-respect springs." Taking personal responsibility is a must. We cannot change the circumstances, the seasons, or the weather, but we can change ourselves.

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