



## Feeling Wronged: Victimization as a Way of Life

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This article deals with people's sense of victimization, both on an individual and collective level. Starting with an example from Saul Bellow's *The Victim*, it points out how contagiousness feelings of victimization can be as well as how demagogue-like, populist leaders take advantage of such feelings to manipulate a population. As a way of helping people understand the nature of victimization, this article goes on to explore the psychological profile of individuals who tend to feel victimized, also focusing on their early life experiences.

In addition, the article deals with the question of how to go beyond victimhood, examining what can be done to transcend these feelings. On the individual level, one such avenue suggested is embarking on an inner journey that allows one to explore the origins of such self-limiting beliefs. As the article points out, a specific victimhood mindset often derives from conditioned perceptions built upon old memories that resulted in coping mechanisms that are no longer functional. From a collective point of view, it is suggested that people who feel victimized should come to terms with what has happened in the past by creating a culture of remembrance. The article notes that some form of conflict transition needs to occur as way of preventing the reoccurrence of ancient grievances.

**Keywords:** victimhood; feeling wronged; demagogue leaders; chosen trauma; defense mechanisms; secondary gain; forgiveness; empathy; kindness; gratitude; attachment behavior; remembrance; reconciliation.

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

—John W. Gardner

*It's very attractive to people to be a victim. Instead of having to think out the whole situation, about history and your group and what you are doing... if you begin from the point of view of being a victim, you've got it half-made. I mean intellectually.*

— Vidiadhar S. Naipaul

## **Introduction**

Among Nobel Prize winning author Saul Bellow's early novels is *The Victim*, an exploration of one man's sense of victimization using as a foil the notion of the doppelgänger. The novel centers around the psychological struggle between two people: the principal character of the novel and what appears to be his "double." This double accuses the protagonist of being responsible for his grim fate, telling him that all his misfortunes—not only the loss of his job but also the loss of his wife—are his fault. If his doppelgänger is to be believed, everything negative that has happened to him is the result of the protagonist's actions. He accuses him of having set into motion a number of societal forces that were colluding to exclude him from its graces.

In the face of these accusations, the protagonist is forced to ponder the problem of his guilt and his responsibility in the matter, which prompts him to descend into a nightmare

of paranoia and regret. Interestingly enough, as time passes, both parties increasingly begin to resemble one another, making feelings of victimization all-embracing. Victimhood has morphed into a dark cloud hovering above both of them. It has become the main driver of their existence—the prism through which they evaluate their life experiences.

### *The Evil Genius of the Demagogue*

Of course, there are many reasons that people may feel victimized, dysfunctional childrearing practices and societal injustices being among the most common contributing factors. For example, if we take the two actors in the novel as illustrative, we realize how easily all of us can enter into this haze of victimhood, a fact that many demagogue-like, populist leaders have been known to take advantage of. One might even say that they are experts at creating a landscape populated by victims and villains. They know very well that by painting such a panorama, they will catch people's attention.

Unfortunately, we don't have to look far to see this behavior in action, the mendacious political acrobatics of ex-President Donald Trump being a prime example. But he isn't alone. Too many leaders operate in a very similar fashion. Recognizing the universality of the victimhood experience, they have used this theme as an ideal breeding ground for manipulating their audiences, making the sense of victimhood a powerful societal force.

As we learn from Saul Bellow's tale and the strained interchange that occurs between the protagonist and his antagonist, victimization is not just an objective occurrence. Actually, victimization is very much based on subjective experiences—the way people would

interpret the world around them. Some people easily perceive themselves as “victims” in circumstances that many others would regard as part of the normal vicissitudes of day-to-day life. Unfortunately, however, victimhood has become an essential aspect of the mindset of these people. In other words, they prefer to see life through perpetually victim-tinted glasses.

What should be added is that a sense of victimhood is an ever-present human characteristic. All of us have been hurt at one time or another. And given these hurtful experiences, these feelings still linger on. Thus, even though a sense of victimhood may not be a core part of a person’s character, it can easily become activated under the right circumstances, which certain types of leaders know only too well.

It is critical to note, however, that this sense of victimization not only applies to individuals but also to groups of people. Segments of the population can also suffer from collective feelings of victimhood which, in ways like individual victimhood, can be based not only on objective experiences but can also be an outcome of social construction. Taking the group as the unit of analysis, the perception will be that the inflicted harm is intentionally directed towards some people because they belong to a specific group. As a result, a sense of self-perceived collective victimhood becomes a major theme in the memory of their specific sub-culture.

Of course, in many parts of the world where segments of the population have been subjected to extremely traumatic experiences, it is understandable that members of that

population possess a sense of collective victimhood. If these feelings linger on, it is because what has happened has never been properly metabolized. They have never really been dealt with. And if that's the case, these feelings of victimhood may serve as a basis for unity and solidarity. After all, nothing can have such a binding force as threats to a people's well-being. Examples of these kinds of traumatic experiences that would linger on are colonial occupations, being subjected to discriminatory practices, the impact of a war, or in the worst cases, genocide. In many of these cases, this sense of collective victimhood has even been transmitted from generation to generation.

### **The Sirens of Victimhood**

As the novel of Saul Bellow illustrates, it doesn't take much to begin feeling like a victim. What the tale also suggest is that people who view themselves as victims, can easily find company. It isn't very difficult to find others willing to share the same feelings. The ease in which victim contamination occurs is because most of us have had victim-like experiences. We may have been party to incidents where we felt that we got a raw deal. For most people, however, despite these experiences, this sense of victimhood will only be of a passing nature. They will get over it.

By contrast, maintaining a sense of victimhood suggests the presence of an enduring psychological state of mind preoccupied by strong beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and behavioral activities that are centered around this sense of victimhood. It refers to a *Weltanschauung* whereby feelings of being disadvantaged have been transformed into a

core element of the individual's personality. Often some kind of traumatic experience has set these feelings into motion.

Having a look at the psychological profile of people who feel victimized, themes like a sense of self-pity, low self-esteem, a pessimistic outlook to life, a sense of listlessness, strong feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame, and feelings of depression will come to the fore. In addition, people prone to feelings of victimization often experience a deep sense of alienation. It is as if they're disillusioned with the world. To many of these people, it is as if life has lost all meaning.

What should be added is that the mere experience of a series of negative experiences by itself may not be enough to make victimhood a core part of an individual's personality. For that to take place, there also needs to be the perception that the harm inflicted on them is undeserved and unjustified. Furthermore, the trauma they have been subjected to isn't only perceived as being undeserved and unjust, but often may even have been done to them while using immoral or even violent means.

### *From the Individual to the Collective*

What's noticeable in the case of victimization is that the individual or collective rights of these people have been violated. Such a violation can be concrete, exemplified by situations whereby an individual or a group of individuals is economically prevented of taking care of their basic needs. The sense of being victimized, however, can also pertain to more suppositional matters such as not being able to exercise the right to freedom or

happiness, not being given a space to live in, being prevented to act in a self-determined way, or not being allowed the free expression of their specific identity. Looking at the world we live, the examples of these kinds of prejudices are endless.

Whatever the harm is that is being done or has been done, people subjected to these kinds of discriminatory practices will retain these experiences in their collective memory. While it is possible that these discriminatory practices are a figment of their imagination, in most instances, such traumas are based on true events that have taken place in the present or fairly recent past. These transgressions could have been large-scale ones—for example, the result of a one-time event such as the loss of a battle or war, ethnic cleansing, or genocide—or long-term, harmful treatments of a group of people, examples being slavery or other forms of exploitation and discrimination.

Given such experiences, these people live with a lingering sense of having been wronged—feelings that can be quite contagious—thereby creating an emotional climate that can easily affect multiple layers of society. In addition, what needs to be added is that these people may have experienced this harm not only directly, but also indirectly. That is to say, they themselves may have suffered the psychological or physical harm, or they may have a relationship with other victimized people through which they have experienced indirect victimization.

What should also be noted is that these feelings of victimization often become shared and kept alive as a way to maintain, protect, and repair these people's group identity. In

fact, these feelings may even turn into some kind of “chosen trauma”—a shared mental representation of a major disagreeable experience that the group may have suffered—the kind of experience that seems to bind them together.<sup>1</sup> No wonder that this sense of being victimized may serve as a basis for unity and solidarity. Clearly, what has happened to these people has been a threat to their collective’s well-being—in some instances even to the group’s survival. Subsequently, hanging on to such a chosen trauma will become the “glue” that keeps these self-declared victims together. Such feelings of solidarity can also become a way of self-protection, given the fear of future harm.

### **Behavioral Patterns**

One of the possible consequences of this sense of victimhood is the development of a siege mentality. Such a mentality issues from their belief that they live under continuous conditions of threat. No wonder that they may become *hyper-vigilant* when looking at the world around them. Whatever they experience, it will be scrutinized for negative intentions. These people believe that they always need to be on guard since, in their mind, they will always have negative expectations vis-à-vis other people. No wonder that they have trouble trusting others as they expect that everyone is out to get them. Of course, such an outlook to life causes them to have a rather a cynical view of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Vamik Volcan (2001). Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity, *Group Analysis*, 31 (1), 79-97.



In addition, people with a victimhood mindset tend to exaggerate little things, always turning them into big issues. In other words, they tend to *catastrophize*. They have a tendency towards cognitive distortions that prompts them to jump to the worst conclusions regarding whatever challenges they are encountering—this despite having very limited information or objective reasons to despair. In other words, they will resort to biasing and distorting whatever information comes their way. Being under the spell of the confirmation bias, they will always search for information that's consistent with their preconceived beliefs, disregarding evidence that does not support their *Weltanschauung*.

Unfortunately, the feelings of victimization experienced by these people can even trigger patterns of *retaliatory behaviour*, meaning cycles of violence directed at the people they view as the cause of their misery. In other words, their sense of victimhood can turn into outright aggression. Often, the rationale for doing what they're doing is that they are trying to prevent future harm or they want to avenge the harm that has already been done to them. They strongly believe that they need to defend themselves to prevent immoral and destructive behaviour by their perceived perpetrators. Such a view to life, however, explains why these feelings of collective victimhood can escalate into violent outbursts. But when this happens, these people view their violent behavior as merely a punishment for the harm that has been done to them and/or as a means of preventing possible future harm. In effect, these people strongly believe that any measure taken to prevent future harm will be warranted.

Given these people's sense of victimhood, they have also a very *righteous, morally entitled attitude* to life. They strongly believe that they are within their right to use any means to ensure their safety. Consequently, they think that they can ignore the moral implications of whatever they're doing or will have done. Clearly, the traditional safeguards to prevent excesses in human conduct such as feelings of shame and guilt do not seem to apply. On the contrary, their sense of collective victimhood becomes the moral foundation from which their actions are always justified. After all, as they view themselves as victims of perceived injustices, whatever they do, it should be morally correct. In other words, if they decide to move from a passive to a more active stand, victimhood becomes a license to commit immoral and illegitimate acts.

What's also clear, given the way that these people are reasoning, is that they're masters of *rationalization*. They tend to justify immoral action with seemingly logical reasons and explanations. To them, the harm they may be enacting should be seen as a punishment and/or prevention given what they believe has been done to them. Consequently, rationalizing what they're doing, they should not be blamed for their activities. In other words, their collective perception of being victimized seems to serve as a buffer to defend against negative thoughts and feelings that may emerge when they transgress. In their opinion, others have no right to pass moral judgement when they do to others what has been done to them. Given their past experiences—asking themselves how the world ever allowed these terrible things to happen—they are convinced that traditional moral conventions no longer apply. They believe that they're allowed to do everything within their power to prevent a similar trauma from ever happening again.

Apart from the use of the defense mechanism of rationalization, these people will easily resort to the use of more *primitive defense mechanisms* such as denial, projection, and splitting. For example, they tend to refute any responsibility for whatever negative things they may have done themselves. It will always be the “others” who are to blame. At the same time—looking at their behavior as being guided by an immaculate moral code—everyone else is quickly assessed as behaving immorally, unfairly, or selfishly. In other words, they easily project everything that they don’t like about themselves onto these “others.” It is these “others” who are viewed as the cause for all their unhappiness. Thus, while denying their own aggressiveness and destructive impulses, they project them onto other people.

Furthermore, “splitting” is also one of their chosen defense mechanisms. Conveniently, they tend to split the world into the people who are “saints” versus those who are “pure evil”—a way of looking at things that helps them to shore up their self-image. However, it doesn’t make for a very nuanced way of looking at the world. Such an outlook to life, only contributes to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair.

Given their *Weltanschauung*, these people need to have their victimhood recognized and affirmed by others. Thus, they are constantly *seeking recognition* for their victimhood. But behind this need for affirmation is the wish to have the perpetrators of their perceived misery take responsibility for what they believe has been done to them. They want them to express feelings of shame and guilt for their wrongdoings.

Another pattern worth noting (which is a central part of their personality) is their *lack of empathy*. Since they are so preoccupied with their own feelings of having been wronged, they are often unable to divert their interest to the suffering of others. Clearly, they have great difficulties to see things from another person's perspective, self-preoccupied as they tend to be. In fact, they seem to feel entitled *to behave selfishly*. They rationalize their behavior since they believe that they have already done their fair share of suffering. They feel entitled to spare themselves some of life's inconveniences, such as being attentive to the needs of others. No wonder that they tend to ignore the suffering others.

In addition, people who feel victimized have the tendency to *ruminate* on their imagined miserable state, repeatedly going over the same information without changing whatever is bothering them. Naturally these constant and repetitive thoughts will interfere with their ability to engage in daily tasks, relate to others, and experience positive emotions. Dwelling on negativity is not the way to relieve their distress and improve their mood. On the contrary, what should be noted is how these people become "stuck" in negative patterns, replaying past hurts, which prevents them from generating new ways of thinking, new behaviors, or new possibilities. Instead, their rumination fuels feelings of anger, firing up a desire for revenge against the imagined perpetrators of their misery.

Given these people's particular outlook on life, they also seem to possess what can be called an *external locus of control*.<sup>2</sup> Whatever has happened to them, they believe is the

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<sup>2</sup> Julian B. Rotter (1966). "Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement". *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*. **80** (1): 1–28.

result of luck or fate. It is always outside forces that they seem to blame. According to them, it is these external forces that have determined the trajectory of their life. Therefore, given their *Weltanschauung*, these people easily give up when life doesn't go their way. Essentially, they don't believe that they have the power to change their way of living. In comparison, people who have a more internal locus of control believe that they are responsible for their own success. They believe their own actions—hard work and self-determination—dictate whatever happens in their life.

## **Origins**

The question becomes, what creates this victim mentality? Looking at origins referring to victimhood as a core part of an individual's personality, we can assume that various factors will contribute to such an outlook to life. Most likely, a victim mentality has developed due to people's early negative life experiences. Obviously, the people a person interacts with will have a strong influence over who he or she will become. It will have a great impact on the kind of mindset that a person will develop. Here, attachment patterns, the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers, seem to have a great effect, an impact that will continue throughout life. To be more specific, when caregivers are reliably available when needed, are sensitive to their children's attachment needs, and respond positively to their demands for proximity and support, children exposed to such parenting will feel secure, having positive expectations about the caregivers' availability and responsiveness. In contrast, anxious, insecure attachment can be a strong antecedent for the creation of victimhood. In other words, when children are exposed to

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caregivers who are unavailable or unpredictable, it is more likely that the child (and the future adult) will feel victimized.<sup>3</sup>

Children with rather autocratic parents are more likely to end up with a victim mentality. Given the way these parents treat them, the way they scold them if they don't follow their rules, they begin to see themselves as victims. In addition, it is also easy to imagine that children's sense of self-worth will be degraded if they have been bullied at school by other children or by their teachers. Consequently, they may acquire an "poor me" attitude to life. This creates a self-perception of being a victim, prompting them to look out for sympathy and help from others.

Apart from these "micro" psychological developmental patterns referring to the individual, "macro" issues should also be taken into consideration to understand a person's sense of victimhood. A sense of victimization—as is the case for many other human belief systems—can also be the effect of meta-socio-cultural influences. For example, members of a specific population group may have been subjected to certain discriminatory practices or have heard about these practices from others to whom they feel close. Due to these influences, a sense of victimhood may have become a part of their identity. In such a process, the media may also play an important role. Here, the impact of television, radio, and the internet should not be underestimated.

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<sup>3</sup> John Bowlby (1969), *Attachment and loss*. New York: Basic Books; Mary D. Salter Ainsworth, Mary C. Blehar, Everett Waters, & Sally N. Wall, (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

### *Passive versus Active*

Whether people who perceive themselves as victims take action or default into inaction depends on the way that victimhood experience has been internalized. Even though there are some people willing to take an active stand—to prevent whatever has happened to them from reoccurring—a more common scenario is inaction. Feeling like a victim can become an excuse for taking a more passive stand. The person may let life take its course without taking any form of action. Given their past life experiences, these people may be telling themselves that any efforts to create change in their situation will fail. Thus, they conclude, why even try?

If that's the case, it is much more convenient for these people to remain in a state of passivity. They may try to place blame elsewhere, to make excuses, but not to take any initiative to change their situation. Of course, hidden behind their passivity are angry feelings about a world that always seems to be against them—a world that doesn't seem to care. In addition, not only may these people be angry about the fact that nobody seems to care, but there will also be this sense of resentment towards the "others" who seem happy and successful. These are the kinds of feelings that will fester if not addressed. In addition, apart from anger, these feelings might contribute to feelings of depression, isolation, and loneliness. What needs to be added is that these feelings can be turned around if these people see a reason for doing so. For example, the catalyst may be a certain type of leader who may rally them around their sense of victimhood. For a number of these people, it doesn't take much to change the anger inside to an anger expressed outside, leading to dramatic action.

## **Beyond Victimhood**

Given the world we live in, it will be difficult to identify anyone who hasn't been either the victim or the beneficiary of injustice. As has been said before, victimhood can be seen as a part of the human condition. Life as we know it can be full of bad surprises. We all have found ourselves in challenging situations. The question becomes, what to do about it?

### *Secondary Gain*

Paradoxically as it may sound, for some people misery seems to have its benefits. What's referred to is the role played by secondary gain—the term used in psychology to describe the unconscious psychological benefits that may accompany misery. What's meant is that there can be unconscious motivators that people may have that accompanies being in a complaining mode. They may have discovered that the victimhood imagery can have a powerful influence on others. They may have realized that coming across as a victim could evoke other people's sympathy and compassion. It could mean being listened to, being given attention. It may motivate people who are dealing with these individuals to try to understand their feelings. They even may want to help them. Furthermore, however strange it may sound, being in a victimhood mode, could make "the victim" feel morally superior. It could even result in being shielded from any form of criticism for possible questionable actions taken by the self-perceived victims.

But even though a victimhood mindset may bring some comfort, going through life in this manner is also a form of self-sabotage. It may prevent these people from living a fulfilled



life. After all, how fulfilling can life be if so much time and energy is spent on complaining? Often, it could also mean that these people have adopted a very passive attitude towards life. All too often, they just let life pass by. Wouldn't it be much more constructive for the people who wallow in victimhood to ask themselves whether they could do anything about their situation? Should they just accept victimhood as their destiny, as an inescapable reality? Or might they instead take some form of constructive action that had the potential of transforming their lives?

It could argue that if various socialization processes can instill in individuals a victimhood mindset, might not different forms of socialization undo this damage? Should only negative experiences define these people? In other words, can this sense of victimhood be undone? Wouldn't it be much more constructive to build on these traumatic experiences—to use these experiences to become a better person? It should be possible to use these experiences to create a more positive and hopeful attitude to life, making these people the owners of their lives, rather than passive recipients.

### ***Focus on the Individual***

What people who feel victimized should realize is that blaming others for their misery may provide a temporary relief from their pain. However, in the long run, it only contributes to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. After all, with a victim mentality, they do not see the blessings that each day can bring. Their spirit will be poisoned instead of nourished. In fact, as long as they feel like a victim, they may end up being one.

What is critical in healing from this victimization mindset is to change the perception of self from victim to that of survivor—in short, to see oneself as a “victor.” Thus, even though these people’s character may have been formed in a certain way due to the unfortunate things that may have happened to them earlier in their lives, they should not just accept the status quo. For the sake of their mental health, it is much better to take charge, to take responsibility and to own their own life.

What these people should realize is that having a victim mindset will put a break on future developmental challenges. By not accepting personal responsibility for their circumstances, they greatly reduce their power to develop and to grow. What they also should acknowledge is that by continuing to play the victim role, this attitude to life will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They will become the authors of their own victimhood.

The first step in the healing may well be recognizing how much their behavior is of a self-sabotaging nature. In short, as these people expect that bad things could happen to them at any moment’s notice, some of them may even turn the passive into the active, making whatever they fear happen. Such behavior can even be looked at as a convoluted way to delude themselves that they have a modicum of control over their situation. However, that is a very self-destructive sort of control.

Instead, what these people need to ask themselves is what role they’re playing in making themselves feel so miserable. What’s their responsibility in the matter? If they’re prepared to take this question seriously, they may discover that they are the author of much of their

own misery. From there, they may discover that they have a considerable amount of power to choose their responses. What these people need to realize is that if they decide to act on their problems, they may cease to be a victim of circumstances. Instead, they could become a force for change. They would be able to transition from being a victim to being a survivor.

The challenge for people who feel victimized is to let go of what they think makes their life so miserable. It is up to them to let go of their grudges. And it is up to them to be more hopeful, not to feel so helpless and hopeless. Basically, what they need to acknowledge is that choosing martyrdom isn't a very constructive way of going through life. If so, far too much of their time and energy will be spent on meaningless complaints. They may even have become so blinded by their own perceived victimhood that they've started making victims of everyone who has to deal with them.

To enter a more constructive action mode, the starting point for change is to become aware of why they feel the way they do. They need to ask themselves why they think that the world is against them. Their challenge will be to stop being the victim of their own thoughts. Thus, to discover the underlying reasons why they're so preoccupied with victimhood, they need a better understanding of their thought processes. This will mean recognizing the need for greater self-knowledge. What they should realize is that without self-knowledge, there will always be this tendency to go on autopilot, to act without thinking.

Unfortunately, that's what many of the people that choose to dwell on feelings of victimhood appear to be doing. To think on their own, or plainly thinking in general, doesn't appear to be their strength. However, it doesn't have to be this way. They can try to change. What would be an important sign of progress for these people is the realization that going through life with a victim mentality becomes debilitating. The question they would do well to weigh is whether life is happening to them, or whether they are happening to life?

If these people are able to pay attention to what's going on in their mind—and how their thoughts at any moment are affecting the stories they're telling themselves—they will have the choice to adjust their behavior accordingly. Self-knowledge will help them to arrive at a different, more constructive outcome. In fact, only when these people are aware of why they think the way they do, will they be able to consciously choose how to act. Their challenge will be to make more of their unconscious conscious. If so, they will be able to focus on what they can control, rather than viewing themselves as being a victim of their thoughts and circumstances.

Of course, what this also means—what needs to be done to change these feelings of being a victim—is that they need to explore the origins of their self-limiting beliefs. Taking this path implies embarking on an inner journey. It means discovering what lies underneath these feelings of powerlessness that seem to color their outlook to life. They need to uncover the roots of their victim mentality, finding out how their life's experiences and memories created these distorted perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs. Thus, during

this very personal inner voyage, these people may need to unpack childhood experiences that may have been repressed. Only by unpacking these memories will they understand where certain behavioral characteristics are coming from and why this victimhood behavioral pattern has become such a core part of their personality.

Therefore, embarking on such an inner journey will be central to this healing and transformation process. Only through self-knowledge can these people stop their self-pitying behavior. In fact, by acquiring more insight about themselves, they may figure out that a “victor” is a “victim” who has decided to do something about the issues that they believe are victimizing them, instead of complaining about them. Eventually, they may come to realize that they will be a victim only when they are willing to play the part.

While embarking on this inner journey, these people may figure out that a victimhood mindset derives from learned perceptions that are built upon old memories of pain and pleasure, how significant life experiences have been interpreted and emotionalized over time. Little by little, through a process of self-exploration, they will realize the extent to which the way that they have been interpreting and defining their experiences has shaped their outlook to life. But they may also discover that what were once adaptive coping mechanisms, at a later stage in life, may have become dysfunctional. And as these coping mechanisms are no longer helpful, it may be time to drop them.

Clearly, an important step in their journey towards change—to be able to reshape these thoughts—is to be aware that these thoughts exist. Subsequently, what needs to be done

is to reframe these thoughts. Holding on to a state of victimhood is not helpful if these people want to live life to the fullest. Instead, what they must strive to do is learn how to think on their own, not to behave like passive victims of circumstances. They shouldn't let others do the thinking for them. After all, if they hang on to victimhood, they will all too easily be taken advantage of by others. And on a societal and political scale, it is populist, demagogue-like leaders who will be first in line to manipulate them. These leaders are particularly aware of how easy it is to rattle these individuals' sense of injustice and, unfortunately, get the worst out of them.

Due to the insights provided during this inner journey towards self-knowledge, these people may realize that whining, being unhappy, and blaming others for whatever they believe is wrong with their lives isn't the way to make their troubles disappear. After all, it is difficult to have agency while harboring the belief that other people are responsible for what's happens to them. However, if these people are prepared to enter this inner journey with a receptive mind, they will end up no longer wallowing in victimhood. Having become more insightful about themselves, they will stop blaming racism, politics, bullies, "imperfect" parents, ex-wives, unreliable friends, elitist people, financial manipulators, immigrants, or anything else for their problems. No longer will they be tempted to say, "I'm this way because of my father." "I'm this way due to the bullying of my teacher." "I'm this way because people like me are hated by others." "I'm this way because I am taken advantage of by foreign influences." No longer will they be seduced by the slogans used by demagogue-like leaders claiming they will be "draining the swamp." Having acquired a modicum of self-knowledge, they will recognize manipulation when they see it.

Moreover, they will also begin to unlearn other aspects of this victim mentality. Realizing that victimhood thrives off of negative thoughts, they can take the first step to letting such thinking go. That act can be seen as a milestone in creating their own new reality. It will make them realize that healthier coping mechanisms can be applied, that they can take back the reins that are guiding their life. Step by little step, these people can begin to learn how to design life on their own terms, creating their own reality by focusing on what they can control and letting go of what they can't.

Thus, if these people begin focusing on what's good in their life, this change in mindset can also turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of looking for the bad in something, they will be looking for the silver lining amidst every challenge. In fact, the moment that they stop blaming the world for all their misery is the moment that they shift from being a victim to one of a "victor." This will their route to self-empowerment. Having acquired a different outlook to life, they now realize that a sense of self-determination is available to everyone. With this changed outlook, life may start working in their favor. Victimhood no longer will be viewed as the only option.

As entering such a journey will involve a great deal of self-reflection, these people may not be able to take this inner journey just by themselves. If they want to explore the underlying causes of this victim mentality, it might also mean talking to trusted loved ones or interacting with psychotherapists or coaches. These people may be of great help in identifying what holds them back. They may also guide them in exploring the reasons

behind their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They may give them support to work on self-care and self-compassion, encouraging them to be nicer to themselves.

### *Forgiveness*

What's important in this unlearning process is the ability to forgive whatever has happened to them, forgiveness being an important step in the process of letting go. It will be essential not only to let go of their feelings of bitterness, but also to stop holding on to feelings of anger that accompany this sense of victimhood. This doesn't mean, however, to justify the actions of others. It is more of an internal, mental act of letting go of painful feelings. Only when these people are able to forgive, will they be set free. Without true forgiveness, however, it will be impossible to let go of the pain that keeps them in the prison of victimhood—the prison that colors their day-to-day experiences. In fact, forgiveness will be a gift that these people are giving to themselves. It is all about finding the inner strength to move beyond whatever pain they have experienced in order to find inner peace. However, what should be added is that forgiveness does not exonerate whatever the perpetrators have done. It doesn't mean forgetting.

What these people should realize is that to take the route of forgiveness will be a truly courageous act. In comparison, continuing to play the victim role deciding to hold onto bitterness and anger and the conviction of being wronged (often without even investigating what the other person's intention may have been), is not the way to progress in life.



Sadly enough, many people hold onto bitterness or resentment under the false belief that it will force others to change. They want these others to accept blame or take responsibility for their hurts. Instead, they would be much better off if they realize that they also may have hurt someone—that these happenings are a part of life. As a matter of fact, everyone, at some point in their life, will either require or have to offer forgiveness.

### *Compassion*

Instead of poisoning their mind with resentful thoughts, people who feel victimized may benefit from practicing compassion. They should recognize that they're not alone with respect to suffering. Other people will have also negative experiences. In fact, people holding on to this sense of victimhood would be much better off if they would let go of negative emotions such as fear, guilt, hate, rage, and self-pity. What they need to become aware of is that these feelings will keep them captive, thus reinforcing their identification with being a victim. In fact, by holding on to their resentment toward these others, they will remain chained to them. It is like they're drinking poison with the desire that it will kill their perceived enemy. Instead, they should realize that compassion towards these others will be the healing force.

It is then this compassion to whomever these people view as wrongdoers combined with forgiveness that will serve to dissolve the chains that imprison them. It's the way to become free. In comparison, they need to realize that continuing to play the victim role becomes a toxic waste of time. It not only repels other people, but also robs them of ever

knowing true happiness. They should let go of these negative feelings because it keeps them in a state of captivity. It only will help reassert their identity as victims.

### *Kindness*

What also can be seen as an antidote to the sense of victimhood is to engage in acts of kindness. All too often, people with a victim mentality have the attitude that everything that happens in the world is about them and their pain. As a mean of transcending these self-centered preoccupations, these people would do well to engage in doing things for others, which will also help them overcome their sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Being kind to others will be a way to empower the self. It creates feelings of having greater control over one's own life. Consequently, if these self-perceived victims are able to replace their perceived suffering with acts of kindness—if they're prepared to help other people—most likely, they will feel much better. And as counterintuitive as it may be, the more they feel deprived, the more they need to give. Offering kindness will be the surest antidote to these feelings of “poor me.”

### *Gratitude*

A major contributing factor to this victim mentality is this feeling of lacking something—the sense that there is never enough of something. Of course, the opposite of lacking something is abundance, which is where gratitude comes into play. Unfortunately, all too often, the feeling that there is something missing makes it easy for these people to get stuck in a trail of negative thoughts and feelings of self-pity. But if they would focus on the blessings in their life—if they would practice gratitude—then they could acquire much

more of a positive mindset. What they need to realize is that a life lived with kindness and gratitude is far better than one centered on resentment and bitterness. In other words, the quickest way to stop feeling like a victim is to adopt an attitude of gratitude, to focus on the good that's happening in their lives.

Thus, to change their outlook to life, people attracted to victimhood would do well to make it a habit of asking themselves, "What am I grateful for today?" or "What good things have happened in my life today?" In that respect, gratitude is simply the conscious acknowledgment of what brings joy in the present moment. Actually, when these people no longer obsess about their own stuff and are prepared to look at the bigger picture, they may begin to realize how lucky they really are.

### ***Focus on the Collective***

Of course, the experience of being wronged, of feeling like a victim, is not necessarily caused solely by personal trauma. Feelings of victimization may also arise due to disturbing collective experiences. Depending on people's ethnic or religious background, they may have been exposed to discriminatory practices. In such cases, psychological healing cannot be fully achieved by dealing with it on an individual basis. When individual traumas are part of much larger societal traumas, letting go and moving on will be a very different proposition. In these situations, healing needs to become more of a collective endeavor. Apart from the challenge of instigating healing on a personal level, a more public, societal process of reconciliation needs to be in order. Attention needs to be paid to whatever has happened on a collective level.

If such processes of reconciliation don't take place, it becomes easy for demagogue-like, populist leaders to take advantage of people's negative mindset, particularly in light of how contagious this sense of victimhood is. Such leaders have a distinctive level of competence when it comes to acting out victimhood on the public stage. If we are to prevent this from happening, then people will need to go beyond denial.

### *Moving beyond Denial*

It is important to realize that denial of the harm that has been inflicted on a societal level will not be the answer. In fact, ignoring past injustices forces the people who have been victimized to retreat into a lifeless existence. It's like a form of dying in the shadows of buried trauma and painful memories. As the holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel used to say, "Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." After all, there may or may not be a hell in afterlife but suffering injustice quietly is a prescription for poor mental health. If injustice has occurred, it asks for a call to action. However, to be able to do so, not only do the victims of injustice need the will to fight back, but they also need to have the skills and the resources.

In the context of dealing with injustices, the philosopher George Santayana said very appropriately, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Consequently, when bad things have happened to groups of people, the damage cannot just be whitewashed. People will have to go beyond denial. The traumatic experiences

need to be dealt with. If not, what history tells us is that those bad things from the past will most likely reoccur.

However, handling collective shame and guilt for committed atrocities will be a difficult challenge. Facing up to these incidents can be highly stressful. Nevertheless, denial or repression of the memories of the committed atrocities isn't going to be the answer. We have to be on guard against the unconscious push towards forgetfulness. Whatever the traumatic experience may have been, its history needs to be recaptured. The experience should be brought into realm of self-reflexive memory. In other words, people should come to terms with what has happened in the past, having realized the importance of ensuring a culture of remembrance. But if they're able to do so, what will also be helpful is recognizing the characteristics of the *Zeitgeist* that has enabled those atrocities to occur. Whatever happened should be seen in context. Of course, doing so, doesn't exonerate what has happened.

While going through this process of remembrance, mourning will be integral. It is the process through which people can arrive at new beginnings, to metabolize what has happened. It offers a mechanism through which people can confront the wounds of the past and offer a new and inclusive future. Here, public discourse as a way of coming to terms with the past can have a therapeutic effect. Some form of conflict transition—redress and reparation—needs to occur as way of preventing the reoccurrence of whatever happened in the past.

As an aside, paradoxically there will also be situations whereby the victims of atrocities may want to perpetuate what has happened to them. They aren't looking for real closure. If that's the case, it could very well be that victimhood has become their way to gain economic and political concessions. In these situations, the victims may argue that these settlements are rightfully due to them, given what they have experienced.

Apart from these special situations, as a collective, the voices of the victims need to be heard to enable a conflict transition. These people need to bear witness. Otherwise, it's most probable that they will relive their traumatic experiences over and over again, that they will be unable to move away from the injustice they have experienced. If they're not being heard, they may still feel violated, cheated, confused, scared, insecure, ashamed, guilty, impotent and at a loss for words or actions. Instead, what needs to happen is to regain a greater peace of mind. In other words, if the traumatic experiences will not be addressed, it will be very hard for them to arrive at any form of resolution. Thus, remembrance could be the chosen way to prevent a reoccurrence of whatever despicable act may have occurred. To break the cycles of violence and build peace, it will be vital to work on this process.

Furthermore, what needs to be kept in mind while going through this process of healing is that when groups of people have been harmed, such a violation will also have destroyed the sustaining bonds between these individuals and the society at large. Trauma, it must be noted, not only isolates, but also shames and stigmatizes. Thus, from a holistic point of view, for a society to function in the future, it will be essential that a sense of community

will be recreated. If the survivors of an atrocity are to restore their belief in humanity, their connections with the larger community must be rebuilt. Doing so, will be a very strong antidote to whatever trauma they may have experienced. Only by creating the feeling of belonging to a group will these people be able to restore their trust in humanity. Therefore, to make this happen, it is essential to embark on this process of reconciliation.

### *Reconciliation*

Reconciliation refers to the restoration of fractured relationships by overcoming feelings of grief, pain, and anger. It is a societally driven process that involves mutual acknowledgment of past suffering. It focuses on changing destructive attitudes and behaviors into more constructive relationships. In addition, it provides a platform for the healing of the relationships between groups of people who have been wronged, thereby touching these individuals' spiritual, psychological, social, intrapersonal, and interpersonal realms. In addition, it can be viewed as a process that helps the victims acquire a more hopeful outlook to the future. Thus, it is highly effective way to change their perception vis-à-vis the people blamed for their misfortune.

Essentially, reconciliation is a psychological transformation process of the collective self. It means that the party responsible for the traumatic experiences as well as the party that has been traumatized is prepared to address issues of justice and truth. Both parties need to be willing to face the true ugliness of what has happened. But to make reconciliation effective, it often needs to be a staged process even though the stages of reconciliation may vary.

Reconciliation usually starts with an effort to replace the fear of the other party into some form of non-violent coexistence. To get to this phase implies the building of confidence and trust, fueled by empathy. An important part of this process is that both parties are able to experience the range of emotions which the offense has caused, while also enabling them to express these feelings. What's also important in this process is that both parties try to understand why whatever happened did happen. What were the contributing factors? How could it have ever happened? Both parties should try to understand why such an event occurred. It will be very hard to put things to rest until some kind of rationale has been found. Subsequently, given the nature of the psychological transformation process, the victimized party needs to feel reasonably safe that the hurtful behavior will not occur again. This assurance could come in the form of a sincere apology and reconciliation, or by creating specific measures to prevent a reoccurrence of what had happened in the future. Finally, in this staged process, the victimized party also needs to make the choice to let go.

Letting go is a decision; it is a promise to themselves that they will stop ruminating about and dwelling on what has happened. This step includes not bringing up the incident again and holding it over the other party's head in the future. Naturally, this final step isn't going to be easy. But if the two parties haven't gone through the prior stages properly, they might find themselves stuck at this final step, simply unable to let go.



Generally speaking, reconciliation will be a lengthy process as both parties need to build trust, build a non-violent relationship, and learn to live cooperatively. Naturally, the challenge will be to break a prevailing cycle of violence—to prevent the reoccurrence of whatever atrocity has happened. It is all about the establishment of peace, justice, fairness, healing and forgiveness, the overcoming of personal enmities, the recovery of cultural identities, and the fostering of productive relationships within and between communities.

### *Private or Public?*

Throughout this process, what needs to be kept in mind is that reconciliation doesn't necessarily mean forgiving. Even though reconciliation is related to forgiving—and can be its catalyst—it isn't the same. To be more specific, forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of anger, resentment, or vengeance toward someone who has harmed someone, regardless of the fact whether the offending person has apologized or asked for forgiveness. It means letting go of the need to punish the other or demand restitution from that person. Thus, it is a process of inner healing of one particular individual—a very private internal process where people work through their hurt. It implies gaining an understanding of what has happened, rebuilding a sense of safety, and letting go of whatever the grudge they're holding. Forgiveness, however, doesn't necessarily require a response from the one who has hurt him or her. The offending party is not necessarily a part of this process—they may not even have to know that they have been forgiven.

Reconciliation, on the other hand--compared to forgiveness—is a group process. It is a public affair. It entails the restoration of a broken or damaged relationship between a number of people. For example, it would include the process of political healing within a nation when two groups that formerly were in conflict with each other, subsequently try to repair the wounds of the past, South Africa's Commission on Truth and Reconciliation or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada being good cases in point. Thus, reconciliation refers to the restoration of a fractured relationship by overcoming feelings of grief, pain, and anger. In this sense, reconciliation lies at the heart of building and maintaining peace in a society, especially between divided communities.

Furthermore, unlike forgiveness, reconciliation requires the cooperation of both parties. As an interpersonal process both parties dialogue with each other about what happened, exchange stories, express the hurt, apologize for the offenders' part in the issue. While this is happening, the victimized party listens for the presence of remorse, a critical element if the releasing of grudges is to occur. This makes reconciliation a far more complicated process. It is all about building trust and positive relationships—trusting that there will be no harm in the future. However, it can also be seen as the foundation upon which individual forgiveness can be built.

### *Testimonials*

If the survivors of an experienced atrocity are able to give testimony of what has happened to them, there is the possibility that a sense of connection with the other party can be restored. Of course, this kind of psychological restoration and healing can only occur by

providing a space for the survivors to feel heard. Thus, an ambiance needs to be provided where every detail of the traumatic event can be re-experienced in a safe environment.

Even though initially the people who feel victimized may believe that important matters such as faith in humanity or common human decency are irretrievably destroyed, it is through the process of giving testimony that a relationship can be rebuilt. This requires that the party responsible for the atrocities acknowledge what they have done. By giving testimony, the victims will be able to reclaim lost parts of themselves. The process will enable them to re-join the human commonality.

In order to initiate the process of reconciliation, an extensive examination of the harm done, its extent, and its nature must be done. It will also necessitate an investigation of due accountability and of the contributing factors that made the atrocity possible. Through this process of investigation, both sides of the conflict will be able to acknowledge what has happened in the past by getting to know the two narratives (including the one about victimization). Understanding each party's narrative will allow for a common frame of reference that will enable and encourage both parties to acknowledge the past, confess the wrongs that have been inflicted, relive the experiences under controlled conditions, mourn the losses, validate the experienced pain and grief, receive empathy, and support, and restore the broken relationship.

As can be seen, this reconciliation with the past will be an essential part of moving forward on this healing journey. Typically, one of the benefits of such a reconciliation process will

be that it will reduce the victims' injustice gap. In that respect, it is all about creating equity and equality by closing this gap. It implies building bridges between opposing parties and helping to repair fractured relationships. Doing so, will make it possible to live harmoniously in the future. In other words, reconciliation helps to break the past cycle of violence, build a more peaceful shared future, and ultimately a sustained peace. However, the formation of peaceful relations based on mutual trust and acceptance, cooperation, and consideration of mutual needs will take time. After all, mourning of what has happened in the past can be a very lengthy endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

However, the successful process of reconciliation should ultimately lead to a collective healing process that will include forgiveness for whatever misdeeds have been done. It is possible that certain more intractable conflicts are asymmetrical in the way the parties involved have carried out their harmful acts. In such instances, it is essential that the side that is to a greater extent the perpetrator is willing to take greater responsibility for whatever harm has been done. Much apology and compensation for the inflicted harm may be in order in order to speed up the process of reconciliation.

### **Coming full circle**

Clearly, human life isn't a rose garden. Setbacks are an integral part of social life. Individuals within groups and groups vis-à-vis other groups tend to go through cycles of conflict and animosity, followed by cycles of cooperation and relative harmony. This

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Mitscherlich (1975), *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, New York: Grove Press.

repetitive cycle between conflict and cooperation is due to the fact that Homo sapiens is a social animal who needs to cooperate with other group members to deal with external dangers. At the same time, for reasons of survival, there is also the question of competition. Clearly, human interaction isn't necessarily a win-win enterprise. Often, there will be competition for scarce resources that makes conflict inevitable, creating situations that make for this sense of victimization.

The question becomes how to minimize the human tendency towards conflict, whether that be on an individual or societal level. After all, a world full of conflict has devastating consequences. It will be a world full of anxiety and stress. And as noted, conflict gives rise to these feelings of victimization and the subsequent desire for revenge—the desire to do harm to other people—with disastrous results for people's wellbeing. From a societal point of view, were conflicts to escalate further, they would bring even greater harm, only contributing to a sense of mass victimization.

What has become clear from this discussion of victimization is that a perpetual victimhood mindset only contributes to a world seen through dark-tinted glasses. Yet, by using a different lens, both parties may discover that the "others"—whoever they may be—aren't necessary evil; and that not everyone in the in-group is going to be a saint. They may come to the realization that they're both human, both fallible.

People who suffer from a sense of victimhood need to realize that as long as they think that the cause of their problems is "out there"—as long as they keep on thinking that

always the “others” are the only ones to be blamed for their suffering—it will only make for a tragic world—a world where they will forever be stuck in the role of the victim. However, if they’re prepared to act on their problems, when they cease to feel like a victim of circumstances but demonstrate a willingness to become a force for change, that’s when they will be transitioning not only to the role of survivor, but also to that of a role model. They will be an inspiration to those still in the victim’s mindset. The choice, however, will be theirs. Consequently, it is worthwhile asking themselves whether they want to have a life of self-fulfillment or a life colored by self-pity? If they were to choose the latter, they should know that living in such a way can be a form of spiritual suicide.

In the summing up, it should be noted that to overcome a sense of victimhood, people have to take two different journeys. The first one is directed inward towards self-discovery, thus helping them to reconcile their personal suffering. The second one which applies to mass injustices is directed outward. It implies reconciliation, including a sense of forgiveness vis-à-vis others.

One of the most significant benefits of undertaking these journeys is that those who come out on the other side are far less likely to be manipulated by those of ill intent. And in our present-day society, this is no small matter. As we well know, there are too many leaders across the globe ready and willing to pull on the strings of those feeling victimized and use them for their own political agendas. *Caveat emptor!*