

The Blame Game

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What Would Aristotle Do?

One of the most destructive human pastimes is playing the blame game. It has been responsible for mass casualties of war, regrettable acts of road rage, and on a broad interpersonal level (social, familial and work-related), a considerable amount of human frustration and unhappiness. The blame game consists of blaming another person for an event or state of affairs thought to be undesirable, and persisting in it instead of proactively making changes that ameliorate the situation. The drive shaft of this game is a series of four irrational beliefs:

- 1) If something has gone wrong (or is not the way it should be), then someone other than myself must be identified and blamed for causing the situation.
- 2) This person/s' malfeasance diminishes the respect he/she deserves as a person.
- 3) So, it is permissible (and only fitting) to treat this person/s in ways he/she deserves to be treated such as ignoring, name-calling, and in extreme cases, physical assault.
- 4) I must not accept any significant degree of responsibility for the situation inasmuch as to do so would be to admit that I am myself also diminished as a person, and therefore deserving of the same disapprobation and negative treatment.

We see these four beliefs play out quite routinely in the mainstream of life. Someone is late to the family, holiday dinner and is treated by the host as a persona non grata for the remainder of the night—given the cold shoulder, given dirty looks, or even reprimanded before the other guests. A motorist goes down the wrong way in a parking lot and receives the middle finger from another motorist. A student fails an exam and subsequently becomes belligerent toward the teacher and makes nasty comments to other students about the teacher. A teacher consistently gets poor student evaluations and blames the students for being incompetent and too stupid to evaluate him. A man beats up his wife and blames the victim for not “understanding” him. A woman cheats on her husband and blames him for working too much. A manager does not get the promotion she wanted and blames her boss for being a “male chauvinist pig.”

Clearly, there are cases in which a person is blameworthy for a malfeasance and acknowledging blame does not involve playing the blame game. In such cases there is a constructive way of settling a dispute as in assigning legal responsibility in a civil matter. Such assignment of blame is conducted according to objective standards and does not involve disrespectful treatment of others as does playing the blame game. Outside a legal context, the assignment of blame may be done for purposes of ameliorating a situation. Thus, when two significant others have an argument or dispute, admission of blame, typically on the part of both partners, can help toward making constructive amends for the future. Indeed, in counseling the willingness to accept responsibility for one's life can be an important prerequisite toward making constructive change.

However, there is a fundamental difference between such rational blame and the irrational kind involved in the blame game. The latter involves a systematic playing out of the four blame game claims described above. Let's take a look at each in its turn.

The Irrationality of the Four Blame Game Claims

Someone Else Must Always Be to Blame

Clearly, the first of these beliefs is false because in many cases a negative situation is not really the fault of anyone, or anyone in particular. For example, traffic accidents can be “true accidents”; people sometimes don't get along or like each other because of personality conflicts; sometimes people come in contact with a

virus and catch it to no fault of anyone. People can suffer heart attacks or get cancer without it being someone else's fault.

Indeed, when people play the blame game, they often engage in further irrational thinking in order to justify blaming others. For example, a client once exclaimed, "It's my wife's fault I caught that nasty bug because the night before I got sick, she made me stay up to the wee hours watching that dumb video she rented." But how could someone possibly ever prove that he wouldn't have gotten sick had he gotten more sleep? Post hoc ergo propter hoc: Just because one event followed the other doesn't mean the first caused the second. The fallacy is classic but it's a lot easier to cast blame than to be scientific. The blame game is a breeding ground for unscientific, unsupportable blame claims!

Losing Respect for the Blameworthy

The second belief of the blame game is also irrational because it confuses the deed with the doer. Here it is not simply "what you did was wrong." Rather, it is that you as a person have fallen from good graces. You are less of a person for your failing and hence less worthy of respect; it is personal; you are stigmatized for it; looked down upon; you are less than you were before you faltered. If you are blameworthy then you are less worthy of respect. It's a cardinal rule of playing the game.

But, as we know, games are not always realistic. Even if someone does something wrong, this doesn't mean that the person himself is bad or deserves less respect as a person. If this were the case, then we would all shed our respectability because we all exercise indiscretion and make some poor choices in the course of life. So we really oughtn't to damn the doer just because we are inclined to damn the deed. What's true of the part is not necessarily true of the whole. It's a simple rule of reality—and life.

Treating them with Disrespect

The use of the silent treatment, personal attacks, and the use of force are all classic ways to alienate people and to shut down the avenue for meaningful interpersonal communication whereby disagreements can be rationally addressed. The blame game, however, does not aim at constructive resolution of disagreements; instead it aims at some vague, unrealistic, and negativistic goal of making sure that people get what they deserve. This game plan gets us nowhere in building fulfilling interpersonal relationships. Instead it tends to perpetuate malcontent among all concerned.

No Flies on Me

Much of this malcontent has to do with the refusal to take personal responsibility. People make mistakes and engage in regrettable actions. But by failing to take personal responsibility the road to constructive change is blocked. This refusal is piloted by the belief that somehow it is not okay to make mistakes. Better to blame others than to admit culpability. For, making mistakes means being flawed and being flawed means being unworthy of respect.

But what is really flawed is this unrealistic demand for perfection. While people are not perfect they can learn from their mistakes—but only if they admit them and change their behavior in the future. Unfortunately, the blame game looks outside oneself to cast blame. It is never me in any significant way; it is rather the other guy who is to blame. Blame me? Hell no! No flies on me!

How to Stop Playing the Blame Game

Do you look for someone else to blame when things appear to have gone wrong? Do you tend to look down on the person you have marked out as the culprit? Do you treat (speak or act toward) this person/s in a disrespectful manner and think yourself justified? How often? Are you a blame gamer? If so, then what should you do differently for happiness sake?

Give up your blame claim that someone always has to be blamed and made to pay. Everyday life isn't a court of law and you aren't the judge and jury. Accept yourself and others unconditionally. This doesn't mean you can't negatively rate your own actions or those of others; but it does mean that you shouldn't berate yourself or others. People aren't "assholes" or "shits" even when they do shitty things.

Recast responsibility as a way to learn from your mistakes as well as those of others. Accept your fallibility as a route toward self-improvement. Try to make things better, but rest content that you live in an imperfect world. Embrace this imperfect universe and the fallible beings in it, yourself and others —and stop blaming people for it.

(This blog entry is dedicated to my friend and teacher, Dr. Albert Ellis, on the week of the fifth anniversary of his death. It commemorates and celebrates his revolutionary contributions to the field of psychotherapy, including key ideas contained herein.)