

THE RESPONSIBILITY/FAULT FALLACY

Most people equate being responsible for something with being at fault for something—and so they take responsibility for nothing in their lives.

9 minute read • by Mark Manson

*This is an excerpt from my new book, [The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck](#).*

Years ago, when I was much younger and stupider, I wrote a blog post and at the end of it I said something like, “And as a great philosopher once said: ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’” It sounded nice and authoritative. I had forgotten who had said it. Google turned up nothing. But I stuck it in there anyway. It fit the post nicely.

About ten minutes later, the first comment came in: “I think the ‘great philosopher’ you’re referring to is Uncle Ben from the movie Spiderman.”

As another great philosopher once said, “Doh!”

“With great power comes great responsibility.” The last words of Uncle Ben before a thief who Peter Parker let get away murders him on a sidewalk full of

people for absolutely no explicable reason. That great philosopher.

Still, we've all heard the quote. It gets repeated a lot. Usually ironically and after about seven beers. It's one of those perfect quotes that sounds really intelligent, but it's basically just telling you what you already know, even if you've never quite thought about it before.

“With great power comes great responsibility.”

It is true. But there's a better version of this quote, a version that actually is profound, and all you have to do is switch the nouns around:

With great responsibility comes great power.

The more we choose to accept responsibility for in our lives, the more power we will exercise over our lives. Accepting responsibility for our problems is the first step to solving them.

I once knew a man who was convinced that the reason no woman would date him was because he was too short. He was educated, interesting, good-looking, but absolutely certain that the reason he couldn't get a date with an attractive woman was because he was too short.

And because he felt that he was too short, he didn't actually go out and try to meet women. The few times he did, he would hone in on the smallest behaviors from the woman that indicated he wasn't attractive enough for her and convince himself she didn't like him, even if she really did. As you can imagine, his **dating life sucked**.

What he didn't realize was that he had chosen a metric that was hurting him: that women are only attracted to height and therefore he was screwed, no matter what he did.

This choice of metric is disempowering. It's a metric that gives him a really crappy problem: not being tall enough in a world meant for tall people. There

are far better values he could adopt in his dating life. For instance, “I only want to date women who like me for who I am” would be a nice place to start. But he did not choose this value. He likely wasn’t even aware that he was capable of choosing his values. Even though the man did not realize it, he was responsible for his own problems.

Yet he went on complaining: “But I don’t have a choice, there’s nothing I can do! Women are superficial and vain and will never like me!” Yes, it’s every single woman’s fault for not liking a self-pitying, shallow guy with shitty values. It couldn’t be his fault, could it?

A lot of people hesitate to take responsibility for their problems because they believe that to be responsible for your problems is to also be at fault for your problems.

Responsibility and fault often appear together in our culture. But they are not the same thing. If I hit you with my car, I am both at fault and likely legally responsible to compensate you in some way. Even if hitting you with my car was an accident, I would still be responsible. This is the way fault works in our society. If you fuck up, you’re on the hook for making it right. And it should be that way.

But there are also problems we aren’t at fault for, yet we are still responsible for them.

For example, if you woke up one day and there was a newborn baby on your doorstep, it would not be your fault that baby was put there, but the baby would now be your responsibility. You would have to choose what to do. And whatever you ended up choosing (keeping it, getting rid of it, ignoring it, feeding it to your pet parrot), there would be problems associated with any of those choices and you would be responsible for those as well.

Judges don’t get to choose their cases. He or she did not commit the crime, was not a witness to the crime, was not affected by the crime, but the judge is still responsible for the crime (they can choose to recuse, but it’s rare). The

judge must choose the consequences; he or she must identify the metric against which the crime will be measured and make sure that metric is carried out.

We are responsible for experiences that aren't our fault all the time. This is part of life.

Fault is past tense. Responsibility is present tense. Fault results from choices that have already been made. Responsibility results from the choices you're currently making every second of every day. You are choosing to read this. You are choosing to think about the concepts. You are choosing to accept or reject the concepts. It may be my fault that you think my ideas are lame, but you are responsible for coming to your own conclusions. It's not your fault that I chose to write this sentence, but you are still responsible for choosing whether to read it or not.

There's a difference between blaming someone else for your situation and them being responsible for your situation. Nobody else is ever responsible for your situation but you. Many people may be to blame for your unhappiness, but nobody is ever responsible for your unhappiness but you. This is because you always get to choose how you see things, how you react to things. You always get to choose which metric with which to measure your experiences with.

My first girlfriend dumped me in spectacular fashion. She was cheating on me with her teacher. It was awesome. And by awesome, I mean it felt like getting punched in the stomach about 253 times. To make things worse, when I confronted her about it, she promptly left me for him. Three years together, down the toilet just like that.

I was miserable for months afterward. That was to be expected. But I also held her responsible for my misery. Which, take it from me, didn't get me very far. It just made the misery worse.

See, I couldn't control her. No matter how many times I called her, or screamed at her, or begged her to take me back, or made surprise visits to her place, or did other creepy and irrational ex-boyfriend things, I could never control her emotions or actions. Ultimately, while she was to blame for how I felt, she was never responsible for how I felt. I was.

At some point, after enough tears and alcohol, my thinking began to shift and I began to understand that although she did something horrible to me and she could be blamed for that, it was now my responsibility to make myself **happy again**. She was never going to pop up and fix things for me. I had to fix them for myself.

When I took that approach a few things happened. First, I began to improve myself. I started exercising and spending more time with my friends (who I had been neglecting). I started **meeting new people**. I took a big study abroad trip and did some volunteer work. And slowly, I started to **feel better**.

I still resented my ex for what she did. But at least now I was taking responsibility for my own emotions. And by doing so, I was choosing better values: how to take care of myself and feel better about myself rather than how to get her to fix what she broke in the first place.

(And by the way, this whole “holding her responsible for my emotions” thing is probably part of why she left in the first place.)

Then about a year later, something funny began to happen. I looked back on our relationship and I started to notice problems I had never noticed before, problems that I was to blame for and I could have done better to solve. I realized that it was likely that I hadn't been a great boyfriend, and that people don't just magically **cheat on somebody** they've been with.

I'm not saying that this excused what my ex did—not at all. But I started to realize that perhaps I wasn't exactly the innocent victim I had believed myself to be. That I had a role to play in enabling the **shitty relationship** to continue on for as long as it did. After all, people with similar values date

each other. And if I dated someone with shitty values for that long, what did it say about me? Because if the people in your relationships are selfish and doing hurtful things, it's likely you are too, and just not realizing it.

In hindsight, I was able to look back and see warning signs of her character, signs I had chosen to ignore or brush off when I was with her. That was my fault. I could look back and see too that I hadn't exactly been the Boyfriend of the Year to her either. In fact, I had often been cold and arrogant towards her. Other times I took her for granted and blew her off and hurt her. These things were my fault.

Did my mistakes justify her mistake? No. But still, I took on the responsibility of never making those same mistakes again, and never overlooking the same signs again, to help guarantee that I never suffer the same consequences again. I took on the responsibility of making my future relationships with women that much better and happier. And I'm happy to report that I have. No more cheating girlfriends leaving me, no more 253 stomach punches. I took responsibility for my problems and improved upon them. I took responsibility for my role in my unhealthy relationship and improved upon it. I took responsibility for my reaction to my ex's horrible behavior and my life is better for it.

And you know what? My ex leaving me, while one of the most painful experiences I've ever experienced, is also one of the most important and influential experiences of my life. I credit it with inspiring a significant amount of growth. I learned more from that single problem than dozens of my successes combined.

We all love to take responsibility for success and happiness. Hell, we often fight over who gets to be responsible for success and happiness. But taking responsibility for our problems is far more important, because that's where the real learning comes from. That's where the real life improvement comes from. And to simply blame others is only hurting yourself.

Order *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*.

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