

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY AVOIDING THE ALLURE OF VICTIMHOOD

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One of the most harmful ways of

thinking of ourselves is as a victim. It can make it nearly impossible to find success, financially or otherwise, and undermines our capacity for relationships.

Yet this mindset is not uncommon, we've probably all experienced it to some degree. But for some it can create a more pervasive atmosphere in their lives.

As researchers Rahav Gabay and his colleagues have shown, this mindset has four specific qualities, that lead to three specific biases and one onerous tendency, that can skew our view of the world.

Today we'll look at how to move away from this kind of mindset, and re-orient toward taking effective, positive action.

Changing a victim mindset is much more complicated than the kind of "get over it" advice that's so common – and useless. We have *reasons* for feeling like a victim – sometimes because we have been seriously harmed in some way; sometimes because for some reason at some point it seemed like a good strategy to deal with challenging circumstances, and eventually became a habit.

Whenever looking at our habits or mindsets, it's essential to start with compassion, to understand that we often build certain habits of action or thought because it's the best we can do at the time, even if it ends up harming us later.

But if our habits *are* harming us, it's well worth looking at them honestly and with courage.

We've all been hurt, many of us have had traumatic experiences, and some of us have been the victims of abuse, crime or other kinds of serious mistreatment.

But those experiences are separate from holding an *idea* of ourselves as a victim. We can experience trauma or abuse and not see ourselves in general as a victim; and on the other hand, we can see ourselves as a victim when we have *not* been traumatized or abused. There is not a consistent cause and effect to this.

The four qualities that Gabay and his colleagues have found express a tendency for victimhood are:

- We want others to affirm our condition, and our suffering
- We see ourselves as having very high moral standards, and everyone else as immoral
- We are preoccupied with our own victimhood, to the point that we minimize, lack empathy, or are oblivious to the pain of others
- We spend time dwelling on how we've been wronged, and talk about what others have done to hurt us, rather than look for actions we could take to improve our situation

This orientation leads to three biases:

- Interpretation bias – we see offenses – big or small – as being more severe than do those without this mindset. We also *expect* to be hurt and so we look for anything that affirms that expectation.
- Attribution bias – We assume that anyone who hurts us has done so on purpose, and we feel our negative emotions longer and more strongly.
- Memory bias – We tend to remember the negative, hurtful experiences more easily and more often.

And then the onerous tendency: *It also makes it harder to forgive, and it inclines us to desire and seek out revenge.*

There's a common theme of helplessness to all of these. The focus is almost entirely external – what other people have done or not done, the unfairness or malevolence of external structures or practices.

That means that for anything good to happen, *other people* have to change, *the world* needs to change, and until that happens, I'm stuck here as a victim of all of this.

Now, the truth is, there's plenty of bad behavior in the world, plenty of unfairness, unearned pain and suffering. And every one of us has been hurt by somebody. Some of us much more than others.

There will always be an imbalance, there will always be ambiguities and misunderstandings, and there will always be at least some suffering and pain in life.

A victimhood mindset undermines our ability to roll with these typical troubles, depriving us of a degree of our own agency, and putting us at the mercy of other people and outside forces.

Success at anything involves a focus on our own strengths and weaknesses, and what we personally need to do to succeed.

When we focus instead on how we've been wronged, slighted, offended, or hurt, the focus is on other people and unfair circumstances – forces very often outside of our control. It also keeps us orbiting around those negative feelings and experiences, coloring our perceptions and the meaning we make of them, and creating

something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But this is something that we can change.

We start by acknowledging that we hold such a mindset. Look for the qualities I've listed above, and be very honest with yourself about whether and to what degree you have these tendencies and biases. To change anything, we must be willing to look at what's true.

This is not something to feel ashamed of. It's likely that these were habits that you developed in response to circumstances, that seemed like a good idea at the time. Besides, shame is a useless and harmful emotion in general.

Then gently reorient yourself toward what you want (except if what you want is revenge, since revenge is part of the same victimhood mindset. If what you want is revenge, stop, refer to the above qualities again, and think about something *positive* that you want to attain or achieve).

Then identify the obstacles to reaching what you want, *why you want it*, and identify the solutions to overcoming those obstacles.

Knowing *why* you want what you want is important to finding the energy to make the change. It has to matter, or you won't do it.

When I work with people who have experienced trauma, there is often an essential energy that has become thwarted from the trauma, and an essential step in healing is to reconnect them with that energy – a sense of *healthy* aggression.

This is *not* violence or revenge, but the physical and emotional energy that allows us to move toward what we want, or set a clear boundary for what we don't want.

This is very different from the kind of emotional release, "getting the anger out," therapy, which can interfere with actual healing – and become destructive in itself. It's essential that this emotional energy be tapped into at a pace and dose that the person can contain and integrate.

This taps us into the thwarted fight or flight reactions that were frozen in the shock of the trauma. By experiencing this capacity gradually, with only the intensity we can integrate and contain, we regain the personal power that was locked away in the frozenness of shock (I go into this in more detail, with references, in my *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions Workbook*).

Integrating the sense of effectiveness that this kind of healthy aggression allows is a different path entirely from a victimhood mindset.

We can't think our way out of rumination; we can't move forward while holding on to resentment and bitterness, and we can't see a positive future through the expectation of being hurt.

A victimhood mindset is a closed loop, and we need to, with compassion, acknowledge that we're in it, and the role that this mindset has played in our own suffering; then find a way to step outside of that mindset, and begin taking deliberate and effective action to improve our lives.

The result can be tremendously liberating, and it opens the door for greater success, and a deeper sense of happiness and well-being.

PS: My course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And now you can purchase the new *workbook* for this course separately for \$29.95 plus shipping. You can still get the online course with the downloadable workbook at a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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