



Demand Respect, Not Victim-Blaming

When I told people I had just broken up with my abusive girlfriend, several responded, “Have you looked at your part?” Since I had tormented myself for months doing nothing else, the question left me speechless.

More appropriate responses to the news would have been, “How are you feeling?” or “I’m so sorry you’re going through that,” or “That’s awful! No one deserves abuse!”

We all want to believe that life is fair and we are in control. We work hard to behave in “good” ways to stay safe. Unfortunately, that leads directly to the belief that if victims had behaved differently, they would not be coping with bad news now, so it must be their fault. Our fear makes us fiercely judgmental of vulnerability and powerlessness in ourselves and others.

Victim-blaming reinforces abuse. Victim-blaming robs abuse survivors of crucial support after an assault. Even worse, it stops those who suffer in ongoing abusive situations from reaching out for help. Emotional abuse is reinforced by the idea that victims deserve it, focusing their energy on “improving” themselves rather than on ending the abuse.

The victim has priority. People abuse for many reasons, including the desire for control, feeling entitled, feeling provoked, and feeling trapped. None of those reasons make the victim responsible for the abuser’s actions. A victim’s first priorities are safety, support, and healing. Compassion for

the abuser is secondary to compassion for the victim.

Recommending forgiveness can contribute to victim-blaming and silencing those with less power. “If only you weren’t so upset, there wouldn’t be a problem.” Forgiving is intensely private and happens in its own time. Yes, terror, shame, and rage can hurt the person feeling them, but more harm is done by suppressing emotions and pretending all is forgiven, especially with ongoing abuse.

Our culture is steeped in victim-blaming. From popular magazines and new age movies, from psychotherapists and religious leaders, we are surrounded by messages about how to gain control over our lives by losing weight, spending money, or thinking different thoughts. Our Inner Critic joins the chorus and tries to keep us safe by detailing all the ways we need to fix ourselves right now.

You are already enough. Amid all the bustle of “try harder,” “try smarter,” “try better,” a radically different message occasionally appears. Instead of telling us what is missing, it tells us we are already enough. Instead of telling us which external authority to believe, it tells us to listen inside and trust what we already know.

What happens in your body, in your heart, in your thoughts, when you give yourself permission to imagine that you are already enough? What if you do not need fixing? What if you already have plenty of the next fix you are tempted to buy?

The respect you deserve. Think of a recent puzzling or disturbing incident. Perhaps a store clerk was unaccountably rude as you completed a purchase. Did you ask yourself what you did wrong and how to fix it? How does that feel in your body?

Now imagine telling a friend about it, and your friend

responds by supporting your right to feel the way you feel, telling you that your perceptions are accurate, and appreciating that you shared your experience. How does your body feel as you imagine it? This is the respect you deserve.

Consider demanding more respect in your life. Move away from messages that say you need fixing, and toward messages that say you are already enough. Remind yourself that you are responsible for only your actions, not someone else's. Ask your Inner Critic to notice which beliefs keep you safer in the long run.

Strength in owning vulnerability. It takes courage to push away the blaming messages and sit with ourselves just as we are. It can be frightening to acknowledge that there is no magical action to make someone else change, and many events are beyond our control.

At the same time, owning vulnerability gives us the strength to notice our responses in the present moment. Secure in the knowledge that no one deserves abuse for any reason, we take action sooner to withdraw from situations that cause us pain and find abuse-free ways to meet our needs.