

SHIFTING FROM BLAME TO HEALTHY RESPONSIBILITY

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

For the first 25 years of our relationship together, we expressed a lot of blame and criticism to each other. We didn't know how else to express our unhappiness to each other. We thought that if we determined exactly who said what, who was at fault, who did what wrong; if we assigned the right amount of blame to each of us; we would be able to fix our problems. Instead, these discussions led to us being more deeply stuck in conflict. Our focus on what had happened actually stopped us from looking at how we were recreating the conflict and what could be done about it.

We viewed each other as adversaries. We attached stories, what we often call evidence, to our feelings of anger, hurt, fear and sadness. We would find ourselves in emotional arousal and act on that. We would build our cases against each other and for ourselves.

Then in the 1990's we learned about the concept of each of us having 100% responsibility. We let go of trying to figure out what happened. We began to look at response-ability, our ability to respond, instead of who did what. Bob clearly remembers the first time he was able to stop, slow down, breathe and pay attention to what was happening. What was really important was to step out of the adrenalin rush of blame, let go of the story, move into the more spacious place of wonder and open up to learning. At that moment, Marlene looked and sounded like a new person.

This began a journey of each of us claiming response-ability for what we wanted to create. It didn't happen over-night. It was a process, one that we struggled with at times, one of forgetting and re-committing.

One night, we were going to the National Arts Centre to enjoy a play – a treat for us, an elegant night out. As Bob was parking the car, he almost hit another vehicle. Marlene yelled, Bob was startled and braked. He got out of the car very angry and agitated. His voice grew loud with anger and blame. Marlene withdrew, and said she would not deal with his anger, and found it inappropriate given what had happened. Bob tried to draw her out and his anger and blame stories got louder inside. (Although not on the outside) We walked in silence to the theatre and took our seats. In the past this would have led to Bob simmering in silent blame and Marlene withdrawing in her own silent blame.

As we sat down we both had a sense of how familiar this all was. Years ago it was a pattern that when we had a night out and got a babysitter for the kids, we would have a fight. Right there in the theatre, we quietly acknowledged our feelings to each other. We realized that we had both been frightened by the near accident. We acknowledged how familiar this was from the past and how we had the option to keep it going in the present. Instead we each chose to take responsibility for our feelings and behaviour. We chose to create our evening, as we wanted it – an evening of fun and connection – rather

than holding onto an incident. Our anger and withdrawal/disconnect energy evaporated immediately. We had fun together the whole rest of the evening. By acknowledging authentic feelings in the here and now, we also healed all those past special night fights.

Response-ability implies creativity, thinking outside the box, coming up with a different or new response. The important thing in any problem is not whose fault it is but how you can respond to it. Healthy responsibility is often answered with two questions, “What can I learn from this?” and “What can or needs to be done about it?” Healthy responsibility is not about what happened (the past); it is about what needs to happen now (the present) and next (the future).

In any relationship, there are two 100 percents of responsibility. Each person has 100 percent; it is not shared between them. Healthy relationships are 100/100. How I treat someone will affect how he or she responds. That makes me 100 percent responsible for whatever happens in all my relationships. The other person is merely reacting to whatever I do.

And the reverse is also true: how the other person treats me will affect how I respond. That makes them 100 percent responsible for whatever happens in their relationship. In other words, each of us is 100 percent responsible for the relationship.

Unfortunately, we seldom recognize our own 100 percent responsibility. We focus on the other person’s treatment of us and how that “caused” us to respond a certain way rather than focusing on our response. All we see is what the other person does to us. We then blame the other person for the conflict. But blaming him/her doesn’t change a thing. Blaming keeps us locked in the problem. You can’t force anyone else to change – even if it’s for his/her own good. The only thing you can change in your situation is your own actions and reactions, your own response.

Let us tell you about Jerry and Monica (not their real names). They insisted on telling us their stories of who said what, why they did what they did based on what their partner had done. We assisted them to shift from “why did you do that again?” to “hmmmm, I wonder how I’m creating this in my life.” They both acknowledged how the way they perceived each other invited argument. Their eyes met for the first time in that session and they spontaneously reached out towards each other.

Our clients frequently ask “But what if it really is the other person’s fault?” We acknowledge that sometimes it clearly looks like one person made a mistake. However, the problem will never be resolved for us, until we take responsibility for what we can learn and how we choose to respond in the present.

Does that mean I am “responsible” for all the bad things that have happened to me; for example my illnesses, for abuse I experienced in my childhood? NO! Taking healthy

responsibility is about right now! How are you re-creating the abuse in your life right now? How can you take responsibility for creating what you want right now?

Learning to claim healthy responsibility has been one of the major learnings for us over the last few years. It has transformed our relationships. We want to acknowledge Drs. Gay & Kathlyn Hendricks for introducing us to and guiding us towards healthy responsibility.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. For more information call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com.