



PRETEND THAT YOU CREATE IT ALL

Get ready for one of the most bizarre suggestions in this book. Here it is: Our lives work most effectively when we take total responsibility for all of our experiences.

We can take responsibility for our lazy, incompetent supervisor.

We can take responsibility for the cars in front of us that sputter and moan as we drive home on the freeway.

We can take responsibility for the neighbors who consistently play their CDs at volumes that could shatter glass.

We can take responsibility for the dogs that howl from midnight until 2 a.m.

Whenever we're tempted to blame someone or something for an unpleasant circumstance in our lives, we can do the opposite. We can take responsibility for it—*all* of it.

Check your first reactions to receiving this suggestion. Perhaps they went something like this: "No way! This idea is crazy. I will not take the blame for my rude, insensitive neighbor, or for that noxious dog, or for a boss who's so incompetent he can barely zip up his pants. If I start taking responsibility for things like these, pretty soon you'll ask me to start taking responsibility for poverty, war, and world hunger."

Good points. So stick around for some further clarification.

The first thing we can do to explore this idea is to lighten up. We can take this practice as a point of departure, a suggestive line of thinking. We can play with it and see where it leads. For now, we need not worry about proving or disproving it.

Another thing we can do is to be clear about what's really being suggested. As we hear the word *responsibility*, we can translate it into *response-ability*. Then this practice is not saying that we chose to have loud neighbors or an incompetent boss. We are not solely responsible for all the circumstances in our lives (though it's sometimes interesting and instructive to pretend that we are). "Take responsibility" really says that we can choose our *responses* to our neighbors, bosses, and anything else in our lives. And those responses play a huge role in creating our circumstances.

As we seek to take more responsibility for our experiences, we can benefit by asking two questions: *How did I create this?* and *How can I create a new result?*

Ask "How did I create this?"

Asking this first question prompts us to carefully examine the choices we made and to look at their consequences. In the process, we might discover that much of our frustration stems directly from what we did or failed to do. When our lives are not working, we can look first to the person standing in our own shoes.

This can be a particularly tough discovery when life isn't going well. That was my experience when I asked this question about my divorce. I was convinced that the end of my first marriage was not my responsibility. I was sure that I'd been an excellent husband, and I knew that I hadn't created my divorce any more than I had created the weather.

The problem lay in the fact that I was teaching the concept of self-responsibility in workshops across the United States. I felt a contradiction between my teaching and my life.

Finally, I chose to apply this concept to myself and look in detail for ways that I had created the end of my marriage. I started to make a list and came up with one item. Then I came up with another. The longer I thought, the more my list grew. Eventually I listed 30 of my behaviors that probably helped lead to my divorce. Of course, I still knew that my first wife had something to do with the end of our marriage. But now I saw my role more clearly than ever before.

Though it's not always gratifying to discover that we create some difficult circumstances, there is some welcome news. By asking *How did I create this?* we embrace our role as the author of our experience. We step out of the role of being a victim and into the role of taking responsibility for our life.

There's more news. If we have chosen our way into the present circumstances, we can often choose our way out again. Here is an opening to freedom. That's what the next question is about.

Ask “How can I create a new result?”

A second step in taking responsibility is asking *How can I create a new result?*

This question is pure magic. It refocuses our attention. It lifts us above the whole self-defeating arsenal of resentment, frustration, resignation, and fear. With this question we begin to move into a whole new dimension of life. By freely choosing our next response and moving into action, we start taking control of our lives again.

When I applied this question in relation to my first marriage, I moved from depression to excitement: *Wow! If I created a relationship that didn't work, I bet that I could create a relationship that does work.* So I took the list of behaviors that helped to end my first marriage and thought about how I could change each behavior during my second marriage. Since I knew 30 ways to create a divorce, I now knew 30 ways to create a great marriage.

Before making these discoveries, I viewed myself as the victim of my first wife. But by asking how I had created my divorce and what I could do to prevent another one, I became the co-creator of a second (and wonderful) marriage. I stepped out of the mud of victimhood onto the solid ground of self-responsibility.



Remember two more ideas

In summary, this Success Strategy says that “you create it all.” That is, you choose how to interpret events and how to respond to them.

One way to enhance the power of this Success Strategy is to keep a couple of ideas in mind.

First, sometimes you *don't* create it. Floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters happen. People experience mysterious medical conditions that have no known cause. And of course, none of us creates the weather.

Still, we can play a harmless game for a few moments and *pretend* that we do something to create situations like these. Then we can see where the inquiry takes us. Often the results are interesting.

For example, people who live with chronic pain might discover that the pain worsens when they forget to do their prescribed exercises. Though they don't create the pain, they are responsible for their treatment of the pain.

And while no one creates the weather, we create our *experience* of the weather. When the first snow falls, some people in northern climates say, “Yuck! Winter's coming.” Other people say, “Wow! Winter's coming and the first snow is so beautiful.” Now, these people all live in the same climatic zone. Yet they live in different worlds when it comes to their experience of the weather.

A second idea to remember is that you can apply this Success Strategy when something pleasant happens. On a sunny, 70-degree day in spring, ask yourself how you created that wonderful weather. Of course, you didn't make the sun rise, and you don't control the temperature. But other people might not notice the sun, or they might complain that the sun is too bright, or they might wish for warmer temperatures so they can go swimming, or ... the list goes on. If you're enjoying the weather, then remember that you created that enjoyment.

Today I've got a phenomenal relationship with my children. I feel like I died and went to “dad heaven.” Recently one of my daughters said to me, “There's nothing I like to do more than be in conversation with you.” When she said this, my first thought was *Well, of course she's going to say things like that; she's a great kid.*

Well, she *is* a great kid. And I can give you a list of up to 50 ways that I helped create a wonderful relationship with her. I've worked on my relationship with my children more than I've worked at my career. I've invested time and drawn on many resources to enhance that relationship. While acknowledging how wonderful my daughters are, I can point to my role in creating our present relationship.

The difference in spelling between the words *victim* and *victor* is minor—just a matter of two letters. And the difference between being victors and victims in real life is initially quite small—just a matter of asking two questions: *How did I create this?* and *How can I create a new result?* Those two questions unleash the power of taking responsibility.



Practice taking responsibility

This is a problem solving exercise with three steps: describe, examine, and plan.

A. Describe the problem

Think of a current problem in your life. For purposes of this exercise, you might get the most insight from a long-lasting and perpetually unresolved problem.

Keep in mind one definition of a problem: a discrepancy between what you *want* and what you *have*. For instance, if you want a group of close friends and find that you have only a handful of passing acquaintances, that's a problem.

With this in mind, choose one problem in your life and describe it by writing on a separate sheet of paper.

B. Examine your role in the problem

Now brainstorm ways that you might be creating this problem.

Take the example of feeling isolated. A person with this problem might remember that it's been six months since he's thrown a party or invited anyone to his home for dinner. His problem and these habits could be connected.

Look for similar factors at work in your own problem.

Keep in mind that this list is a brainstorm. The goal for right now is to generate as many ideas as you can. Judging their quality or accuracy comes later.

Also remember that this list has nothing to do with shame or blame. You're merely diagnosing a problem the way a detective would—telling the truth in an objective, nonjudgmental way.

You might feel tempted to trace this problem to other people—what they're doing or failing to do for you. And in fact, other people may be a big part of the problem you're writing about. Even if this is true, look past this factor for now. Remember that other people's behavior is outside of your direct control anyway, and the purpose of this exercise is to discover *your* role in creating the problem.

Write a list of ways that you could be creating the problem you described in part A. Use additional paper if necessary. Then set aside your list for at least 24 hours.

C. Plan a solution

Now come back to your list with a fresh eye. Look over what you've written, considering it carefully. Choose one specific behavior—something you said or did—that seems to contribute the most to your problem.

State how you intend to change this behavior. Be specific and keep the focus on what *you* can do to solve the problem.

Practice this new behavior for a minimum of one month and determine whether or not it's helping to solve your problem. If not, go back to your original list of behaviors and choose another one to change. Then take action as before and evaluate the results. Even if the behavior change you originally made is helping, you still might want to review your list for others that could accelerate or strengthen your plan.

Cycle back through this exercise as often as you want. If you like, use it to tackle several problems. Doing this can be a significant step toward taking charge of your life.