

WATERMAN & ASSOCIATES
PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELLING SERVICES
70 Prideaux Street, Nanaimo, BC Canada V9R 2M5

IT'S YOUR DECISION: – DON'T RISE TO THE BAIT!

By Dr. Larry W. Waterman, Registered Psychologist

One of the biggest challenges for a psychologist is when an individual comes into the office and says something like “He/she made me so angry; I couldn’t help myself, I lost my temper; It wouldn’t have happened if he/she hadn’t pushed my buttons”. The common theme in such statements is that the person is not accepting any responsibility for his/her decision to behave or react in a certain way. Of course, we are responsible for how we react whether we like it or not.

I am not quite sure how this “urban myth” got started or continues to be perpetuated. Maybe it is a holdover from Freud and his theories of the unconscious that suggest we have no control over some aspects of our behaviour. Maybe it’s because, in our society, the majority of people don’t like to accept responsibility for their actions. However, before we can change any aspect of our life, we have to accept that we are responsible for our actions and our behaviours. If we believe someone else is responsible, then that other person will have to make our changes for us. If we wait for that to happen, we are probably going to be waiting for a very long time.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. In our society, anger management has become a serious problem. We hear about road rage, people being assaulted, spousal abuse, serious injuries and even murder occurring because of out-of-control anger. In most cases, these acts are not done in a cold, calculating manner. Rather, they are the results of individuals who become extremely angry and acting in ways that cause harm to others. In each of these situations, it is clear that the individual is acting in an inappropriate manner, based on a choice made to not manage his/her anger. Think about your own life for a moment. When something happens to annoy you, do you really believe that you have no options about how to act? If you are following a slow driver, is that actually the cause of your anger? The truth is, it’s your perception and interpretation of what is happening that results in you reacting in certain ways (i.e. “He is deliberately making me late”).

In describing these dynamics, I am not including situations where there is a definite psychological component that impacts on a person’s behaviour. For example, after a trauma many people experience a conditioned response that may restrict their behavioural options. Similarly, persons with significant phobias may not have the same degree of control over their reactions. Rather, I am referring to situations where you have a full range of choices available to you and you still make a bad choice. Rather than blaming another person for your choice, I believe that it’s far better to accept full responsibility for what happened. By assuming responsibility for the situation, you will be able to make different choices the next time such a situation arises.

As parents, I believe we do our children a real disservice when we make excuses for their behaviour instead of holding them responsible for it. If children grow up thinking that they couldn't help what they did, how will they learn that they do have the ability to change behaviours that get them into trouble or do not get them the results that they would like? Children who grow up believing that they do have choices, they are responsible for their choices, and there are positive and negative consequences to those choices, do much better throughout their life. It's also much easier to learn and integrate such concepts at an earlier age than when you are older.

The next time that you find yourself reacting in a way that you don't want, remind yourself "not to rise to the bait". You will find your life is much calmer and you will experience more success in all areas of your life than you currently enjoy. If you don't believe me, think of someone who is constantly complaining and blaming others for everything that happens to her/him. Contrast that person's behaviour with someone who is confident and accepts responsibility for themselves. Which person would you rather have as a friend?

Phone: 1 (250) 754-8559
1 (888) 422-5888
Fax: 1 (250) 754-2349
Email: info@waterman-associates.com
Website: www.waterman-associates.com

David Hallam, MSW, RSW
Jenifer Wilson, MSW, RSW
Dr. R. Paola Lake, Clinical Therapist
Dr. Raymond Shred, Reg. Psych. (#1268)
Dr. Larry W. Waterman, Reg. Psych (#0909)