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Personal responsibility

"I should be teaching this class!" Stephanie asserted. "I can recite the calorie, fat, and carbohydrate content of hundreds of foods. I know the calorie-burning value of dozens of different activities, and I know all the tips for avoiding eating cues. But, I still can't control my weight. The problem is, I know it all up here," she said pointing to her head, "but not here," she added gesturing toward her heart.

Sound familiar? It very well may. According to the National Weight Control Registry, most dieters tried to lose weight at least five times before achieving success. What made them successful the fifth time? Finally "getting it."

Getting it was different for each person, but it always involved the realization that it was up to them to solve their weight-gain challenges. In other words, when they took responsibility for losing weight and keeping it off, they achieved success.

Personal responsibility closes the gap between knowing what to do and actually doing it. It fosters successful weight management for the following reasons:

- You and only you can successfully manage your eating and activity behaviors.
- As long as you blame someone else or external factors for your weight problems, you'll be distracted from doing what's truly necessary to reach your goals.
- The more you focus on external reasons for what you do or don't do, the more powerless and out of control you will feel when trying to reach your goals.

tools for success

- Understand the necessity of taking personal responsibility to successfully manage your weight.
- Identify the relationships among personal responsibility, control, and empowerment.
- Recognize how excuses and blaming can undermine weight management.
- Understand the role of assertiveness in weight management.
- Recognize how time management is related to weight management.

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When you shift responsibility for your actions from inside yourself to outside yourself, you are essentially saying, "I'm not in control of my behavior; someone or something else is." This is called external locus (location) of control. People who relinquish control of their lives in this way often experience feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, depression, or frustration.

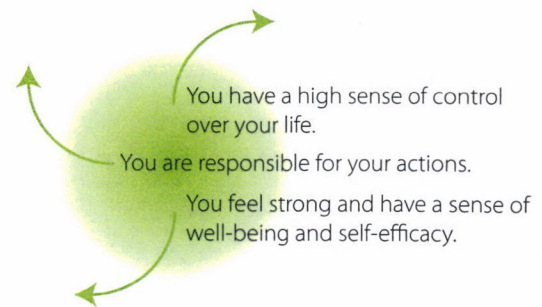
If you believe you are responsible for your actions, then you have shifted responsibility and control over your life to within yourself. This is called internal locus of control. People who have a strong sense of control over their lives experience less stress and frustration than do those who feel their destiny is out of their hands.

Where is Your Locus of Control?

External Locus



Internal Locus



Empowerment is the act of shifting responsibility, control, and power to within yourself. This shift reduces frustration, since now your energy can be redirected away from sometimes uncontrollable external events toward changing that which is truly changeable—yourself.

"There is only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving and that's your own self." Aldous Huxley, Author

Symptoms of External Control

The Blame Game

When we blame others for our shortcomings, we are placing responsibility on them for our mistakes or lack of commitment to our goals. Blaming is a natural, although immature, behavior. Toddlers as young as two are adept at blaming their bad behaviors on someone else. By age 7, the tendency to blame others should begin to diminish, so that by the late teens individuals are able to accept the consequences of their behavior. The mark of a mature person is the willingness to claim responsibility for his or her own behavior. If you are still playing the "blame game" now is the time to start eliminating it.

Avoiding The Blame Game

Let's look at some blaming behaviors that apply to weight management and physical activity.

Scenario 1

Marge was angry at a hostess of a holiday party where the buffet featured only high-calorie, high-sugar, and high-fat foods. Marge had been rigidly dieting but lost control at the party, eating large amounts of inappropriate foods. On the way home, she complained resentfully to her husband that the hostess was thoughtless and inconsiderate to offer only fattening food choices and should have known that many people were trying to control their weight.

What does blaming the hostess accomplish for Marge?

How is blaming counterproductive to Marge's weight management efforts?

List some personally responsible behaviors Marge could have used either before, during, or after the party to keep her weight management efforts on track.

Scenario 2

Forty pounds overweight, John developed hypertension and was urged by his doctor to exercise regularly. He decided to walk every day after work for 45 minutes and asked his wife to accompany him. She did so for the first three weeks, then began to beg off because it was too hot. John stopped walking soon thereafter, saying he didn't like to walk alone. He complained that since his wife wasn't supportive enough to accompany him, he'd just have to rely on medications to control his hypertension.

How is blaming his wife counterproductive to John's physical activity program?

How might John's wife constructively respond to the blame John has placed on her?

Suggest some behaviors that would have demonstrated John's personal responsibility for his commitment to physical activities.

Excuses, Excuses

Excuses let you off the hook of personal responsibility. But like a blind spot in your rear view mirror, excuses keep you from seeing potential options for taking control of your life. Ironically, the emotional blind spot created by our own excuses also makes it easy for us to notice excuse-making in others, while remaining unaware of our own. Excuses may come to you effortlessly and automatically, and unless called to your attention, they are frequently unconsciously believed and accepted. They then serve to keep you in your comfort zone and prevent constructive problem solving.

If you hear yourself responding with "Yes, but ..." or "If only ..." when people provide suggestions to help you overcome an obstacle, this will keep you from achieving your goals. For example, you complain your family likes to eat breakfast out several days a week and it's ruining your eating plan. When your friend suggests you order cereal or toast with fruit, you respond, "Yes, but ... it's impossible to watch them eat eggs and bacon and deprive myself." You can probably think of several other possible solutions to this problem, as well as other "Yes, but ..." responses.

Or consider Sally. During graduate school she slowly gained 25 pounds. She often complained, "If only I weren't so distracted by this stupid thesis, I'd be able to exercise like I used to and could manage my weight better." However, she made no effort to change her schedule.

Why do some people learn to accept responsibility while others seem stuck in blaming and making excuses for their own shortcomings? No one knows for sure, but it seems to be a combination of nature and nurture. In other words, you inherited personality traits and also learned behaviors from the way your family handled personal responsibility.

Constructive Problem Solving

Frequently you make excuses without realizing it, yet they blind you to options for constructive problem solving. This exercise will help make excuses conscious and obvious.

Scenario 1

Mary lamented that she could probably manage her weight better if the people she ate lunch with every day didn't so strongly prefer fast food restaurants.

Create three viable solutions to Mary's problem. Then respond with a "Yes, but ..." answer (excuse) to each alternative.

Solution	Excuse response
	Yes, but...
	Yes, but...
	Yes, but...

Scenario 2

In addition to a long workday, Robert has a family with a wife and three small children to whom he is very devoted. Despite a real desire to manage his weight, Robert has not begun a physical activity program.

See the example below of a typical "if only" statement Robert might make to absolve himself of personal responsibility to be physically active. Create two more "If only ..." statements Robert might use that would distract him from constructively addressing his problem. Give an alternative response to each statement.

Excuse	Constructive response
If only I weren't so tired at the end of the day I'd feel like exercising.	It is very likely that regular physical activity would increase my stamina and energy level. I need to make time to be active."
If only,	
If only,	

Moving Beyond Blame and Excuses

A monkey came across a hunter's trap in the jungle. The trap consisted of an upside-down wooden box with vertical slats separated by one-inch spaces and with a ripe banana clearly visible inside.

The monkey turned his hand sideways, reached in through the slats, and grabbed the banana—but he could not get his prize out with his hand closed. As the hunter approached, the monkey struggled and screamed but allowed himself to be caught rather than releasing the banana so he could escape. In some instances the behavior of human beings resembles that of the monkey. There are times when we desperately hang on to something we want or think we need, even when the result is self-destructive or unhealthy for us.

What must you release to reach your goals?

Your bananas may be powerful yet negative motivations you use to excuse yourself from taking personal responsibility. For example, has overeating ever represented your way of easing stress, reducing boredom, managing your mood, or exerting control over someone who wants you to lose weight? Some people see food as their main or only source of pleasure in life. Others may remain overweight to avoid sexual intimacy or excuse themselves from achieving important goals. What are your bananas?

For people who misuse food in these ways, abruptly changing eating styles could create major voids in their lives. Developing personal responsibility skills is a gradual, multi-step process. The first step is recognizing negative motivational factors (your bananas) underlying your eating and activity patterns. The second step is deciding how to address

these factors “head on” rather than avoiding or denying them through food. The third step is practicing your new responsible approach. It often takes more than one attempt to extinguish the old habit of shirking responsibility. If you find it too difficult to resolve your negative motivations alone, demonstrate personal responsibility by seeking appropriate professional guidance.

This poem describes the multi-step process of change.

autobiography in 5 short chapters

- 1) I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost... I am hopeless It isn't **my** fault. It takes forever to find a way out.
- 2) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in the same place. But, it **isn't** my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.
- 3) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in ... it's a habit. My eyes are open. I know where I am. It **is** my fault. I get out immediately.
- 4) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.
- 5) I walk down another street.

Author Unknown

Responsibility Building Tools

Assertiveness and time management are tools that can help you build your personal responsibility skills.

Assertiveness

An assertive person does the following:

- Acknowledges his or her own feelings and takes responsibility for them.
- Asks for what he or she needs.
- Says “no” to the unreasonable requests and demands of others.

Assertiveness vs. Aggression

Non-assertive individuals may be passive or aggressive. Passive people often expect others to read their minds to figure out what their needs or limits are. When others fail to do this, passive people may feel mistreated and blame others for victimizing them. Aggressive persons might rudely demand others to meet their needs or angrily define their limits in a blaming way. Both passive and aggressive behaviors are associated with expecting others to meet our needs and blaming them when they don't.

“A man can fail many times, but he isn't a failure until he begins to blame somebody else.”

John Burroughs, Naturalist

Successful weight management requires an assertive response. Some assertive actions you may have to take in order to manage your weight include the following:

- Ask for support from others.
- Set limits on others' excessive efforts to help you lose weight.
- Request special food at restaurants or social gatherings.
- Actively select a restaurant rather than passively letting others decide.
- Keep an appointment to exercise with a friend.
- Express anger or hurt rather than suppress it.

Pointers for Acting Assertively

Assertive behavior is expressed in many different ways. Here are some tips for acting more assertively.

Respect your own rights as well as the rights of others. Don't expect others to meet your needs, share your agenda, or conform to your preferences and values. Just as your family and friends have a right to eat fast foods, you have a right to make healthy food choices.

Be direct. An assertive statement is clear and direct. It does not rely on hints, sarcasm, or emotional manipulation.

Use “I” statements. Express your wants, needs and feelings through “I” statements such as “I'd prefer to eat at home.”

Eliminate “You” statements. Avoid statements that convey blame, such as “You always want to go out to eat!”

Speak firmly (but kindly). If you say “no” in a hesitant or questioning way, others may not take you seriously.

Make eye contact. If you look down or away for too long, you convey you're unsure of your message or uncomfortable stating it.

Watch body language. Be aware of cues that communicate aggression (raised voice, clenched fists, pointing finger), anxiety (wringing hands, chewing nails), or passivity (lowered gaze). Your strongest message is consistent in both content and delivery.

Remain calm. Sometimes emotions can interfere with assertive communication. For example, anxiety might result in non-assertiveness/passivity (withdrawal, clamming up, giving in) whereas anger could lead to aggression (blaming, attacking, hurtful “you” statements). If you find yourself in a confrontational situation, pay attention to your body for signs of arousal (tight muscles, increased heart rate, “fluttery” stomach).

Relax your muscles as you begin to take several deep, slow breaths to calm down, letting your abdomen move freely as you breathe. If someone has taken you off guard with a request, demand, or accusation, you might build in a delay by responding that you need some time to think over what they have said and will get back to them later. It helps to specify when you will plan to respond so it doesn't appear you're avoiding the issue. Use the "think" time to calm down and figure out an appropriate assertive response.

Values and Time

Values give life meaning and direction. Many people claim certain values are dear to them, yet do not live their lives (and spend their time) accordingly.

Instructions:

1. Below are some important values listed in random order. Rank-order these values (and any you wish to add) by placing a number (1 to 18) in the **Importance** column.
2. Rate the amount of **Time & Energy** you are currently investing in supporting each value in your life as high (H), moderate (M), or low (L).

Values	Importance (1-18)	Time & Energy (H, M, L)
Marriage (or other significant intimate relationship)		
Health		
Children		
Work satisfaction		
Material things (that money can buy)		
Pleasure (fun, things you like to do)		
Power		
Spiritual needs		
Sense of purpose (meaningful life)		
Self-esteem		
Friendship		
Financial security		
Status/recognition from others		
Physical attractiveness/appearance		
Creativity		
Intellectual stimulation		
Physical activity		
Other		

- Circle the values that you rate high on **Importance** and high on **Time & Energy** investment?
- Mark the values you rate high on **Importance** and low on **Time & Energy** investment?
- Mark the values you rate low on **Importance** and high on **Time & Energy** investment?
- How might you consider managing your time differently?