



The Curse of Adversity: Victim Thinking

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As human beings, our brains are always trying to make sense of our surroundings. This is in order that we can predict what is likely to happen next. Being able to predict what actions and events lead to particular circumstances gives us a level of comfort as we want to be able to be certain about outcomes we will face. Too much uncertainty is overwhelming; resulting in a lot of anxiety, and so consuming a lot of energy leaving us feeling exhausted. We function better when we have a fairly high level of predictability in our environment. Thus, from the time we are born, we pick up cues from our environment and we learn to understand what experience is likely to follow those cues. The level of complexity of our interpretation of the cues around us depends on our brain development and experience, and hence our age. But it is something we are always doing. We want to be able to predict what will come next, and so we concentrate on learning what actions lead to what outcomes.

Adversity is.....

When I talk about adversity here, I am talking about situations that stop us from experiencing normal opportunities in life. Adverse experiences can include abuse, subjugation of one person or one group by another, poverty, situations of war or captivity. Situations where a lot of our time is spent in hardship and misery, fear and pain. In such situations our brain continues to function using cues to predict what comes next. And in the process, because we are in adverse circumstances, we can only link our actions to staying safe, protecting ourselves, and avoiding possible harm. We do not get to experience actions that enhance our confidence in ourselves, reinforce our capabilities, and challenge our potential.

In the years (actually it is decades) I have spent working with people in, or coming from, adverse circumstances, many issues need attention. Health can be one of them. Low self-esteem can be another. Poor education can be yet another. While nothing is usually easy to fix, there is a lot available to help people overcome health problems, low self-esteem, learn skills that are absent for functioning in daily life, improve education and job prospects, and so on. The one aspect I have found particularly challenging to change on a permanent basis is mindset, and in particular the victim mentality which quite naturally develops when someone is in adverse situations for long periods of time, especially during childhood.

When our first experiences are adverse, or we experience a prolonged time in adversity, our thinking fits that environment. It must be. How else do we make sense of what is happening around us. Thoughts can be along the lines of survival: how do I get through today; what must I do to survive the day; who do I need to keep happy so I survive this week; what do I need to keep my mouth shut about; what must I avoid in order to stay safe? Thoughts that may keep us alive, but that is about it. Thoughts can also be around settling for little in life or perhaps even hopelessness: These could be: I mustn't expect much in life; things will always go wrong for me; because of circumstances I will never be able to get a good job; my family was poor and so I will always be poor; the good life is not for me; no matter how much I study I will still fail my exams; I must do what other people tell me to do; if I try and take charge of my life I will be punished; if I am quiet no one will notice me and I will be safe for today.

Repeated often enough thoughts become beliefs and thus become what we consider facts about ourselves and our lives. We usually live out our beliefs and continue to make them come true, thus reinforcing them until they are particularly strong and well entrenched neural pathways. And well learned material is not easy to change. It requires constant repetition of something different to change. And even then, when something horrible happens which is similar to the past adverse experiences, the tendency is to go back to what is familiar and start thinking the old way. When people get mean, or things get tough, it is way too easy for our brains to default back to a victim way of thinking.

Changing that mindset....

When you talk to people who have a victim mindset to a lesser or greater degree about taking charge of their lives, and you explore opportunities with them to move forward to a better life, people are usually very excited and eager to learn new knowledge, new skills, and use tools which help them to do so. Which is great as the enthusiasm helps start the change process. However, I have found that it is one of the most difficult changes to make in the long term. Their actions do move them forward for a time, but all their previous negative experiences are just waiting to come back and dominate their thinking the minute life gets tough again. The brain seems to almost default back into victim thinking. Now some people do like to play the victim because they like being dependent on others, but this is not what I am talking about. I am talking about people who really want to get out of their current situation, change their circumstances, and get on and do the things they want to. And they start out enthusiastic and committed and then it gets really hard. Usually because life, including other people around them, knock them back into re-experiencing something similar to their previous adverse experiences. And the brain goes "this situation is familiar" and the previous thinking and actions associated with that situation come back.

You absolutely can overcome a victim mentality or thinking like a victim. You can overcome a horrific past to become a person who envisions the life they want and makes it happen. But it is very, very hard, and without lots of continuous work, most people will default back to their traditional ways of thinking and being. The truth is, you probably need to work at it your entire life. I am not going to mention specific actions in this newsletter. In 2022 I wrote 12 newsletters each outlining a specific way to own your creative power and stop falling into the victim trap. These are on my website (www.lifecoachingbusiness.co.za) and are the first newsletters for each month of the year 2022. Each

month talks about a specific way to set up your environment to enable you to – what I called – own your creative power.

In this title I used the words “victim thinking”, and I implied this is not a good way to be. If you truly are in a victim situation, for instance someone tries to mug you, then rather go along with what the person wants. Trying to own your power may be a fatal move. But generally, in life, thinking and feeling and acting like a victim do not lead to happiness, success, and a fulfilling life however you may construe that. People who act like victims are generally unhappy, resentful, often drowning in self-pity, and quite helpless. If you want to have a good life then you need to get up and make things happen for you. You need to stop thinking like a victim which means blaming others or justifying why you can never have the life you want, and start taking responsibility for creating the circumstances you do want so you can create a good life for yourself. And you can do it. Plenty of people have done it. And they did it by acting like a “non-victim”. They decided that their current situation was not going to be one they settled for, and they went and created what they wanted.