

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

It's Not Your Fault!

Remember that scene in *Good Will Hunting* when Robin Williams points to the file listing all the abuse Matt Damon went through and he tells Matt, "It's not your fault"? And somehow, after all that time, Matt Damon finally *gets* that it's not his fault, breaks down and hugs Robin, and then goes off to pursue *his own* dreams rather than those that other people had for him?

I've been wondering about that human tendency the movie portrays so well: that urge to make things that we could not possibly have had control over *our* fault. You see it all the time. Little kids see their parents divorce and think, "It's because I was a bad kid." A loved one dies in an accident crossing the street to work and the bereaved say, "It's my fault. I had a bad feeling about today. I should have told him not to go that way."

It's like we really believe what the trite movies tell us: *Bad things only happen to bad people and if you are good enough you will not experience pain.* So we assume that because something bad happened to us, we must have, at the time, at least, been "bad." Then we either:

- anxiously work our butts off the rest of our lives trying to "learn our lesson" so we will be good and therefore safe from future bad things, or
- decide that we must actually be bad people and there is nothing we can do to fix that, so we flood ourselves with guilt and then (often unconsciously) prevent ourselves from having or doing good things to punish ourselves.

So what is it that could possibly make it worth it to us to blow right past the clear evidence that there was *nothing* we could do and chug down guilt that ruins the possibility of our doing and having good things?

Control with Guilt vs. Helplessness with Freedom

Maybe the only thing worse than feeling bad and punishment-deserving is feeling helpless. Admitting that there are some situations in our past and future about which there is absolutely nothing that we can do to prevent hurt, loss, heartache, loneliness, etc. is pretty traumatic. How horrible to realize that it doesn't matter how strong, nimble, skilled, smart, sexy, wise, spiritually attuned, or James Bond-like we are, that sometimes bad things will happen anyway and there is nothing we can do to prevent them! That realization is so terrifying to some of us that we'll do just about *anything* to prevent it.

To avoid feeling helpless about our *past*, we somehow figure out a way make impossible situations feel like they were our fault. Because if they were our fault, then there was something we *could have* done, which means we were not *actually* helpless. We go on to take care of our fear of *future* helplessness through Herculean efforts to make ourselves better, stronger, tougher, more OCD people who can't be caught by pain again. For example, if my parents' divorce could have been prevented by my being a better kid, than all I have to do now is to be the sweetest person *ever* and I won't have to experience that terrible pain again. I can feed the

homeless, work long hours to take care of everyone's needs around me, smile at my worst enemies, etc. and then I will be safe!

Some of us, instead, go the self punishment route, preventing ourselves from having good things to inform Whomever is in Charge of Dolling out Punishment that we have already had our share of misery, thank you very much, so they can bypass our number in the punishment lottery. So with the divorce example, again, I just would have to avoid having any close, committed relationships that would have the power to hurt me the way my parents' separation did. By keeping myself from having something good that could be taken from me again, *then* I will be safe.

That seems to work for awhile. It gives us the illusion of control over things that have happened or could happen that are just absolutely overwhelming. But, as you can see, the illusion comes with a price. With our divorce example, the price would be either the exhaustion of perpetually serving others without allowance for rest, or the self-inflicted loneliness that comes from keeping relationships at bay.

The question is, at what point do the costs of the illusion of control outweigh the benefits of not feeling helpless—especially since it's only an illusion? When would it be better, though of course not easier at first, to grieve the fact that certain things have happened to us and will happen to us that we cannot control, no matter how strong, good, cunning, and well-intentioned we are, and then go on to let ourselves enjoy the good that comes our way, knowing that the *actual* rule of reality is that both good and bad come to both good and bad folks?

Could the time when the costs outweigh the benefits of the illusion of safety from helplessness be right now? I don't want to sound trite here, like this is an easy shift to make. I know that the illusion of control that comes with making things our fault can be a pretty good booby prize, compared with mourning our human helplessness in some situations. I know it can be a deeply ingrained habit that is very hard to let go. But it kills our joy! It steals our life! And look what could happen if we let it go:

- “Now that I have a daughter, I realize how helpless I was at her age. There is no way anything I did could have warranted my parents' being so cruel to me. It wasn't that I was a bad kid. I was a normal kid. I'm gonna stop punishing myself by dating people who are mean to me like my parents were. It's easy to see that my daughter deserves better than that and I am starting to believe that I do, too!”
- “For so long, I've thought there was something I could have done to prevent my wife's death. For years now, I've been checking and double-checking everything as if I could go back and prevent that by being super cautious now. I'm realizing all this checking preoccupies me so that it's hard to be present with those I love who are alive today. Truth is there's nothing I can do to guarantee that nothing else bad will happen. But I can control how grateful I am to be with them today.”
- “Ever since that horrible failure, I've been killing myself with work to prove that I'm still a valid person. My standards for myself are higher than I would inflict on anyone else. But I'm realizing that even though there may have been some things I could have done differently, I just didn't know how to do them back then. There was no reason back then that I would have known what to do differently. I think it's time to take myself off the hook for messing up and start judging myself by the standards I use for other people. I forgive others for making mistakes. I need to let myself do that too—even big ones.”

Stepping Out of Fault

If there is something you've felt guilty about for a long time that you suspect may not have been entirely your fault, here are a couple of things you might try to start breaking the illusory or hurtful habits you've built up around it:

1. Have a trusted friend, mentor, or counselor work with you on the question: "What part of this could I have done something about and what was just part of the bad things that happen in life?" Whenever the event comes to mind, practice saying to yourself, "I forgive myself for (the part you could have changed); and it's so sad and unfair that we live in a world where (the part you didn't have control of) can happen."
2. Make a list of any habits that you started doing and thinking after the hurtful event that you still do today. Are there some that imply that you have to meet standards that are more extreme than those you'd expect from other people? Are there some that keep you back from good things or that actively punish you? Choose one of these things to practice decreasing, replacing it with another activity that helps you to rest or to have something good instead.

If you or someone you know would like help leaving the illusion of fault and control to embrace good things, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

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