



# Are you a victim of the victim syndrome?



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*Take your life in your own hands, and what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame.*

—Erica Jong

## INTRODUCTION

Working in organizations (or for that matter in any domain of life), do you know people who always behave like victims? People who blame others when bad things happen to them? And do they blame their family, partner, people at work, or any number of things that they perceive to be victimizing them? The world these people live in appears to be peopled by victims, victimizers, and occasional rescuers. And if you have ever tried helping them, have you discovered that “rescuing” them from the trouble they are in can be an excruciating process? Do you resent the way every bit of advice you offer is brushed aside or rejected, often contemptuously?

If any of these observations apply, you may be dealing with people who suffer from the victim syndrome. These are people who always complain about the “bad things that happen” in their lives, due to circumstances beyond their control. Nothing feels right to them. Trouble follows them wherever they go.

This is not to suggest that they are making it up. On the contrary, there is always truth in their stories. Bad things happen to all of us; that’s life. It’s not a rose garden. But there are many different ways of dealing with the difficulties that come our way. Most of us, when faced with life’s obstacles, do something about them and get on with it. But people with a victim mentality are incapable of doing so. Their negative outlook on life transforms every setback into a major drama. Even their way of absorbing information causes chaos and stress. To complicate this already difficult equation, people suffering from the victim syndrome are prone to aggravate the mess in which they find themselves. Strange as it may sound, they are often victims by choice. And

ironically, they are frequently successful in finding willing victimizers.

Worse, people with a victim mentality are very difficult to handle. They have an extremely fatalistic outlook on life. Because they believe they have no control over the way events unfold, they have a poor sense of responsibility. Every negative outcome in their life is attributed to people or circumstances beyond their control. Every effort made to help them, or to present a solution to their predicament, is met by a huge arsenal of reasons why it will not work, some of them quite ingenious. Their problems are apparently unique and therefore insoluble. They appear always to be trying to prove the helper wrong. Anyone prepared to help them is left with a sense of utter frustration.

## PERSONALITY STYLES

People with a victim mentality are passive-aggressive in their interactions with others. The passive-aggressive style is a very subtle, indirect, or behind-the-scenes way of getting what they want and expressing anger without openly acknowledging it, or directly confronting the source of it. People who feel powerless usually resort to the passive-aggressive mode. Because they have difficulty acknowledging their anger directly (given the way they feel about themselves), they seem superficially compliant to others’ needs, but are experts in passive resistance.

The blame game is part of these “victims’” repertoire. Although their own actions are responsible for whatever situation they find themselves in, they are very talented at finding excuses why things don’t work out. A common means of getting their way is to lay guilt trips on others through various kinds of emotional blackmail. They will sulk, pout, withdraw, bungle, make excuses, and lie. Their talent at sending mixed messages catches others off guard. With these people we can never be entirely sure what was said or what is expected.

This behavior has a self-defeating, almost masochistic, quality. It is as if people in the grip of the victim syndrome welcome the process of getting hurt and are attracted to problematic situations or relationships. They fail to accomplish tasks crucial to their wellbeing. They set themselves up to fail, associating with people and situations that end in disappointment, failure, or mistreatment, even when better options are clearly available. They reject opportunities for pleasure, or are reluctant to acknowledge that they are enjoying themselves. Self-sacrifice is more their thing – even if unsolicited by the intended recipients of the sacrifice. They have a persistent and detrimental pattern of behavior that, in its extreme expression, includes playing Russian roulette, drunk driving, excessive smoking, drug abuse, obsessive gambling, risky sex addictions, self-mutilation, and suicide.

## THE VICTIM, VICTIMIZER, RESCUER CYCLE

The world is a dangerous place for people with a victim mentality. They have always to be prepared for the worst, as it is full of people who are out to hurt them. To them, it is a harsh environment of victims, victimizers, and occasional rescuers. Their locus of control is likely to be external, that is, they believe that what happens to people is contingent on events outside their control. Powerful others, fate, or chance primarily determine the events in their lives. This kind of belief system is highly congenial to a victim mentality.

To compound the negativity of this outlook, people with a victim mentality know how to inflame others (although this may not be a conscious process). They have a knack for dragging others into the emotional maelstrom they create, keeping them off-balance with their talent for shape shifting. One moment, they present themselves dramatically as victims; the next they are morphing into victimizers, hurting the people who are trying to help them. Victim, victimizer, and rescuer: it is a very messy and very fluid process.

People prone to the victim syndrome are also masters of manipulation, which can make interactions with them infuriating. It is almost as if they invite people to help them, only to prove subsequently that their rescue attempts are futile. To add insult to injury, they are very good turning things upside down, claiming that their would-be rescuers' efforts to help are actually damaging them. This can affect their behavior in such a manner that it actually causes these expectations to be fulfilled.

When asked why they behave in this way, they will say that they "have their reasons." If pressed for an explanation, the "reasons" for their (at least superficially) non sensible behavior, often appear muddled and incomprehensible. People suffering from the victim syndrome are not clear why they do what they do. They have only a limited insight into the reasons for their self-destructive behavior. And even when the reasons are clear – and the means of improvement obvious – they don't want to hear what is being said. They seem to prefer being stuck in their muddle. This is what makes their behavior so puzzling and irritating.

Victims' talent for high drama draws people to them like moths to a flame. Their permanent dire state brings out the altruistic motives in others. It is hard to ignore constant cries for help. In most instances, however, the help given is of short duration. And like moths in a flame, helpers quickly get

burned; nothing seems to work to alleviate the victims' miserable situation; there is no movement for the better. Any efforts rescuers make are ignored, belittled, or met with hostility. No wonder that the rescuers become increasingly frustrated – and walk away.

Of course, the essential question is why these "victims" are asking for help in the first place. Do they really want to be helped? Given the endless holes they keep on digging for themselves, they may just be looking for attention. And even negative attention is better than no attention at all. We notice how the victim style becomes a relational mode – a life-affirming activity: I am miserable, therefore I am. This is a common scenario for people prone to the victim syndrome. Let's look at an example.

John, the CEO (chief executive officer) of a sustainable energy company, was wondering about the best way to deal with Amelia, one of his vice presidents. Although she had many positive qualities, Amelia was very high maintenance. She took up more of his time than any of his other direct reports and managing her was far from being a pleasure – she was such a drama queen, making scenes if things didn't go her way. And it didn't take much to make her feel wronged.

John was puzzled why such a highly competent professional always needed to play the role of victim. How was it possible for someone so bright and so talented, to be so blind about her inappropriate behavior? It grated on John, who had been the great advocate of gender diversity in the firm, that whenever Amelia got herself into trouble, she always blamed the "old boy" network. John knew that was a poor argument. None of the other women in the company had ever mentioned it. He had bent over backward to increase the ratio of women at senior management in the company. The idea that there was such a thing as an old boy's network in the company that was holding back women was ridiculous.

Meetings with Amelia were like walking on eggshells. Going through her bi-annual feedback report with her was the worst. You never knew how she was going to react. John genuinely dreaded these sessions. Telling her how she could have handled a specific situation more effectively was an exercise in master diplomacy.

And now it was time for Amelia's next appraisal. John was having sleepless nights. He still had vivid memories of Amelia's overblown reactions the last time when he gave her what he thought was constructive feedback. When he talked about how a specific situation could have been handled more effectively, she went into overdrive, starting a heated argument about his input, and denying any responsibility for the way things had gotten out of hand. Couldn't she see how remarkable it was that every time something went wrong, it was always somebody else's fault? When John persisted, and tried to show her that she had not just been an innocent bystander in the example he had given, Amelia lashed out at him, again presenting herself as a victim. After these exchanges, John would feel thoroughly miserable, wondering why he had bothered to go through the exercise in the first place. He felt as if he had victimized her. A typical feature of their particular *pas de deux* was that he would end up feeling sorry for her and try to calm her down. John wondered how effective this

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