

The Language of Responsibility (Education)

People regularly use language that attempts to excuse or deflect responsibility. Even teachers frequently ask questions that imply a lack of personal responsibility or self-control. For example, teachers often ask students, “How does that make you feel?”

Nothing *makes* us feel a particular way. Our feelings result from the importance or value that we put on the person, situation, or event. One student can score a 90% on a test and be happy. Another gets the same 90% and feels terrible about it. It is not the information that creates the feelings, but what we do with the information.

Consider also these statements commonly made by students:

“S/he or you made me angry.”
“S/he hurt my feelings.”

It is important for students (and adults) to realize that we are capable of controlling our response to a situation. While our first inclination may be to become angry about a perceived wrong or feel hurt over unkind words, we can choose to deal calmly with either situation.

The use of appropriate language reinforces the concept of accepting responsibility for our actions and choices. Consider these examples:

“I have to...”
“I didn’t have a choice...”
“Why did you give me that grade?”

All of the above comments are attempts to avoid responsibility. No one **HAS** to do anything. Of course, there are personal, social and legal consequences involved in all decisions. We always have a choice. However, we don’t always have a good choice. In the last comment, the student is placing the responsibility on the teacher. It is up to the teacher to return that responsibility to the student. Too often, teachers trying to help students accept this responsibility fall into the “We vs. You” trap.

We vs. You

There is a strong tendency to ask a student, “What can we do about it?”, or “How can we solve the problem?” While these are perceived by the teacher as helpful questions, the result is that full responsibility for the solution is removed from the student. Instead, ask,

- “What are some of the options that you see?”
- “What are you going to do?”

The Language of Responsibility (Counseling)

People regularly use language that attempts to excuse or deflect responsibility. Even counselors frequently ask questions that imply a lack of personal responsibility or self-control. For example, counselors often ask clients, “How does that make you feel?”

Nothing *makes* us feel a particular way. Our feelings result from the importance or value that we put on the person, situation, or event. One person is happy to be separating from a spouse, another is devastated. It is not the separation, but rather if one wants the separation, what the belief is about separation, and what values one has about the situation that impact how we choose to react.

Consider also these statements commonly made by clients:

“S/he or you made me angry.”
“S/he hurt my feelings.”

It is important for everyone to realize that we are capable of controlling our response to a situation. While our first inclination may be to become angry about a perceived wrong or feel hurt over unkind words, we can choose to deal calmly with either situation.

The use of appropriate language reinforces the concept of accepting responsibility for our actions and choices. Consider these examples:

“I have to...”
“I didn’t have a choice...”
“Why did you give me that evaluation?”

All of the above comments are attempts to avoid responsibility. No one **HAS** to do anything. Of course, there are personal, social and legal consequences involved in all decisions. We always have a choice. However, we don’t always have a good choice. In the last comment, the client is placing the responsibility on the evaluator, usually a supervisor. It is up to the evaluator to return that responsibility to the client. Too often, counselors trying to help clients accept this responsibility fall into the “We vs. You” trap. We vs. You

There is a strong tendency to ask a client, “What can we do about it?”, or “How can we solve the problem?” While these are perceived by the counselor as helpful questions, the result is that full responsibility for the solution is removed from the client. Instead, ask,

- “What are some of the options that you see?”
- “What are you going to do?”