

## Chapter

### Personal Empowerment and your Freedom to Choose

All too often we're caught in the trap of trying to make the world around us live up to all of our standards. We do this because we believe that the source of our suffering exists in the imperfections of the world. For most of us it takes years of fighting against the world before we realize that true change has to begin with ourselves, and even then we find that we don't know how to go about the work of personal transformation, or we don't feel we're strong enough to pull it off. Such conditions can make us feel trapped by our circumstances with few options to alleviate our suffering.

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist and survivor of Nazi death-camps, wrote that "...everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." He found that his Nazi captors could torture his body and take away all his possessions, but there was one part of himself - the most important part - they could not touch: his personal freedom, that is, his ability to respond to any situation in a way that reflected his core identity. This is what saved Dr. Frankl from losing his mind in such a horrific environment. Our freedom to choose is that powerful.

In a world where it can seem that you have little power to control your life embracing your freedom to choose can be one of the most empowering decisions you make. It is this freedom that separates those who live as the victims of unfortunate circumstances and those who lead rich, rewarding lives. Rather than becoming the product of your environment and other people, your freedom to choose empowers you to live more fully as your true self by focusing your attention on the choices you make. How others treat you and the events of your life are no longer the deciding factor in your experience; the deciding factor is how you choose to respond to your circumstances. It is through these choices that

you create your own experience. It has always been this way, it's just that most of us were never taught this amazing secret. Once you embrace this principle you will learn the true meaning of freedom.

So how do you put the freedom to choose to work in your life? To begin it is a good idea to identify the core values you would like your life to be based on and to create some guiding goals.

### Exercise

Take a moment to complete the following exercise on identifying your values and goals.

1. Values. Values are the ideals and qualities you value most in life. Take a moment to think of the ideals and qualities you would like your life to reflect. Reach deep within yourself. Try to think of qualities that really inspire you or touch a cord in your heart. Here are some helpful questions to get you thinking: If I could live as my best self, what kind of life would I lead? How do I want people to remember me after I die?

Feel free to choose from the list below or to create your own values.

Confidence	Love	Strength
Peace	Sincerity	Courage
Compassion	Harmony	Intelligence
Kindness	Generosity	Health
Mindfulness	Balance	Responsible

My values are 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_  
4. \_\_\_\_\_ 5. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Goals. Goals give you direction and motivation. Think of two goals you would like to accomplish. You can pick one long-term goal and one short-term goal, two long-term goals, or two short-term goals; it's up to you. Just make sure they mean something to you.

My goals are 1. \_\_\_\_\_

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2.

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With your goals and values in hand you are now ready to make the most of your freedom to choose. To start, make the following principle your guiding mantra:

I am free to respond to any situation in a way that reflects my goals and values, and through these choices I create my reality.

This principle shifts the power into your hands. No longer is your life at the mercy of unfair circumstances or people. Instead it is how you respond to those circumstances and people that holds the ultimate power.

Don't let the simplicity of this principle fool you into thinking your freedom to choose is nothing special. This freedom is a fantastic, transformational tool that cannot be underestimated. Just think how often you feel limited by the circumstances you're in and by the people and events of your life. This no longer needs to be the case, because with the freedom to choose you are the deciding factor in your experience of life. What freedom!

### Reflection

By embracing your ability to make choices that reflect your goals and values you give yourself a sense of space and freedom. You no longer have to feel trapped by your circumstances because you know that no matter what's going on you can always make a choice that reflects who you are. No person, situation, or authority can take that from you.

As humans it is common for us to focus on how other people and events are the cause of our pain and suffering. Logically, this makes sense. If something is causing us pain we are hard-wired to find the cause of that pain and to try to eliminate it. But this habit is itself a significant source of the pain and suffering we experience.

Take a moment to think of how often your first instinct is to blame other people and events for your experience of life.



How often do you envision a negative future because of the circumstances you are currently in? While caught-up in such thoughts your experience of life in the present moment is greatly affected. How much undue suffering have such thought patterns caused you? This isn't to say that unfair circumstances or people haven't made your life challenging - of course they have! That's a natural part of life, but when difficult situations cause you to focus on factors outside of your control you experience a painful loss of personal power and inner freedom. But this doesn't have to be the case. Life will be full of difficult situations that will cause you pain, but the amount you suffer as a result of that pain is totally up to you. The initial pain of a situation is what it is, but usually it isn't so terrible and doesn't last long. There is not much you can do about it, so why add additional suffering to that pain by giving up your power and freedom? As soon as you choose to focus on blaming people and events instead of how you're going to respond to them you add an additional layer of pain - and it is this secondary pain that can last for a long time and make your experience miserable.

The extraordinary truth is that when you choose to enact your personal power by focusing on how you will respond to the situation you will immediately decrease your suffering and increase your sense of freedom. Try it and see for yourself.

### Exercise

#### Puttin' your Freedom to Choose to Work

Now that you have identified your goals and values and you have a basic understanding of your freedom to choose, you are ready to put this principle to work for you.

Take a moment to think of two common but difficult situations that have been causing you some stress lately. Use the space below to describe these situations.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Now take a moment to describe how you have been reacting to each of these situations. What have been your most common ways of dealing with these situations?

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

How did reacting in these ways feel? Was the experience pleasant or unpleasant? Successful or unsuccessful?

Now think of ways that you could respond to those situations that reflect your goals and values.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Finally, take a moment to consider how responding in these new ways might affect your experience of the situations. How might the situations turn out if you respond in ways that reflect your goals and values? Would your experience of these situations be different?

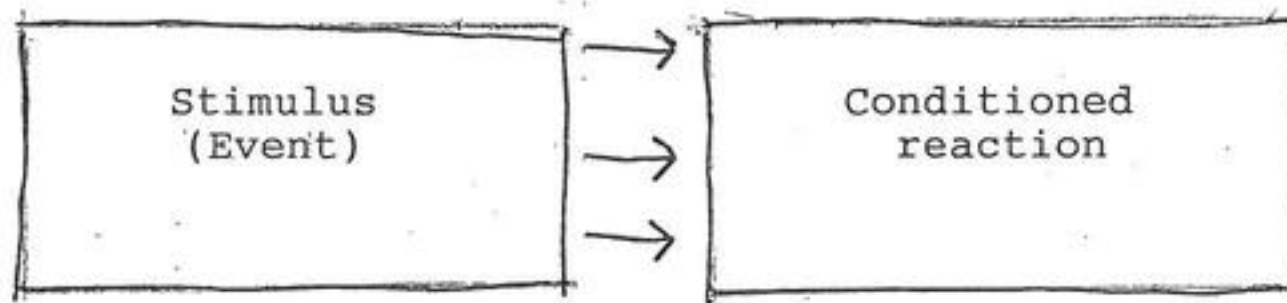
Try these new responses the next time you face these situations and see how it affects your experience. Your experience of the situations will likely be dramatically different even though the events are still the same. This is because what matters most is how you respond to situations and people. This is how you create your own destiny.

So what does mindfulness have to do with your freedom to choose? Everything. Mindfulness is the key that gives you access to this awesome storehouse of power and freedom.

Viktor Frankl pointed out that there is always a gap between stimulus and one's response to it. You always have a space between when something happens and when you respond to what happened. It is within this gap that true freedom is found. If you are not aware of this gap when it appears you will react out of impulse and conditioning. It is only when you deliberately focus on finding this gap that you gain access to it's power. This gap is often quite small. It can seem like there's no time at all between the stimulus and your response to it. But with mindfulness you increase the size of that gap. The greater your degree of moment to moment awareness the larger that gap becomes. This gives you a better chance to respond rather than react out of conditioning.

To find this gap you need to shift your focus from the situation (the stimulus) to your own ability to respond, and you need be mindful that you have the choice to do this.

In Stephen Covey's book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People he portrayed the difference between a reaction and a response in the following way:



The above model leaves little hope for positive change. To live your life under this model is to rely on fortunate circumstances. This reflects a victim mentality. If you want to have more direction in your life there is another model that is much more effective.



With mindfulness you increase the gap between stimulus and response giving you more time to enact your freedom to choose.

Without mindfulness this gap is virtually nonexistent, leaving you to react out of conditioning. This will lead to just more of the same - life as usual.

If you want to access the power of your freedom to choose so you can make new choices and create a new experience of life, you will need to develop a higher degree of mindful-awareness. Meditation and the other mindfulness practices we have been exploring are designed to do just that. Without the mindfulness these practices create it is virtually impossible to break out of old patterns and make new choices for yourself.

If something inside you longs to experience more from life, if you are sick of living within the confines of limiting circumstances, then make the decision to embrace your freedom to choose and to settle for nothing less than the glory of your dreams. What else is life for?

Between stimulus and response there is a space.  
In that space is our power to choose our response.  
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Viktor Frankl

Remember:

I am free to respond to any situation  
in a way that reflects my goals and values,  
and through these choices I create my reality.