How can I step out of the 'blame loop'?

bulldogcatholic.org/2023/11/29/how-can-i-step-out-of-the-blame-loop

November 29, 2023

Q: I have been really hurt by people in my life. But most of the bad stuff in my life is my fault. Still, I can't stop blaming myself and blaming them for hurting me.

A: Thank you for writing. In your actual letter, you summarized the terrible things that you have been through. You have been hurt, truly. I believe that this is worth stating. Often, when there is real pain and suffering, we can be tempted to brush it off or dismiss it. We usually do this so that we can protect ourselves from the tendency of some people to dismiss our pain. A common response is to be quick to talk about it as if it is "no big deal." But you have really been hurt, and I think that you deserve to hear someone say that.

But what sticks out most in your letter was the fact that you keep going back and forth between condemning yourself for what someone else did to you and at other times blaming them.

That being said, it is clear that you can't stay where you are. It seems to me that you are a bit stuck in a "blaming loop." As often as your mind returns to what you've suffered, you keep looking for someone to blame. This has hurt you more than almost anything else, because it has kept you stuck in a trap of your own making.

This is common when we experience pain. We want to find the source. We want to get to a place where we can point to the cause of our suffering and say, "This is the reason. This is what or who is to blame." That is completely natural. And it can even be helpful. In fact, when dealing with many areas of life, it is necessary to track down where the discomfort is coming from in order to deal with the root of what has gone wrong. For example, a physician will want to know whether a stomachache is the result of having eaten too much or is the result of something more severe. In the wake of a broken relationship, it is wise to stop and ask why it didn't work out. In these cases, an informed and patient examination of the reason why could be helpful in moving forward.

But the desire to find blame is altogether different. Often, the result of blaming is an "all or nothing" accusation. For example, you might have found yourself stuck at one point or other on the "blame loop." Let's take a relatively extreme, yet clear-cut, example. Say there was a person who chose to go out walking in a bad part of town alone and at night. While they were taking their walk, they were mugged.

This might be where the blame loop could come in. It takes the form of going back and forth between exclusively blaming oneself and totally excusing oneself. The person might turn this on themselves, "This is all my fault. I shouldn't have been walking there. I am to blame." In this posture, they could adopt a condemning stance against themselves. They could assign blame to themselves and embrace it as if they are the guilty party. In this portion of the blaming loop, the actual mugger isn't seen as guilty; they themselves are. Again, the accusation comes back, "It is all my fault."

But then, in moments of clarity (and exhaustion from being under the weight of this unfair self-blame), the person realizes that the mugger was the person who did the evil action. The mugger is the one who is solely to blame for the attack. Not only is the individual completely innocent in it, but they contributed nothing to the calamity that befell them.

While this is largely true (the mugger is the guilty party), it is not entirely true. And the person knows this. They know that they made a foolish decision to walk alone in a dangerous part of town. And, in light of this, they can be tempted to return to placing all of the blame firmly on their own shoulders. This is why we call this a loop. It goes round and round.

The way out of the blaming loop is to tell the entire truth. The person must acknowledge the full truth of the situation, "Yes, I made the unwise decision of walking in a dangerous part of town at night. And yes, the mugger made the evil decision to attack me." You see the key

distinction here? The walker chose an unwise action. The mugger chose an evil action. The way off the loop is to "own" one's unwise action and to refuse to "own" the other person's evil action.

One possible way to escape the self-condemnation trap is to replay one's own choices. While it may have been unwise to walk alone at night, if the assailant had not chosen an evil action, would you condemn yourself for being less than wise in that moment? It is likely that you may have merely looked back and thought, "Phew! That was silly of me. I'm not doing that again." That response is a far cry from the self-blame and self-condemnation that many people can get caught up in.

And you deserve to be able to escape this cycle of blaming others or blaming yourself.

Until we are willing and able to do that, we will be stuck on an endless cycle of excusing ourselves or condemning ourselves, while excusing others and condemning others. Tell the truth: You made some unwise decisions, but others made the evil decisions.

You have a future. While you have been hurt, this is not the end of your story. Learn from this, and leave the self-condemnation behind.