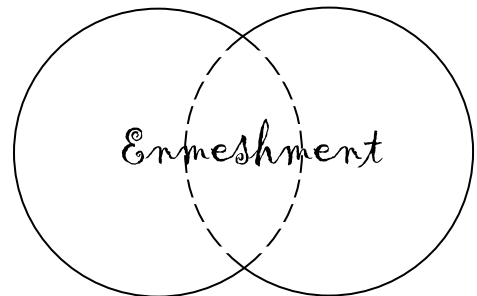


## Chapter 1

You, alone, are responsible for your behavior, and only your behavior.

**W**hen you look back at Earth from space you notice that there are no boundary lines between countries or between states or provinces. Blue water, greenish brown land, white clouds, and snowy mountain peaks—that’s what you see—but no boundaries. We humans have created the boundaries and we know where they are. That is a good thing in some ways since knowing where countries begin and end can make handling details like currencies and property disputes much easier. Knowing where *your* personal boundaries are is also a very good thing. Like any country on the the Earth, no one can look at you and see a line around the outside of you, but you have boundaries nonetheless. There is a place where you begin physically and even emotionally and there is a place where you end. Knowing where these boundaries are is a hallmark of maturity and psychological health.

Most people are pretty clear about their physical boundaries. Each of us has skin on the outside of our bodies and our skin serves as the indicator of how far our body extends and where it ends. Clearly, if something is outside what is covered by your skin you don’t think of it as your body and you consider what *is* covered by your skin some part of you. The boundary layer that is your skin makes it very clear where you begin and end, physically. The problem comes with emotional and psychological boundaries, though. Some people just don’t know where they begin and end psycho-emotionally. This is a big problem, too, because people who aren’t clear about their own psychological boundaries tend to “bleed” over into other people. Sometimes they do that so much they can’t tell at all anymore where *they* end and *someone else* begins. They get “enmeshed”. The word “enmeshment” means “to tangle or interweave in a mesh or net-like manner so as not to be easily separated”. Enmeshment means, then, that two things that were originally separate and unique, each having their own boundary, are now so overlapped and tangled together that it becomes difficult to determine which one is which. Or, when two or more people become psychologically or emotionally enmeshed, it is very hard for them to figure out who is who. That creates a very dysfunctional relationship.



Imagine if this kind of boundary overlapping and entanglement happened between two countries. It has happened many times in history. Country A is certain that some territory abutting Country B belongs to A. Country B is equally certain that the territory belongs to B. Arguments start, accusations fly, the threats begin and then there is a bloody war over the disputed land. One country eventually “wins” and puts a fence between the newly secured piece of land and the other country. Yet both countries remain angry with each other, their relationship is now much poorer, many lives have been squandered and all the possible healthy ways they could work together to achieve

mutually beneficial goals are likewise ruined. They both lose in this game that began because the boundaries were not clear. This same ugly process happens with people. People get enmeshed, too, as their personal boundaries overlap too much and one person begins taking way too much responsibility for the other's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Often, the one who is attempting to take too much responsibility is encouraged to do so because the other person relinquishes his/her responsibility to the taker. One person, then, takes what is really outside of his/her boundary and the other allows them to do it. It is almost like having two people living in a shared psychological and emotional "skin" and, just as with the land dispute between countries, this kind of enmeshment is similarly bloody and destructive. The classic example of this is the dependent relationship that often develops between those related to drug and alcohol addicts. A spouse or other family members begin to take responsibility for the addict's substance use, try to "cover" for the addict, explain away their behavior, etc. This might have started in tiny ways because of love for the addicted relative but it develops into a messy situation in which the addict remains addicted to the substance and the family becomes organized around the addiction, actually coming to depend on it.

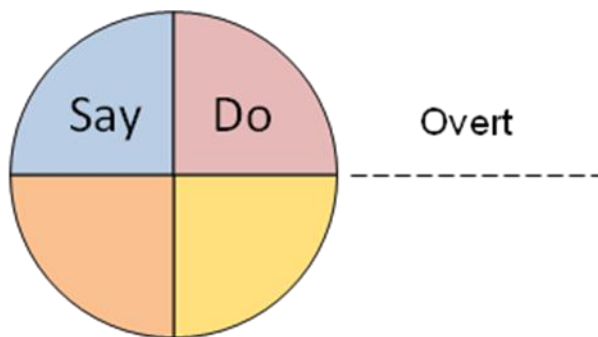
Interpersonal enmeshment is almost never a conscious decision people make but, rather, is almost always the result of many, often tiny, instances of responsibility shirking and taking over years. It happens slowly, imperceptibly, and quietly, like a cancer growing. Like cancer, enmeshment is often only noticed when it has grown so large and done so much damage that it cannot remain hidden anymore. Its effects scream out its presence. Some of these effects are: (1) growing expectations that someone is supposed to do for another person what the other alone should be doing for him/herself; (2) personal laziness that develops as the other shirks personal responsibility based on those unhealthy expectations; (3) arguments, accusations, anger, bitterness, resentment, and even hatred felt for the one who is *expecting too much*/shirking their own responsibilities and, ironically, for the one who is *taking too much* responsibility for the shirker, and; (4) divorce, relationship splits, and distance between the one expecting too much and the one doing too much. Enmeshment produces unhealthy, unstable, and emotional and sometimes even physically abusive relationships. No one can grow while they remain enmeshed with another...both are emotionally crippled until one or both parties say "no more". The reason I suggest you care about any enmeshment in your life is because you will simply not have the life you could have and will not achieve what you could if you remain enmeshed. Enmeshment is a psychological prison. But it is a prison from which you can be released whenever you are ready.

How do you obtain a release? How do you reverse the damage? How do you begin to untangle the enmeshment and restore health? Look back to how enmeshment began: personal boundaries became unclear as responsibility was taken and given away. The way to restore health is to get very clear about *your* personal boundary and personal responsibility. You then take specific steps to take back responsibility for everything that lies *inside* your boundary and to give back responsibility for everything that lies *outside* your boundary. Since what lies within your personal boundary (and for which, therefore, you are responsible) is all about your behavior, the way to shore up your boundaries and reduce enmeshment is to begin *taking full responsibility for all aspects*

of your behavior. The first law of life can help you with this: *You, alone, are responsible for your behavior, and only your behavior.* Since this law has two parts, let's look at each part separately and then we can put them back together.

This first part of this law is: “you, alone, are responsible for your behavior.” Actually, your own behavior is really one of the only things over which you have total control. Since you have control over your own behavior, *you* are *responsible* for it. Human behavior falls into one of four categories. Imagine for a moment that you are a country with four provinces or states and there is a very clear boundary around the outside of these four states. As you take more and more responsibility for everything that happens in these four states, your external boundary becomes clearer and more defined both to you and to all those around you. The same is true as you take more responsibility for all of your behavior in the four categories of behavior. Let's look at each.

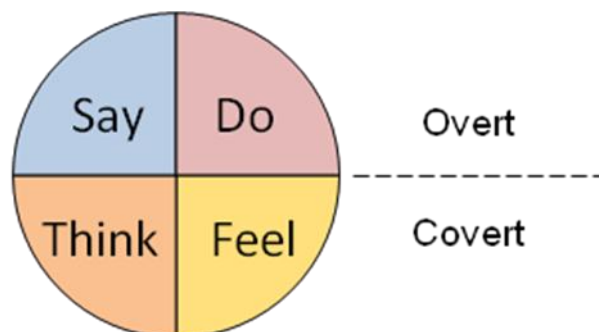
The first category or type of behavior is verbal behavior—anything your say. What comes out of your mouth, the words produced by you, are your full responsibility. You created them, you gave voice to these words, and they all belong to you. If there is any good that results because of your words, you get the credit. If there is any ill or hurt that results, you will have to take the blame. Your words are your product for which only you



are responsible. The second category of behavior consists of actions—anything you *do*. Eating, sleeping, working, washing dishes, walking, creating, playing, taking care of your children, etc.—these are all examples of things you do. In fact you are doing something all the time. Right now, for example, you are holding (an action behavior) and reading (another action behavior) this book. You might also be

sitting while you are reading this, drinking a cup of coffee, listening to music or engaging in some other action while reading. All of these, also, are action behaviors or things you are *doing*. As you think about it, you will see that you are doing literally thousands of things every day! You are responsible for each of these actions. You get the credit or will need to accept the blame for the results created by the things you do. Because words you say or things you do can be observed by others, we call these two categories of behavior “overt”. That is, they are “out there: and can be witnessed by anyone observing you.

The other two categories of behaviors are not nearly as readily observable to others. We call these last two categories of behaviors “covert” because others can't really know you are behaving in these two ways unless you *say* or *do* something overt to let them know. These two covert behaviors are (1) *thinking*, and; (2) *feeling*.



You might not consider thinking a behavior but it is. Thinking is a mental behavior you perform with your brain. Like action behaviors (what you *do*), you are thinking all the time. You may not be aware that you are thinking and you may not be taking much responsibility for how and what you are thinking but, still, thinking is a covert behavior in which you are always engaged. The product of your thoughts, for good or ill, are also your responsibility.

The other covert behavior is *feeling*. Here I mean emotional feeling rather than the physical feelings associated with sensing heat, cold, touch, etc. We will see, later in this book, that emotional *feelings* are powerfully determined by the choices you make about your *thinking* behavior but, for now, just know that your acts of feeling are also behaviors. Feelings are covert behaviors that others may not detect or understand until you make these known to them by either overtly *saying* or *doing* something. You are responsible for these feeling behaviors and accepting responsibility for them is extremely important because what you *say* and *do* is very much influenced by what and how you *feel* about something (which, itself, is very influenced by your *thinking*). Understanding this movement from *thinking* > *feeling* > *saying* and *doing* is key and an entire chapter later in this book is devoted to learning specific tools to manage your thoughts better.

For now it is enough to know that the two covert *thinking* and *feeling* behaviors get expressed in the two overt *saying* and *doing* behaviors. Your overt words and actions then start impacting others in ways that are helpful or harmful. You are responsible for the help or harm you produce by these overt behaviors. Taking total responsibility, then, for everything you *think* and *feel* is the first step in better management of what you *say* and *do* as outward expressions of your inner thoughts and feelings. A healthy person more clearly defines his/her boundary as s/he takes full responsibility for everything s/he says, does, thinks, and feels. You shore up your boundary *not* by working on improving it in a direct way but, indirectly, by taking responsibility for these four different types of your behavior that lie within your personal boundary.

Sadly, today in our world, “responsible” is not a popular word. Knowing and accepting the truth, the law of life, that you are “responsible” means acting in ways that demonstrate that you know and accept that all your behaviors are products of YOUR *choices* and YOU are the total *owner* of your behaviors and the outcomes you produce by them. You are the owner—not your mother, father, siblings, children, the government, etc. YOU are responsible, 100%, for what you say, do, think, and feel. It is all about you because it is your behavior. You, alone, are the responsible party.

Everybody thinks that, right? Everybody knows, don't they, that they alone are responsible for themselves and their behavior? So we can just skip ahead past this law, can't we? Not so fast! Unfortunately we live in a modern society in which far too many people are pretty convinced that they *aren't* responsible for what they say or do. They think they are also not responsible for how they feel or what they think. They have turned over responsibility for what they say, do, think, and even feel to people around them. As they shirk their responsibility they begin to act like victims. In fact, you

probably know some or even lots of these people. You can tell which ones they are by what they say to themselves or others around them. Let's look at some examples and, as we do, notice if these are things you frequently hear from others or maybe you often even say yourself.

"He makes me so mad!"

"She made me say that."

"Nothing I do matters."

"I could lose weight if I were happier."

"It's your fault I don't have \_\_\_\_\_."

"He got me pregnant"... *or the male version*: "She trapped me by getting pregnant."

"If it weren't for my parents I would be happy."

"The real problem is my boss. Get rid of her and everything would be OK."

"If I didn't have all these negative thoughts, I would be happy."

"I can't wait for these kids to leave home...then things will be great again."

"If she would just get off my back our marriage would improve."

"I was happy until I married him—he's the problem."

"It's not my fault I am fat--McDonald's just serves really fattening food."

"I wouldn't think such nasty thoughts about him if he didn't deserve them."

"I'm the way I am all because of my parents/family."

Victim talk. Puppet talk. Disempowered talk. These are all statements indicating that the one who is thinking or saying any of these or similar things believes someone or something else is responsible for their actions, words, thoughts, and feelings. That is a lie, though, and it is one too many people desperately want to believe. In fact, the above statements are *all* lies that we may have told ourselves or others at some time in our lives. Maybe we have even said them many times in one day. Even today? The more we say them, the more we believe them, and the more we believe them and the victim-hood they describe, the more we act like a victim even if, in fact, we really aren't.

There really are true victims of the actions of other people or of events bigger than themselves but you and I are much less a victim that we often claim to be. Many of us like the title "victim" because we think it means that we don't have to take responsibility for our situation since the *fault* lies outside of us. The truth is that, in each of the above statements, the "fault" or, to use a better term, the "responsibility" lies in the lap of the one saying or thinking each statement. Victim talk is a lie because you and I are always responsible for what we say and do and think and feel in response to a situation even if that situation is unfair. No matter how unfair or unjust or dreadful the situation we face, we always have the choice of our response. It always belongs to us. How we choose to respond, no matter the events that happen or what someone else says or does to us, is always in our hands. Always. It is a law like other physical laws and it is one that cannot be ignored. Like Dracula when confronted with sunlight, people playing the role of "victim" hate to see the light of this truth because it means that they can't hide anymore. It means that they have to stand up and take responsibility for themselves and their behavior. It means they have to grow up. The law of personal responsibility is so fundamental and unchangeable that, until we each accept it and act based on it, we will simply get nowhere in life.

If you need any more evidence of rampant victim thinking, just look at much of what is depicted on TV. Let me share with you just two examples. First, over the years more and more smarmy ads from certain lawyers send the message to millions who want to see themselves as victims that somehow and in some way they have been hurt or damaged and deserve a monetary settlement from a doctor, insurance company, hospital, business, etc. for some injury they have “received.” The focus of the ad isn’t on fixing the problem it is on “how much money I can get for you if you retain me as your lawyer.” It really appeals to wannabe victims. Such ads are both an expression of a victim mentality that already exists and are reinforcers of even more victimhood and the ugly sense of “entitlement” (somehow I deserve for someone to give me something) that has grown in American society over the past 50 years. Second, we are assaulted each weekday with far too many daytime programs that depict dysfunctional, psychologically and emotionally unhealthy people acting out their dysfunction for the viewing audience to see as entertainment. Much of their behavior and nearly all their statements to each other are profound examples of the shirking of personal responsibility, unmanaged and uncontrolled anger spewed like mud at one another, and reflect the nastiest forms of victimhood. It is, somehow, always the other dysfunctional family member’s “fault” for something, isn’t it? Rarely does anyone take personal responsibility for their words, actions, thoughts, or feelings and the blame and shame goes on and on until the next commercial. Again, all this daytime dirt both reflects the victimhood that is already present in too many in our society and just reinforces more of it. Bottom line: TV demonstrates to us how much we already act like victims and provides us with more models of how to do it even better. It is sad and it is profoundly destructive.

As a clinical psychologist I see two other very distressing indicators of responsibility shirking in our society that you might not have known much about. I have noticed a vastly increased number of people who are applying for some type of disability entitlement. I have also noticed that the numbers of people applying for disability increases as overall economic conditions worsen. It may be that people find that things are tough and look for what seems to be an easy way out. If someone is truly disabled (and I have seen those people and have been asked to evaluate them) then disability support is entirely appropriate and I am glad they have it available to them. As a psychologist, however, I am often contacted by disability service agencies about people I know who are seeking “disability” status because they just don’t want to work even though they could. They appear to have some idea that the government is supposed to support their indolence for the rest of their lives. What they don’t know is that they will need to spend the rest of their lives continuing to “prove” their claimed disability status to maintain it and so wind up “acting disabled” for the rest of their lives. The time they spend playing this game and reinforcing their false claim is time they could have spent doing something productive that would have made their lives better. So, while they might think they have “won” disability...they “lose” out on developing a healthy life and are almost never really happy.

I see the same sad phenomenon occurring in greatly increasing worker's compensation claims as a growing number of people claim they have been so injured at work that they can never work again. They then attempt to convince me and others in my field (who are consulted about these cases) that they deserve to be compensated for the rest of their lives and should never even be asked to work again. For workers who have truly been injured such that they actually cannot work, despite a strong desire to do so, workers' compensation is appropriate. For the growing number of malingerers, though, it is not. People who make exaggerated or false disability or workers' compensation claims seem to think that if they can secure some means of monthly support while they do nothing that this will produce a happy life for them. The fact is that I have never met one person who is on any form of disability or worker's compensation support who is truly happy. The ones who have valid injuries are not happy because they would prefer to work and dislike not being able to do so and having to rely on external support. The ones that have made false or exaggerated claims to get the support are not happy because doing something with one's life and contributing in some way while earning income is a major source of personal satisfaction. You cannot shirk personal responsibility and active involvement in life while playing the role of victim and expect happiness. Life does not work that way.

Let's shift our focus to something more positive. Something that will encourage us to take more responsibility for our behavior and leave behind any sense of disempowering victimhood we might have harbored. That "something" is heroes. Heroes are people we admire, look up to, would like to emulate, and feel are models of some particular characteristic we think is excellent in human beings. It might seem that the time of heroes is past. Our information age in which we can learn even the tiniest details of the lives of noteworthy people has made it possible for us to discover unflattering things about people we might otherwise wholly admire. To some extent all the information dims the light of potential heroes. Perhaps it is healthy for us to realize that no one has achieved perfection and that even the best among us has failings. This does not mean, however, that we should abandon honoring the greatness we see in others or that we should fail to be inspired by those who have achieved something notable. There is still a place for heroes. Honoring them and their achievements wakes us out of the dead space of victimhood. That is because heroes are actually the opposite of victims. They are the ones who realized that the law of responsibility for their own behavior *did* apply to them and they acted accordingly. They acted, owned their actions, were responsible for them, and enjoyed the positive results even if these results took years to reach fruit. Focusing on large and even small heroes around us inspires us to take similar action. Taking action based on our growing sense of personal responsibility is important because *you cannot, at the same time, act like a hero and act like a victim.*

Who are your heroes? Who do you admire or, at least, whose behavior do you admire in history, religion, sports, politics, social change, science, etc.? Who has done something noble or just or generous in your eyes? Even if they are not known to anyone but you—who has acted with honesty or integrity or selflessness in such a way as to inspire you? These are your heroes and it is good to identify them, keep them in

mind, and follow their example because it will help you avoid the trap of irresponsible victim thinking.

Who isn't a hero to you? Whose behavior does not deserve your admiration? Do you feel inspired when you hear people habitually say any of the above fifteen victim statements or ones like them? Do you feel admiration for the behavior of people who *could* work but feel they are entitled to have someone else or the government take care of them? Do you feel proud when you hear the kind of statements and thoughts expressed by the mud-slinging people on those daytime TV shows? Do you really get excited by the mistaken idea that someone can "make" you mad, glad, sad—that someone can "make" you say or do or think or feel anything? Do you want to be like the people who cannot control their own anger and who explode without warning damaging relationships wherever they go? No. None of these are heroic or noble or admirable behaviors. These behaviors and the thoughts behind them take us down, not up. These are the worst of what you and I can do. And we know we can do better and be better. Much, much better. The key to doing and being better is taking total responsibility for your own behavior. The fact is, as the first part of the first law of life states, "you, alone, are responsible for your behavior." That is good and hopeful news.

It is also good news that the second part of this law states that you are responsible for "only your behavior"—not anyone else's. This is another place where knowing your boundary comes in handy. Knowing where you "end" psychologically and personally tells you where your responsibility ends. Within your boundary you are responsible. Within my boundary I am responsible. We saw, above, examples of what people who are *shirking* too much of their responsibility say. What do people who are *taking* too much responsibility for someone else's behavior say to themselves and those around them? How can we recognize them? Here are some examples of things they might say:

"Oh, I'm sorry I made you feel that way."

"I can make you do it if I want to."

"It's my fault you didn't do your homework...I should have reminded you."

"Don't even bother asking him, I can tell you what he thinks."

"If it weren't for me you could have landed that job."

"It's my fault they got divorced."

"I know I made you say that."

"I'm really the reason she is so successful...she never could have done it without me."

"It's not his fault. I made him mad and he hit me."

"She's clueless unless I tell her what to think."

"Joan's in a bad mood again—it's my fault."

"If I had been kinder to him he wouldn't think so negatively of me."

"Mom is yelling because of me."

"If I were a better kid my parents wouldn't fight so much."

"Well, if I don't do it for him he won't do it for himself."

"If you get married your father will have to stop helping you financially."

Can you hear the “responsibility grabbing” in each of these statements? The person thinking or saying each is taking way too much responsibility for what someone else says, does, thinks, or feels. You might even try reading each one of these statements again and see if you can tell, in each, whether the person is taking too much responsibility for someone else’s: (1) words (2) actions (3) thoughts or (4) feelings. Why is taking too much responsibility for someone else’s behavior so dangerous? Because to the extent that you take on the responsibility that actually belongs to someone else you:

- (1) relieve them of both the right and obligation to choose their own words, actions, thoughts, and feelings;
- (2) communicate to them and to yourself the lie that somehow you *should* do the choosing for them, and;
- (3) teach them that they are not really responsible for what they say, do, think, feel and so do not deserve, 100%, either the positive or negative results.

By taking over the responsibility that belongs to someone else you cheat them out of what belongs to them and you cheat yourself out of focusing on that for which YOU are responsible: your own behavior. After all, if you are taking over my responsibility, you are simultaneously neglecting your own to some degree. We both lose. You learn to be overly responsible for things that don’t belong to you and I learn to be irresponsible. You crash through my boundary and I let you stomp where you will--very unhealthy for both of us.

What is the cure? There are four simple steps.

1. Each person must look very critically at where the boundaries should be drawn and who is responsible for what. As we have learned, the only way to redraw the appropriate boundaries is to focus on behavior. You are responsible for everything you say, do, think, or feel—all of that is your behavioral territory around which your personal boundary is drawn. I, likewise, am responsible for everything I say, do, think, or feel. So, in your relationship with others, which behaviors belong to you (or should) and which ones don’t (or shouldn’t)?
2. Look and listen for any statement or action that you or others might say or do suggesting that someone is *taking too much* responsibility for someone else’s words, deeds, thoughts, feelings or *not taking enough* responsibility for their own. If you have, in step one, gotten crystal clear about what behavior belongs to you and what doesn’t, it will be easy for you notice when someone is pushing their responsibility onto you and/or you are taking too much responsibility for theirs.
3. When you hear something that is a responsibility shifting/taking statement or see some responsibility shifting/taking action, flag it. Point it out. Don’t wait a second to shed light on this statement or action. Don’t let it remain there without tagging it. Don’t let the cancer start to grow.

4. Correct it immediately. Talk with the other person about what you have determined is your responsibility—what appropriately lays within your boundary. Help them understand why the statement or behavior you flagged is either an example of you inappropriately taking responsibility or of them not taking appropriate responsibility for their behavior. Talk in a loving way about boundaries and who is responsible for what. Remind yourself, as you speak to them, and help them see why their taking too much responsibility or shirking it (or your taking/shirking) is not healthy and won't build a healthy relationship in which you can both grow. Talk about the things you both are saying and doing (and may be thinking and feeling) that are not building better boundaries through appropriate responsibility assumption. Talk about what you both *could* say, do, think, and feel that would demonstrate taking appropriate responsibility on both sides. Encourage that behavior. Stress to them how that positive behavior is not only healthier but will help the relationship grow. As you do this, you can share with them this first and most fundamental law of life: "You, alone, are responsible for your behavior, and only your behavior."

