

By Michael Bader, DMH

Psychotherapy clients tell me every day about the stress and anxiety they're experiencing as a result of the current economic recession. For every rational response, there is an irrational one, one that derives less from objective circumstances and more from the peculiarities of the human psyche.

Such peculiarities are no less unreasonable because they are common. In particular, irrational feelings of envy, self-blame and denial increasingly are rearing their heads in our clients.

Self-blame is one of the most insidious and common of these reactions, e.g., *I should have moved everything to cash when it first happened, or I was in denial and now I'm paying for it, or so-and-so predicted that the bottom was falling out and I just didn't listen.*

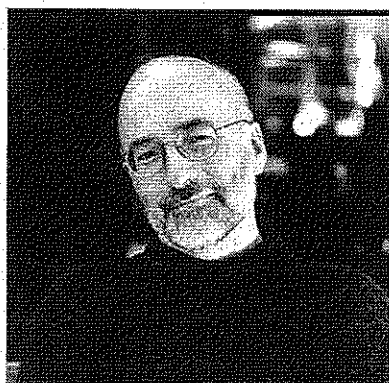
Sometimes, such guilt is spiced up with a dash of envy: *My neighbor just sold his house and was sitting on the profits waiting to buy another one—the lucky bastard, or even, from one patient, My best friend consulted a psychic last spring who convinced her to get completely out of the stock market!*

Such stories, real and apocryphal, invariably provoke twinges of envy and self-criticism. Their good fortune highlights our failure. Often, such self-castigation continues right up to the present: *I should probably get out now, but am afraid I'd miss the recovery.*

The implied judgment here is “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.” Whatever the facts of the matter (even the savviest of investors are not sure what to do at the moment), the underlying sentiment involves blaming oneself for some mistake, failure of nerve, intelligence or judgment.

Human beings can't tolerate helplessness and, as a result, feel a compulsion to take on individual responsibility for their lot in life, despite oceans of evidence that

A psychological response to recession



Michael Bader

they're victims of forces they cannot individually control. We feel an unconscious need to spin a story about it, a story in which we somehow had choices or one in which our suffering had some transcendent meaning.

One of my patients lost everything in the 1989 San Francisco earthquake. Even though she had retrofitted her house in exactly the same casual way as her neighbors, she criticized herself for not hiring a top-flight structural engineer to insure that the retrofit was state-of-the-art. Abused children routinely blame themselves for their parents' neglect and violence.

Innocence and helplessness are intertwined in our psyches. For example, when people are given a chance to talk at length about financial losses, over which they had no control, there is usually more than a trace of guilt. Recently, I've had the opportunity to listen to people who were swindled by Bernard Madoff blame themselves for having trusted him.

Their outrage and despair is contaminat-

ed by an irrational guilt, irrational because while they might have been legally responsible for their investment, it was obviously not a “choice” in the sense for which they blame themselves. Madoff had impeccable credentials and came highly recommended by all the “experts.”

There are multiple sources to this type of irrational guilt. We have a culture that idealizes individual responsibility and the “self-made man” who succeeds despite all obstacles. Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, it's almost impossible to shake off the notion that we live in a meritocracy that rewards the worthy.

Or perhaps there is something quintessentially human about free choice — namely, that even in the harshest and most constrained of environments, we are compelled to believe we're free, that we have choices, that, we believe with Sartre, that “freedom is what you do with what's been done to you.”

A deeper source of the difficulty most people have feeling helpless and innocent lies in the psychology of childhood. The psychoanalyst W.R.D. Fairbairn once said, “Children would rather be sinners in heaven than saints in hell.” What he meant was that children would prefer to believe that they come from a just and good family in which they were bad than an unjust or bad family in which they were good.

For this reason, abused children often report that they provoked their parents' violence and adults often qualify accounts of their own early beatings with the caveat that they were “difficult” children. Most people can't let themselves feel innocent, because in a truly moral universe their caregivers would

then have to be guilty, and that recognition is intolerable.

I think that the residue of this childhood denial can be found in the last-ditch psychic efforts of many of the people I treat to continue to believe in the goodness of our political and financial institutions. Our public outrage at being betrayed by the greed, mismanagement and political shenanigans that created the current crisis is compromised by all the subtle and secret ways that we irrationally hold ourselves accountable.

Our real responsibility to change the world — something we can do — is undermined by our false and self-blaming feelings of responsibility for things that we didn't and can't do. The paradox is that we have to face the ways that we're really helpless in order to own the ways that we're not.

Therapists, in my view, need to help their patients understand a central fact: We are not to blame for our current predicament. We need to develop compassion for each other and ourselves.

We need to mourn the loss of our money and the financial dreams that they fueled. This is not to say that we won't recover some of our losses or shouldn't have dreams, but we can't turn back the clock and pretend that this catastrophe hasn't happened.

Thus, like mourning the death of a loved one, we have to come to terms with a new reality in a way that allows us to experience a range of normal reactions, reactions we can openly share with others rather than hide in the closet as if they were private failures and sources of shame. Shame makes loss and trauma indigestible. **CE**

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