



I found myself in yet another conversation with a particularly difficult person in my life whose favorite default phrase is “I’m not responsible for your feelings”.

And yet again, I found myself raging against the concept that we are not responsible for the impact of our words and actions.

It’s especially top of mind for me these days, as we watch the #metoo movement act and react to the events unfolding in Washington, D.C. How do we balance our responsibility for managing our own emotions with our responsibility to treat others with kindness and respect? When, or if, are your emotions my responsibility?

Indeed, there is an enormous body of work on the subject that emphasizes how important it is not to take responsibility for someone else’s feelings, not to regulate someone else’s emotions. This is so very true in relationships when there is an imbalance of power, so to speak, where one person assumes full responsibility for the other’s emotional stability. I’ve been in relationships like that, and there is nothing healthy about the dynamic.

What I have trouble with is the idea that we’re free to say and do whatever we want, only to be absolved of responsibility by affirming that your feelings are your problem. This is often disguised in the phrase, “I’m just being honest with you”. Quite frankly, I don’t want people close to me who believe they’re free from responsibility for the impact their words have on me or anyone else.

It’s another way of shifting responsibility to the recipient of awful words or actions. How did your terrible behavior become my burden to shoulder, my emotional storm to weather?

The best way I can explain my thinking is this: If I walk up to you and punch you in the face, does it hurt? Yes. Am I responsible for causing that pain? I am. So why are words any different? Why am I absolved of responsibility for causing emotional pain, when I might very well be arrested for causing physical pain?

I believe I am responsible for your feelings, when I act or speak in a way that affects you. I’m not responsible for what you do with those feelings, however. Or to put it another way, I’m not responsible for our relationship, but I am responsible to it.

All things considered, I would much rather live in a world where we are responsible for our words and actions and are deeply aware of the effect they have on others.