

Discussion & Review Questions

1. At the beginning of the video, Professor Swain states, “Let me tell you how my story ends: I become a tenured, award-winning professor of political science at an Ivy League university and then at one of the leading universities in the South. Now let me tell you how my story begins: I grow up in rural Virginia literally dirt poor. I drop out of school in the eighth grade and have three children by the time I’m 20. I consider myself to be a reasonably modest person, but even I have to admit that’s quite a journey.” Why do you think that Professor Swain begins her presentation this way? Explain.
2. Later on in the video, Professor Swain explains that, “I was born in America, a true land of opportunity for anyone of any color or background. In this country, where you start your life does not determine where you end up. That works in both directions, by the way. You can start out with every advantage and waste them all. Or you can start out with nothing and become a success. It all depends on you. Your attitude is far more important than your race, gender, or social class in determining what you will accomplish in life.” What are the fundamental conditions in the United States that allow for such drastic changes in one’s own success? What else sets the United States apart from other countries, in terms of opportunity for success? In what ways, specifically, does attitude correlate with accomplishments? Explain.
3. Professor Swain goes on to share with us that, “When I hear young blacks, or anyone for that matter, talk about systemic racism, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. I want to laugh because it’s such nonsense. I want to cry because I know it’s pushing untold numbers of young blacks into a dead end of self-pity and despair. Instead of seizing the amazing opportunities America offers them, they seize an excuse to explain why they’re not succeeding. ... But here’s what you need to know: yes, that racism shaped the black experience, but even then it did not define it.” Why do you think that so many young people ‘buy into’ the nonsense of ‘systemic racism?’ Explain. Why do you think that so many young people choose to be a ‘victim’ and to use perceived oppression as an excuse for failure, rather than to seize the opportunities to succeed? Explain. Why is Professor Swain’s distinction between *shaping* the black experience and *defining* the black experience so important? Explain.
4. After sharing with us her love for and belief in America, and the possibilities for success that it offers, Professor Swain notes that, “I knew if I diligently pursued my ambitions, I could leave the poverty of my early years, with all its abuse and depression, behind me. I was fortunate in another way. I was spared the life-sapping, negative messages about America that are crippling a generation of young people. These ideas are poison: White privilege. Whiteness as a form of property. Unconscious racism. Reparations. Microaggressions. Police have it out for blacks. That the United States was created to protect and promote slavery. These are the ideas young people are told they must accept.” Where do you think that these ideas are coming from, and who do you think is benefiting from propagating such nonsense? Explain. How might Professor Swain’s ambitions have been affected if such negative ideas were being spread during her youth? Explain.
5. In regards to young people being subjected to negative notions about America and how those ideas can stifle young people’s ambitions, Professor Swain goes on to point out that, “ ... they’re told to reject the ideas that can save them, the antidote: the success

principles that enabled me and millions of other Americans to escape lives of poverty. These principles aren't complicated: work hard, learn from your mistakes, take personal responsibility for your actions. When I made the decisions to get my high school equivalency, attend a community college, and then earn four additional college and university degrees, I believed that my education would open doors. And it did." Do you think that young people who grow up with the 'victim' mentality can ever change their mindset and embrace the principle of taking personal responsibility for their actions, their decisions, and their lives? Why or why not?

Extend the Learning:

Case Study Victim mentality

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the article "The Victim Mentality – What It Is and Why You Use It," then answer the questions that follow.

1. What is a victim mentality? What is the difference between being the victim of a crime or feeling sorry for yourself once in awhile and victim mentality? What is victimization a combination of? What does a healthy person recognize? What are the true 'benefits' of always being a victim? What kind of behavior is victim mentality, and where does it come from? What must someone dealing with victimization face? How can a trained and experienced psychotherapist help someone with a victim mentality?
2. The author of the article explains that one of the 'perks' of being a victim is that if one is a victim, one does not have to take responsibility for things. How does this mental condition relate to the principles of success that Professor Swain describes for us in the video? Explain. One of the tools that therapists use to help patients overcome a victim mentality is the phrase "Feelings are not facts." What do you think would have become of Professor Swain if she had perceived any feelings of 'you can't be successful because you are poor, black, and female' as facts? Why do you think that Professor Swain chose to focus on the facts that if she worked hard and got an education that she would create opportunities for success for herself- rather than choosing to embrace and focus on the feelings she may have had about being the victim of racism? Explain. Do you think that Professor Swain is proof that applying principles of success to your life is better for you than dwelling in a victim mentality? Why or why not?
3. Do you have ambitions for your future? If not, why not? If so, what might some obstacles to achieving your goals be, and how will you overcome them?

The Victim Mentality – What It Is and Why You Use It



Last reviewed by Sheri Jacobson April 26, 2016 Counselling, Self Esteem



By: Walter Watzpatzkowski

What is a ‘Victim Mentality’?

Having a ‘victim mentality’ means you blame your challenges in life on others around you, even if you can’t prove their negative actions.

You might also blame many things on circumstances, which you see as always unfair.

Being a Victim vs Self Pity vs Victim Mentality

Bad things can happen in life. You might be the victim of a crime, such as fraud or even sexual assault. In such a case you have every right to feel that things were out of your control, because they were, and any thought that it's somehow your fault and you are responsible is erroneous thinking.

It's also perfectly normal to feel sorry for yourself every once in a while, or feel powerless in the face of a challenge like a bereavement or divorce.

But if you have a victim mentality, you will see your entire life through a perspective that things constantly happen 'to' you. Victimisation is thus a combination of seeing most things in life as negative, beyond your control, and as something you should be given sympathy for experiencing as you 'deserve' better. At its heart, a victim mentality is actually a way to avoid taking any responsibility for yourself or your life. By believing you have no power then you don't have to take action.

A healthy person, on the other hand, recognises that beyond random bad occurrences, many things in life happen because of choices they themselves made, and that they have power to choose differently. And they understand that when misfortune does happen, it is nothing to do with personal value or 'deserving' or 'not deserving'.

Why would I choose to always be a victim?



By: [super awesome](#)

Constantly acting a victim can actually have a lot of perks. These can look like the following:

- you don't have to take responsibility for things
- you have the 'right' to complain and receive attention
- others feel sorry for you and give you attention
- people are less likely to criticise or upset you
- others feel compelled to help you and do what you ask for
- you can tell stories about the things that happened to you and seem interesting
- there is no time to be bored because there is so much drama in your life
- you can avoid ever feeling anger as you are too busy being sad and upset.

If you look at the above statements, you might already see the pattern of what the true benefits of being a victim can be. They are:

1. **attention,**
2. **feeling valued,**
3. **power.**

The Secret Power Behind Being a Victim

Surprised that playing the victim gives you power, because you've convinced yourself that your life is so awful you have no power at all? This is what a victim tells his or herself.

But having others feel sorry for you can easily be a way to manipulate them into meeting your needs and wants. This can be something small, like someone always going to the shops for you, or can be deeper and more insidious, such as meaning your 'poor me' act leaves another forced to treat you nicely and never yell at you, or to not leave you even if they feel they should.

An example of victimhood as a form of power is a codependent relationship, such as the one between an alcoholic and their partner. The 'caregiver' can play a victim, putting up with the alcoholic's terrible behaviour and sacrificing their own needs to care for them, only to one day use guilt, complaints, and 'poor me' tirades to then attempt to control the alcoholic.

On a darker note, the role of victim can also be a common way for abusers to take power, called 'playing the victim' in psychology. A less unconscious form of victimhood, this can look like an abuser who constantly puts their partner down then fixates on the one time the abused party snapped back and called them a monster, making out that they are in fact the 'attacked' one. Or an abuser will say that it's not their fault they hit the other person when that person is so annoying and stupid and they have to 'put up with them'. In this way an abuser uses the 'poor me' mentality to defend their sociopathic behaviour.

Why am I the sort of person who plays the victim?

What makes you more likely to be the sort that lives your life from a victim mentality?

Like most behavioural patterns, a victim mentality is a learned behaviour that can be traced back to childhood.

You could have learned to play victim because you watched the adults around you doing so. If your mother or father, for example, always felt the world was out to get them and complained daily about all the people who wronged them, you would take on board this was the way to gain personal power and attention.

It's possible you had a codependent relationship with one of your parents. You would have felt responsible for their wellbeing, either taking care of a sick (mentally or physically) parent, or being led to believe you are in charge of their happiness. The message a child can take on here is that not only do you have to 'earn' love, but that if you are sick or weak others take care of you. Both can lead to patterns of victimisation as an adult.

Or, you might have learned to be a victim because it was a way to survive your childhood. As a child, we all require attention and love, and if it's not offered freely by our caregivers, we are left to find ways to receive it. Perhaps, in your family home, the only way to receive attention and care was to be sick, or to act weak, or to allow bad things to happen to you.

Many people who live life from a victim mentality were sufferers of abuse as a childhood. This is often sexual abuse. The helplessness a child feels, combined with the deep shame abuse causes, can mean you grow into an adult who has no self-esteem and who sees the world as a dangerous place they are lost in.

What should I do if I recognise that I suffer from victimisation?

On a good note, because a victim mentality is a learned behaviour, you can indeed 'unlearn' it.

It is, however, a process which takes time and can be quite intense, especially if it is connected to childhood trauma like abuse or neglect.

And dealing with victimisation means you must then face the anger, sadness, shame and fear that playing the victim protects and hides you from.

It is therefore recommended to seek support when dealing with facing your victim mentality. A trained and experienced counsellor or psychotherapist can create a safe, non-judgemental space for you to explore why you act a victim, and what childhood events led to such behaviour as an adult. They will then help you learn new ways of thinking and seeing the world that are more helpful to you.



QUIZ

What I Can Teach You About Racism

1. **How many children did Professor Swain have by the time she was 20?**
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4

2. **In what one, crucial way was Professor Swain blessed?**
 - a. she was gifted with exceptional intelligence
 - b. she was born in America
 - c. systemic racism was real when she was born
 - d. she was lucky to be dirt poor when she was young

3. **Talk about systemic racism is pushing untold numbers of young blacks into a dead end of self-pity and despair.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

4. **What negative message about America is crippling a generation of young people?**
 - a. White privilege.
 - b. Police have it out for blacks.
 - c. That the United States was created to protect and promote slavery.
 - d. all of the above

5. **Which success principle enabled Professor Swain to escape a life of poverty?**
 - a. work hard
 - b. learn from your mistakes
 - c. take personal responsibility for your actions
 - d. all of the above



QUIZ: ANSWER KEY

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