



# Essential Energy

Cyndi Dale

## Handling Responsibility (Or When a Client Hands You All the Responsibility)

Life hands us continual opportunities to assume responsibility for others' decisions. How do we handle this human tendency when working with clients who often surrender their power to healing professionals of all sorts? Not only does it feel uncomfortable, but there are also certain practical changes that can only be enacted by a client. Plus it is not fun or effective to clean up "messes" that are not our own.

Case in point, only recently I ended up playing "maid" because the parties responsible for a mess—a big one—were more than happy to elevate me to Chief Responsibility Officer. Of course, two of the culprits had tails, but still.

My son, Gabe, had hosted what seemed like an entire team of monster-size boys for an overnight. I ordered late night pizza with the agreement that they would carry the boxes to the outside garbage when done. I then went to bed and rose early to get the crew off to football practice.

Arriving home, I immediately suspected disaster. Usually, two gigantic dogs rush me, each trying to out-bark the other with a full news report. You know the drill. The cat from next door crept under the fence. The speckled dog from the other block marked the front lawn. Someone forgot to leave steaks as payment for guarding the house. However, instead

of greeting me, Lucky and Honey were sitting sheepishly in front of Gabe's room, pretending that they would never set a paw in there.

Dogs are not very good liars. My two bandits had tomato stains all over their faces—and feathers stuck in their fur. The feathers were not there because they had been little angels, either.

The bed sheets were in shreds and the pillows were ripped open from inside out. What was left of the pillows would make mighty fine feather dusters. Whatever extra feathers were not on the dogs were all over the room. As the dogs informed me, it was not their fault they had wrecked the room. No, their tails were pointed right at Gabe and his friends. Apparently there had been pizza slices hidden in the bed.

As Gabe implied later, the disaster was not his fault either. Actually, it was mine. He knew I would get mad if the food and boxes had not been handled as I had requested so he and his friends hid the leftover pizza and boxes in the bed (because they were tired and overslept, may I add). They had been planning to throw everything away when they got home—but I ruined their opportunity by leaving his bedroom door open when I left.

Guess who ended up helping the boys clean up the mess? It sure was not the dogs.

When we do too much for a client, including taking on too much responsibility, it can result in our feeling used. It is hard to be professionally effective if we feel like we are carrying a load that is not ours. As the old saying goes, it does not work to care more about our client's treatment than the client does.

Healers of all types struggle with client pressure. A physician friend was thinking of moving to administration instead of clinical care because he was so tired of being seen as the only healthcare authority in the room. As he pointed out, there is actually very little most healthcare professionals can actually do, except crisis support and assisting with client decisions, if clients will not examine their own internal or external behaviors, from eating healthy foods to wearing their seatbelts to dealing with their emotional needs. In fact, he believed that 80 percent of the patients he saw would not need him except for situational care if they assumed personal responsibility. From his point of view, we are experiencing an epidemic



of perceived patient powerlessness, leading to intense and backbreaking pressure on healthcare providers.

Of course, we want to help our clients. We are being engaged to help and helpers are often responsible people. We want to make a difference; we want our clients to feel better and live more fruitful lives. Just as cannot take credit for our clients' successes, however, we also cannot accept blame for their failures.

We know it does not work to force decisions on a client. Neither can we do our best work if we are overstraining to put up boundaries. I think it is much more productive to gently help a client perceive their choices in a situation. This stance requires understanding why people do not like to accept personal responsibility.

I believe that the main reason people refuse accountability is that they are ashamed of their past or current behaviors. Many of us grew up with parents or in systems that used shame to "guide" us. Shame being the sense that there is something wrong with us, rather than acknowledge that we might have done something wrong—or less right. These systems tend to present in these ways.

1. *"It is all your fault."* The "all your fault" systems are characterized by authority figures who will not accept their own responsibilities. Instead they blame the underlings. In a family situation, these "underlings" are often the children. In institutions, they might be the employees. This type of system leaves individuals stuck in over - or under - responsibility. Over-responsible people have difficulty determining what changes will make a difference because they think they should change everything. Under-responsible people freeze at the thought of accepting responsibility and want others to do everything for them.
2. *"Better be perfect."* Perfectionistic systems force impossible standards on their members. The result is pickiness. Clients with this background might struggle with determining the core issues to face and want to fix them all. They might also hold us to a code of expectations that we cannot meet.

How do we help clients who exhibit these dynamics? First, I avoid providing guarantees. I am careful with my promises. If asked if I can "fix" the situation or "assure" them they will

recover, I state I will do what I can and maybe we can partner. I also use "soft" language, such as, "My sense is this," instead of determined statements. Also, I ask the client a lot of questions such as, "What do you think," or "How might you go about looking at this issue?" In other words, I engage them in their own healing process.

I believe that people seek a hero because they cannot perceive the heroic within themselves. This means it is important to highlight clients' gains and successes and compliment their progress. If I am going to work with a client on a long-term basis, I like to tackle smaller issues first and leave bigger issues for later. Better to make one tiny but significant change than fail at a large and vital one. In addition, I always remember that clients might be afraid I am going to shame them or blame them for their problems. What good is heaping more shame on an already volatile situation? Instead I like to uncover the roots of any shame and more often than not, clients end up more willing to try a new attitude or activity.

Or course there will be a time when we jump into "the mess" with our clients. And that is okay—as long as we are not the only ones cleaning up "their room." Now if boys and dogs would only get that point. ☺



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