

# 3 Steps From Blame to Accountability

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Blame... oh righteous indignant blame. Pointing the finger is easy, and you know what, the more you practice the more you tend to do it.

There are many subtleties to blame. Versions of blame that are quiet and others that are big and ugly.

There's those passing moments where you can just toss it away, like it never happened. A driver cuts you off in traffic and you erupt for a moment. It's the rain's fault that you can't do what you wanted to do today. Your partner left all the dirty dishes in the sink before leaving for work and you come home to a mountain of filth. The salt is not in its usual spot in the kitchen and you're sure it was your kid.

Then there's big ass ugly blame. This shows up and owns you. It finds the override switch and your intense anger, rage, sadness, despair... it's all someone else's fault, and in some cases, rightfully so. A physical assault or a legitimate injustice. Or at work, a team member dropped the ball on a project causing you time and money.

I'll be the first to admit (well maybe not the first, but I will eventually :) that I'm quick to assign fault. While there's a time and a place for accountability, consciously assigning fault and tactfully engaging in an elevated conversation, blame is a sure-fire way to erode relationships and turn the other cheek to your own emotional well-being.

Storyteller and researcher Brene Brown defines blame like this...

“Blame is just the discharging of discomfort and pain. It has an inverse relationship with accountability.”<sup>1</sup>

Beneath the surface of blame, the discomfort and pain are feelings not felt. You can think of blame as a distraction. Just imagine you have a work project to finish. You negotiate with yourself that you'll just watch one episode of your favorite show. Some spiritual, or motivational video. The next thing you know your on Facebook, Instagram, or your inbox doing completely unrelated tasks. That thing your putting off is what really needs to get done. If you would just buckle up and get it done, it's done. Blame is like all those distractions in a way. At the right place and time and in the right context, they're useful, productive, and fun. But right now, they're taking you away from what really matters.

I recently caught myself in the blame cycle in a few different situations, some subtle, some loud as fuck. The amount of time and energy I was investing in pointing the finger was quite ridiculous and it wasn't until I shifted out of it that I really saw what was underneath.

Here's where I caught myself pointing the finger

The 1st

Being a single father is something I never thought I would do. But like most situations in life, there's really no use fighting them. It's more effective to come to level ground, see the situation for what it is, and then make moves accordingly.

In the day to day, having a bit more logistics on my hands when it came to my daughter and all things related, I was super snarky about her mom. Not necessarily verbally, but definitely in my head.

The 2nd

While washing my car, I tripped over the hose and automatically spat out loud... "*Stupid fucking hose!*"

The 3rd

My daughter forgot her jacket at school and she was going on a week long trip with her mom the next day. I went into all kinds of reasons why this was bad, and that translated into me saying (while feeling an increasing sense of shame and anger) "*I can't believe you forgot your jacket.*"

It was clear as day that I was passing the buck a lot. In some places subtle and in others, blaringly loud.

For a variety of reasons, but mainly because I don't like feeling all wound up and reactive, I decided to go to work on this blame thing.

Everytime I felt mildly annoyed, critical, or frustrated all the way up to gripping anger, disgust, shame, and humiliation... I went to work on them. Sometimes this would be just a slight poke. I would be aware of the emotion, but it didn't take hold. And other times they would be all consuming. Like paralyzing anger or frustration.

As I reassigned blame, in a sense seeing that every time I pointed the finger, there were three pointing right back at me, I discovered something that blame was hiding. In my experience this is what Brene Brown is talking about when she refers to the "discharging of discomfort and pain."

The Process

The process is simple and it's a kin to exercise. When you train with weights, the more consistently you train (assuming your method is sound), the stronger you get. Same thing here.

The more you practice reassigning blame and shifting the focus from the other person to yourself in a factual, grounded way, the more you'll get in touch with what's under the surface.

The more you identify the emotions involved, the easier it will be to see the situation clearly while owning your part and calling the other person to own theirs if that's the case.

Before I dive into the practice, here's a few ground rules I find useful

First... You must be willing... not even making a huge powerful decision, just simply the willingness to believe that feeling better is possible. And that feeling better is ok. Also, entertain the possibility that you are at cause and not just at effect. That what you do and if you choose to do differently, will have a different result. And if that seems a little too far off, just being curious is a good start.

In those three instances where I was blaming left and right, my energy was lower, I felt less creative, and it was really hard to stay focused. If you've ever been caught up in blame you can probably relate. Shifting your external and internal conversation of blame isn't always easy, and it can be simple.

Shifting your language and emotions

One of the easiest ways to intercept and work with our emotions is through language. Little by little I started to unravel the language of blame every time I felt a mild to intense emotion. Any time I got wrapped up in things about my wife, I would rework it to a point where I felt good about it. To the point where I could feel the noose loosen.

This looked like any time I pointed at one of her behaviors and completely left out my own, I would pause, take a deep breath, and focus on following my breath and bringing my attention back into my body.

For any perceived injustice where I was carelessly pointing the finger I reeled it back and found where I came up short, what I could have done differently, and how I can show up differently now as we co-parent our daughter. Essentially holding myself accountable.

This in no way shape or form means that I've "let go" of things that do need to be addressed, but coming to the table having owned my part feels more empowering and bringing them up takes on a very different shape.

With the hose thing... I know, sounds ridiculous right... I simply made one shift. Instead of saying "*Stupid fucking hose!*" I paused, grounded myself and stated "*I didn't see the hose there.*" The charge diminished.

When my daughter forget her jacket at school this one unraveled a little slower. \*Mini tangent alert\* If as parents, we all decided to end the blame and shame game by not passing them down to our children the world would be infinitely better than the one we see today. Ok... back to it...

I believe it's partly my responsibility to help her remember that stuff. I mean she is only 8. So I tried this one on for size... "*It's ok honey, we forgot your jacket.*" From here it was a lot easier to come to terms with just driving the 25 minutes back to her school from where we were. The chatter and internal dialogue about the whole thing began falling away.

But here's where the real work began

Within a few days of doing this practice, something came out that I didn't know was there. I was feeling way more calm, focused, and it was even easier to hit the off switch after a long day of working on projects and coaching. I was a lot more patient too, which is always a great thing. But here's what came next.

One morning I was passing through my daughters room and, like running into a wall, I was hit with this deep sadness that came out in crying bouts for an hour plus. When it comes to the ugly cries on a scale from 1 to 10, this was a 10. Not only that, but for the first little bit I still attempted to wash some dishes, clean up the kitchen, etc. Until I just gave in and let it flow.

What came out was this deep sadness of how much I miss seeing my daughter in my house every day instead of just half the time. I was aware of it mentally, but this was the first I actually got in touch with it.

Up until this point, I couldn't get deeper into that because I was so quick to launch into blame that my feelings were staying locked up and not being let out.

The blame that kept showing up, even in the seemingly inconsequential was the discharging of discomfort and pain.

While letting emotions course through us is not always the most fun or comfortable thing, the payoff is huge. It only leads to deeper, more meaningful connections with people we care about, wins back bound up energy, and gives us access to more creativity and [agency](#).

It's certainly not a direct path. But like any other skill, with practice, unravelling the equation will become more natural.

The Practice

Start just by simply noticing when you're blaming someone or something else for a problem in your life. Basically any time you point the finger, use this.

When you get the sense that you're emotionally hooked, notice the places where your language has a they, the person's name, or an inanimate object. Find where it's appropriate to replace it with I or we. If you're wondering what being hooked into blame is, it's when you have a moderate to intense emotion and... you start blaming.

As you shift your language and the pictures you see in your head, you'll know you're on the right track when the intensity and the seeming importance of the current situation starts to subside.

As you gain solid ground and feel more centered, start to work with identifying the emotions you're experiencing. My favorite tool for this one is the simple [emotional vocabulary list](#) by [Karla McLaren](#). Just pull up [this list](#) to hone your emotional accuracy, being able to identify which emotion you are experiencing.

I'll get into why emotional intelligence is not just a luxury but a necessity in another article, but for now just practice these three steps

1. Notice where you're placing blame and shift your language from blame to accountability by using I and we.
2. Continue to shift your language and feel the emotional charge, intensity and seeming importance of the current situation subside as you hone the context through language.
3. Identify the emotion you're experiencing by using the emotional vocabulary list.

If you're "in the heat of the moment", and whipping out the emotional vocabulary list is less than ideal, carve out some time to do it later in the day or the next morning. The goal here is to broaden your emotional literacy and free up bound energy while staying on the bench for the blame game.

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1. Brown, Brené. (2013). *The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings of Authenticity, Connection, and Courage*. [Audible Audiobook]

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