

Some 'victims' are just playing a part

with

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Do you work with someone who takes on a 'victim' role to gain sympathy? I call these people 'energy vampires.'

You may wonder what motivates this behaviour. Basically, the role-playing victim seeks sympathy in order to gain a sense of personal power. Here are some signs you're dealing with someone who gains power by pretending to be powerless:

- Constantly telling 'poor me' stories
- Setting up others to communicate their negative messages (e.g. one separated parent sending messages to other through their child)
- If you do something enjoyable, the 'victim' makes you feel guilty
- Setting you up to look mean in front of others

What can you do if you work with an energy vampire? Here are four steps I teach participants in my communication skills training programs.

1. Recognise real damage

Many people who play victim roles as adults were genuinely disempowered – and in some cases abused – as children. They may genuinely believe they have no option but play the victim.

2. Notice their filters

The story the victim tells has been distorted by their 'poor me' filters. This means it may not be 100% accurate. Check others' perceptions before believing any tale energy vampire tells about being victimised.

3. Refuse to listen to 'poor me' stories

Opt out of conversations in which the energy vampire criticises other people. If you get involved, they could later attribute their own comments to you – so you look bad, instead of them.

4. Ask what they intend to do

Often the role playing victim wants you to take action for them. If you do this, you are baited into playing a complementary 'rescuer' role and the victim behaviour will continue. Stop the energy vampire's game playing by asking solution focussed questions such as:

- What are you going to do about this?
- How will you solve this problem?
- What action are you going take to manage this situation?

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Contact us now.

What to say to chronic whingers

by **Eleanor Shakiba**

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Chronic whingers take the zing out of life. They constantly spot things to complain about. If you're around them too long, you can start to feel negative as well. Here are three verbal techniques you can use to stop this happening.

Refuse to join in

Contributing to a 'whinge session' will just make it worse. Send a clear message that you're not willing to participate. Here are some sentences that communicate this:

- I'd rather speak about something else right now
- I feel uncomfortable speaking about [person's name] without them being here. Let's change the subject
- I'd prefer to focus on ways to solve the problem, rather than dwelling on it

Focus on specifics

Many whingers exaggerate. They use words like "always" and "everyone" to blow things out of proportion. Challenge this sort of language with meta model questions. These probe for specifics and generally start with 'what,' 'how' or 'when.' For example:

- What led you to think that?
- When, exactly, have you experienced...?
- Who, specifically, are you talking about?

Help them find help

Chronic complaining can be a sign of depression. Unfortunately, depressed people often find it hard to access help. Step in by raising the issue and being willing to help. This involves five steps.

Find a private space to talk. Point out that you've noticed the other person seems down a lot of the time. Give a couple of examples of things they've said recently. Let them know you're willing to support them. Then provide information about how they can find help. Here's an example of this strategy in action:

Whinger: I might have known this would all go wrong...

You: You seem really down these days. For example, you're speaking as though you expect everything to go wrong today. And yesterday, you said that no-one was paying attention to your problems. I'd like you to know I'm paying attention and I'm willing to support you. But you might also find it useful to speak to a counsellor or coach. Here is the number of the Employee Assistance Program/a good counsellor. Let me know if you'd like me to help you set up an appointment.

Need advice on what to say in a difficult situation? [Send your question](#) and we'll answer it in a future newsletter.

Ward off a sympathy vampire

Real Life Success Story

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Terri was fed up with Sara’s complaints about co-workers. She spent up to six hours a week listening to Sara’s ‘poor me’ stories.

Terri worked in a Melbourne accounting firm. She was taking work home because Sara was consuming so much of her time. She knew she needed to take action. Terri enrolled in a communication skills course called *Beat The Energy Vampires*. There she learned how to use assertive I Statements to end Sara’s complaining. You can use the same formula to deal with negative types in your life.

1. Empathise, don’t sympathise

You’re sympathising when you take on someone else’s feelings. For example, Terri had initially felt sorry for Sara. This led to Terri ‘catching’ Sara’s depression. Terri needed to learn how to empathise. This involves *acknowledging* someone’s feelings, without being ‘contaminated’ by them. For example, Terri could empathise by saying “You sound really upset about your conversation with Rick.”

2. Describe the behaviour

Briefly summarise how the ‘victim’ is behaving with you. Avoid judgmental language as you do this. For example a non-judgmental message Terri could send is “I notice you often tell me about your problems with other members of the team. I also notice you’re not taking any action to deal with those problems.” This is a much more assertive message than “You’re always complaining about someone.”

3. Outline the impact of the behaviour

Tell the ‘victim’ the consequences *for you* as a result of their behaviour. Terri, for example, could say “Spending so much time discussing these problems means I get behind with my work. I’m taking jobs home to catch up.” Remember to use non-judgmental words during this part of your I Statement, too.

4. Set a limit

Outline how you’ll respond to ‘victim’ behaviour in future, making sure you set a firm boundary. For example, Terri could say “I need to concentrate on my work from now on. So I won’t be able to have these conversations in future.”

5. Assume change is possible

Finish your I Statement with words that assume success for the other person. Terri could say, for example, “I know you’re worried about your relationships with the team and I’m sure you’ll find a way to improve them.” This sends a clear message that you expect the other person to work on their own solutions.

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What's New

AUGUST 2011

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New Courses for Your Team:

Crunch Point Conversations for Managers

Crunch point conversations are discussions that focus on critical situations: work performance problems, team disagreements or sensitive feedback. Learn to handle these situations in a professional and assertive way. This course will boost your ability to lead and inspire others.

Read course outline.

News from Eleanor Shakiba

This year I've started producing training videos and e-learning packages.

You can view my first video at www.thinklearnsucceed.com.au

Your feedback would be very welcome.

Three new videos will be loaded to the Think Learn Succeed website next month. These will be:

- How experiential learning works
- How coaching promotes success
- How stories create learning

I'd love to hear your suggestions for future video topics. [Email me](#) with your ideas.

New Resources for You

Boost your energy

Don't let energy vampires drain your resources. You can manage the impact they have on how you feel. This FREE audio session will make increasing your energy a breeze, so you 'vampire proof' your life.

Download now

About Think Learn Succeed

We teach people to create, relate and communicate. If you need team training, we can create a customised session. If you want individual coaching, we'll deliver it by phone or face to face. Or if you need a customized training video, we'll make it for you.

Contact us now to find out how we can help.