**6 Ways Childhood Abuse and Neglect Leads to Self-Blame in Adulthood**

By [Darius Cikanavicius, Author, Certified Coach](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/psychology-self/author/darius/)
Last updated: 15 Dec 2018

~ 4 min read

**

“Trauma victims commonly blame themselves. Blaming oneself for the shame of being a victim is recognized by trauma specialists as a defense against the extreme powerlessness we feel in the wake of a traumatic event. Self-blame continues the illusion of control shock destroys, but prevents us from the necessary working through of the traumatic feelings and memories to heal and recover.”
― Sandra Lee Dennis

**What is self-blame**

An overwhelming amount of people routinely experience mild or complex trauma symptoms from the environment they had in their formative years. One of such symptoms is *toxic self-blame*.

Self-blame is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, feeling responsibility, guilt, or shame keeps us from hurting others and lets us learn from our mistakes. It helps us be more empathetic to each other. It keeps us human.

However, it can be, and often is, a problem when we blame ourselves for things we didn’t do or objectively shouldn’t feel responsible for or ashamed about. In this article we will talk about toxic, unhealthy, unjust self-blame and its effects.

**The origins of self-blame**

When children experience trauma, whether extreme like sexual and physical abuse or “mild” like lack of attention, they often are not allowed to feel how they feel, which is hurt, angry, enraged, betrayed, abandoned, rejected, and so on. Or if they are allowed to feel some of those emotions, they usually don’t receive proper soothing and mental resolution to be able to heal and move on.

It is especially prohibited to feel angry at the people who hurt you if they are your family members. And yet the child is dependent on their caregivers, even if they are the very people who are supposed to protect them and meet their needs yet are failing at it in some form.

Moreover, human beings want to understand, and here, too, a child wants to understand what happened and why. Since a child’s psyche is still developing, they tend to see the world revolving around them. This means that if there’s something wrong, they tend to think it’s somehow related to them, that perhaps it’s their fault. “If mommy and daddy are fighting then it’s about me. What did I do wrong? Why don’t they love me?”

On top of that, the child is often explicitly blamed for feeling hurt. Directly or indirectly we all have heard phrases like, “There’s nothing to be upset with.” Or, “(S)he is lying.” Or, “I’ll give you something to cry about.” Or, “You made me do it.” Or, “It doesn’t hurt.” Or, “Quit making stuff up.” Or, “If you don’t stop, I’ll just leave you here.”

Not only all of that is the opposite of what a hurt child needs, it makes the child blame themselves for what happened and repress their true feelings. Then, since they’re unresolved and often not even identified, all of these issues are carried into a person’s later life.

If properly unaddressed, they can follow them into their adolescence, adulthood, and even older years, and manifest in numerous emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal problems. Here are six ways how self-blame manifests itself in a person’s life.

**1. Toxic self-criticism**

People who suffer from unhealthy self-blame are prone to toxic self-criticism.

Because a person has been overtly criticized, unjustly blamed, and held up to unrealistic standards when growing up, they internalized these judgments and standards and now that’s how they see and relate to themselves.

Such a person often thinks something to the following: “I’m bad.” Or, “I’m worthless.” Or, “I’m not good enough.”

[False beliefs](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/psychology-self/2017/09/5-toxic-self-beliefs/) like these can be debilitating and a sign of low, skewed self-esteem. They often come up in various forms of perfectionism, such as having unrealistic, unattainable standards.

**2. Black and white thinking**

Black and white thinking here means that the person thinks in strong extremes where there is more than two options or an issue is on a spectrum yet they don’t see it.

In relation to self, a chronically self-blaming person may think, “I *always* fail.” “I can *never* do anything right.” “I’m *always* incorrect.” “Others *always* know better.” If something is not perfect, *everything* is perceived as bad.

**3. Chronic self-doubt**

Because of all these thoughts, a person has many doubts. “Well, am I doing it right? Am I doing enough? Can I really do it? I seemingly failed so many times. Can I be correct? I mean I know that sometimes I tend to overreact and think the worst—but maybe *this time* it’s really true?”

**4. Poor self-care and self-harm**

People who were taught to blame themselves for being hurt are prone to taking poor care of themselves, sometimes to the degree of active [self-harm](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/psychology-self/2017/10/childhood-abuse-and-self-abuse/).

Because they lacked care, love, and protection when growing up, such a person has difficulties caring for themselves. Many people like that are raised to take care of others, therefore they often feel that they are not even worth of getting their needs met.

And since such a person tends to blame themselves, self-harm in their unconscious mind seems like a proper punishment for “being bad,” just like they were punished as children.

**5. Unsatisfying relationships**

Self-blame can play a big part in a person’s relationships. At work, they may take on too many responsibilities and be prone to being exploited. In romantic or personal relationships, they may accept abuse as normal behavior, be unable to constructively resolve conflicts, or have unrealistic understanding how healthy relationships looks like.

Other related interpersonal problems are codependency, people-pleasing, learned helplessness, Stockholm syndrome, poor boundaries, inability to say no, [self-erasure](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/psychology-self/2018/04/learned-self-erasure/).

**6. Chronic shame, guilt, and anxiety**

People with a tendency to self-blame often struggle with overwhelming or otherwise painful and intrusive emotions. The most common emotions and mental states are shame, guilt, and anxiety, but it can also be loneliness, confusion, lack of motivation, aimlessness, paralysis, overwhelm, or constant alertness.

These feelings and moods are also closely related to phenomena like overthinking or catastrophizing, where the person lives in their head more than they are consciously present in external reality.

**Summary and Closing Words**

Having a wanting or otherwise traumatic upbringing makes us prone to self-blame, which is only one of many effects of such a childhood environment. If unaddressed and fully unresolved, the tendency to self-blame, then, gets carried in a person’s later life and manifests itself in a wide range of emotional, behavioral, personal, and social problems.

These problems include, but are not limited to, low self-esteem, chronic self-criticism, magical and irrational thinking, chronic self-doubt, a lack of self-love and self-care, unhealthy relationships, and such feelings like toxic shame, guilt, and anxiety.

When a person correctly identifies these issues and their origins, then can start working towards overcoming them, which brings more inner peace and overall satisfaction with life.

*Does any of it relate to you or people you know? Are there other things you would put on this list? Feel free to share your thoughts in the comments below or in your personal journal.*