#61: Releasing Responsibility for Other People

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With Your Host

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Hey, you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the Redefining Rest Podcast for public health professionals. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Hey, everyone. How are you doing on this Monday or whatever day you're listening to this or reading it? So glad you're here. The topic we are talking about today comes up in probably at least, if not more, 50% of my coaching sessions with my clients. Again, for sure a 100% of my consults, for folks who are coming to me and we're talking about potentially working together. People come to me and one of the biggest things I see that they're struggling with is believing they cause someone else's feelings.

And this is something I still struggle with from time to time and I get coached on too. So, some of you listening, or my clients who have been around for a long time have learned that other people do not cause your feelings. If you're new here and this is your first episode, I have some older podcast episodes that talk more about this that you can go back and listen to. But that also means you do not cause other people's feelings either. And when you believe you're responsible for someone else's feelings or their behavior it sucks so much time, and energy, and effort from you.

It takes up so much brain space, it impacts the decisions you make, how you use your time, and your relationship with yourself honestly. So, let's talk about it. From an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense that we, many of us think this way. In premodern era, and prehistoric era we relied much more heavily on being accepted into social groups in order to survive.

If you were kicked out of the tribe, or the clan, or your kin, or the community then you risked your survival. Meaning if the leader got pissed at you, or a majority of the group thought you weren't pulling your weight, they might leave you behind. And you'd have to try to survive on your own during a period where survival in a group was really important based on the

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circumstances of the time, based on the environment, based on the challenges, based on how they lived their lives, what was their status of the world at that time and you're on your own.

So, humans spent hundreds and thousands of years relying on each other in this way. Of course, still today we rely on each other, and community is really important. But it's very different now than it was in the kind of hunter and gatherer prehistoric era. And it could be hypothesized that those who survived and carried on their genes were those who were hypervigilant about staying in the group, and adapting to the group, and being liked by the group. So that's one piece.

Now, let's talk about it from a kind of socialization perspective. Everyone no matter your identity is told as a child growing up that you cause other people's feelings. Teachers and parents will say, "Apologize to Sam, you hurt their feelings." Even sometimes parents especially will say, "You hurt mommy's feelings, you hurt daddy's feelings." And these are all messages that communicate that you cause other people's feelings.

Now, if you are socialized as a woman meaning whether or not you identify as a woman now, but you were socialized growing up as a woman, the patriarchy tells you that you are responsible for making everyone around you happy. That you are responsible for their feelings. That you have to make your friends happy, your boss happy, your partner happy. And in the heteronormative context you have to make men happy, no matter if it's a sibling, or a boss, or a coworker, or a mentor partner.

And a big part of the patriarchy is this messaging around women's responsibility is to make sure men are happy and not upset. And if they are upset then it's their fault. That's kind of part of the stemming of victim blaming. And even if you are a person who is socialized as a woman but do not date men you've also been socialized to believe that you have to make

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men happy. And women have been told if someone is upset, or sad, or disappointed it's their fault.

And then there is this added layer if you're a woman who's also a parent that it's your responsibility to make sure your kids are happy. I also see some of this socialization among my clients and my students who are immigrants or children of immigrants who feel their choices in life, their accomplishments determine if their parents or their family are happy or disappointed, that their choices cause their feelings. And this shows up in the socialization of other marginalized groups, among fat people, or disabled folks, or queer trans folks.

If you identify in any of those communities you have received messages that you make other people uncomfortable, that you have to hide or limit yourself so other people don't feel a certain way. And of course, this shows up in many other ways for individuals with a variety of other lived experiences or identities. And we bring this socialization into work. And we bring this belief that we are responsible for other people's feelings into the workplace.

So, let's talk a little bit about the public health workforce specifically. Most of us come into public health because we want to make a difference in people's lives. It's not for the money, it's not for the fame. And most of us who come into public health also live in an identity that has been additionally socialized to believe that we are responsible for other people's feelings. So, this intersection of a desire to help others, which I should know that for some folks in public health it might be a real desire.

But for others it might actually be that they've been socialized to believe that is their role in society to help others and that's what they should do. And that's why they gravitate towards the field consciously or not. So that's kind of a sidenote. But this intersection between wanting to help others and believing you cause other people's feelings becomes this almost perfect

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storm to abdicate what you want, your decisions and how you show up in order to try to please other people.

Now, of course there is another layer in the workforce around power dynamics and hierarchy, especially in public health, around discrimination and bias based on race, gender, all other sorts of things that also come into play and interact with this experience. But this is all to say of course you believe you cause other people's feelings because you have been socialized to believe that. But it does not mean it is true. Even if to you it 'feels true.' It only feels true because you believe your thoughts about it.

And you have thought this for a very long time. And other people have told you this for a very long time. If you have been thinking, if I wear anything purple I will have a terrible day over and over every day your whole life and other people around you told you the same thing, of course you would feel that that was true. But that doesn't mean it is true. And this comes up a lot with my clients, and with my students, and with myself when it comes to making a decision whether it's about what you want to do for your birthday and how other people may or may not feel.

How to plan a meeting and who's going to be there and how you're going to think what they're going to think, whether or not to say yes to a committee role and worrying about how that's going to impact others and what they're going to think and how they're going to feel. And it also comes up when someone else expresses their thoughts and feelings or takes an action that you think you caused or could have prevented. Like if your child is upset that you forgot the dessert in their lunch, or your colleague is working late on a manuscript that you are leading.

Or your friend tells you that they wish you would have invited them camping when they saw your pictures on Instagram. When this happens, either of these scenarios you experience so much anxiety, stress, and drama. You play out in your head what they may or may not be feeling. Imagine what

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they must be thinking about you, that you're a terrible person, that you don't care, catastrophize what it will mean for you, that they'll be so mad, they'll never talk to you again, or you'll get fired, or not get promoted, or not get other opportunities.

You try to act or say things in a certain way to prove to them you care or fix the situation. You do or ask things to try to figure out how they feel and how you can fix it. You maybe even try to convince them to feel differently. You apologize when you do nothing wrong, or you don't feel like you want to apologize. You go above and beyond for them, messing up your schedule, bending over backwards and so much more. And the reason you do this is because you believe it is a problem for them to have a negative thought or feeling.

But their thoughts are just sentences in their head, they're just neurons firing in their head. Their emotions are just sensations in their body. They aren't problems. But you believe they are problems because you think you are causing their thoughts and feelings. If your friend came to you and tells you, "I'm really upset, I'm so mad, I found out today my coworker gets paid $10,000 more than me."

You're not going to be like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry, I don't want you to feel upset. I don't want you to think that. Let me fix that. Let me give you $10,000 from my salary to make sure you feel better and not mad." No, because you don't believe in that scenario you are causing their emotion. And you don't believe it is your job to fix it. But when you realize you might not be able to get manuscript edits to your boss by Friday, you don't want them to think you're lazy. You don't want them to be upset or disappointed, so you decide to work late and try to avoid them being upset.

Because you believe you caused their thoughts and feelings and it's your responsibility to not make them feel a certain way or think something and your responsibility to either prevent it or fix it if that happens. But you don't

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cause their thoughts and feelings. Let's say you tell your boss, "Hey, I'm so sorry, I can't get the edits to you by Friday." They could think literally one million things. They could think, that's not a problem, or I didn't think you could, or I knew that was too short of a timeline to give. And they could be thinking, good, I don't have time to review them anyways.

Or fuck, I have to edit this myself now. Or I was going to say for a deadline extension anyways. Or gosh, they're really delaying us, this is a problem. Or I totally forgot I asked you to do that. They could be thinking, this really throws off my timeline or it's not a problem, I wasn't going to review till Monday anyways. Or I'm so glad that they communicated what they mean, literally anything. And what they are thinking can be impacted by so many things. Maybe they didn't sleep well, Maybe they're having a bad day. Maybe they're exhausted. Maybe they want to get this over with.

Who knows? Seriously, there's a million different things they could be thinking, none of which you cause. And they could have so many different feelings about it. Maybe they'd feel relief, or anger, or frustrated, or neutral, or curious, or open, literally anything. You do not cause it. And I know you can all imagine this. We have all had this experience. When we tell someone our decision and we think they are going to be upset even envision in our head, we are certain they're going to be upset. And we tell them, and they literally do not care. I know you've all had that experience.

Or we tell someone our decision that we really believe they're going to love and not have a problem with or not care at all. And then they hate it, and then they're upset, and we're confused. And when we tell someone something that we truly think that they're not going to care at all about, maybe even wouldn't consider telling them but it happens to come up. And then they end up caring a lot and get upset. This, I bet right now in your mind there's so many scenarios in your head coming up because this happens to all of us.

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I can name so many that has happened just the past couple months. I bought someone a book for their birthday this year that I really thought they would love. I read it and I was like, "This is amazing, they'll really love this." And I had all these reasons that I thought they would love it. Turns out they did not. They told someone else they thought it was a rude gift to give. Last weekend I said a sarcastic joke to my partner and then based on his behavior I was worried that he was upset by what I said. And when I asked him he was confused. He was like, "What? No, that didn't bother me at all."

Right now, I have a leak in my garage in the condo that I've been dealing with for years but when it first happened I thought it was coming from my neighbor's house, the way our condominiums are set up, our garages are detached. And I reached out to that neighbor totally thinking that they would understand and be super open, and not think it's a problem. Well, I was wrong, they were really frustrated and had a lot of thoughts about it. What I did, what I said, what I decided, what I felt did not cause any of their feelings or thoughts.

Other people take actions because of what they feel. And what they feel is determined by their thoughts. And their thoughts are just sentences in their head that they choose to have consciously or have unconsciously, not caused by you. Believing you cause other people's feelings is so emotionally and mentally draining. You spend so much energy thinking about them, how they feel, what they're thinking, so much time worrying about what this means about you and what will happen, so much effort trying to change the situation, change them, fix it.

Also, that they 'feel better' or 'like you,' or at least don't feel bad or think negatively about you. But really it's so you feel better, because when they have certain thoughts or certain feelings you feel bad. You feel anxious because you're thinking, oh, no, this is a problem. You feel shame because you're thinking, I shouldn't have done that. Really you're trying to feel better. You don't want to feel that anxiety, or that worry, or that shame, or

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that guilt that comes up. You don't want to be thinking or telling yourself you shouldn't have done that, you should have known better.

The real reason you don't want them to be upset or have negative feelings is because you don't want to experience your negative feelings or your thoughts. You don't want to be feeling guilty because you're thinking, I shouldn't have done that. You don't want to be feeling anxious because you're thinking this is going to jeopardize my promotion opportunity. You don't want to be feeling shame because you're telling yourself you're being totally selfish and you're being an arsehole.

If you were comfortable and okay with your feelings and allowed any emotion that came up and allowed the thoughts that came up without making them a problem you wouldn't 'need' anyone else to act, or feel, or think differently. If you were comfortable and okay with other people having their emotions, whether it's they're upset, or mad, if you were okay with them thinking whatever they were thinking, whether it's that you're rude, or inconsiderate then you wouldn't need them to think or feel differently.

If you counted up all the time you spent worrying about what someone else is going to think or feel based on your decisions, or your actions, how much time per day would that be? Think about how much you do this with your family, with your partner, with your job, with your boss, how much time per day would that be? Now, take that estimate and times that by seven, seven days a week. And then by 52, 52 weeks a year. And times that by however many years you think you have left to live on this Earth. How much time would that be?

How much time is that over the course of the next, five, 10, 20, 40, 50 years? And if you had that time back because you are no longer believing you cause other people's feelings and trying to spend so much energy changing that, what could you do with that time? What could you do with that mental energy? How different would your life look? Seriously, your

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emotional experience and your emotional state would look completely different. Most likely many of your decisions would look different. Some might look the same, but many might look different.

You would probably show up very differently to your life. You'd be more your authentic self, not make yourself small, not put yourself last, you would prioritize yourself, you would for sure feel more rested. Because one of the main reasons you don't feel rested is because of this bullshit. And listen, this happens to me too. So, I'm also calling myself out. We all do this. You would take more time for yourself. You would do things you want, and you love more. You wouldn't apologize as much, that's for sure.

You would live and make decisions based on you and what you want. You would focus on you and what's right for you. And you would let other people focus on them. Stop trying to control other people. Stop trying to take responsibility for them. That is their job. Your job is to take responsibility for yourself. Here is the hard truth, you all. When you take an action or say something because you want someone else to feel differently, or think differently, that is manipulation.

You want to control their thoughts, their feelings, their actions so you can give yourself permission to feel a certain way or think something. The intent is for you to allow yourself to feel better or think thoughts that feel better, by manipulating them so that they feel differently, so that they think differently. It does not work and it's a complete drain on your time and it is a huge barrier to rest. It is 100% blocking your emotional and mental rest. It's one of the ways you are not living in integrity with yourself.

Your relationship with yourself is being compromised because of this and truthfully your relationship with other people because you're not showing up as your truest self. You are not showing up being honest about what you want, what you think, what you feel, and what you do. You are lying to yourself and other people.

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So, I'm going to leave you with these last two questions to think about this week. How is it the most loving thing for other people to let them have their feelings? Truthfully answer that. If you let other people have their feelings and didn't try to fix them or prevent them, how is that loving to them? Who would they get to be? How would they get to show up? How would they get to grow? Now, how is the most loving thing for you to let other people have their feelings? Answer that.

Who would you get to be, how will you get to show up and how would you get to grow? Doing this work and detaching from the belief that you cause other people's feelings is healing your relationship with yourself, the integrity with yourself, the truth of who you are and who you want to be. It is about you and your relationship with yourself. And in many ways it will heal and create integrity in your relationship with other people as well. And as you do this work it may also mean that relationships with other people might change Some might end. Some might shift. And that's okay.

All of that comes out of truth, out of integrity, out of being honest, and that's okay. That's why this work is so important. And this work will create so much mental, emotional, and physical rest in your life, and social and relationship rest and peace. So, I'm going to leave you with that you all. I want you to think about this. I love you, talk to you next week. Bye.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to mckoolcoaching.com, that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.