



#77 Helplessness, Suffering, and The Power to Overcome

It doesn't matter what you do – you are powerless. The most you can hope for is to be born into fortunate circumstances and lucky enough to endure a life endowed with more comfort than suffering.

This belief, that we are extremely limited in our ability to impact the course of our life, is quite possibly one of the most detrimental psychological states. However, sadly it is also a mindset which afflicts a great number of people in the modern age.

As infants, and into our childhood, we are by-and-large helpless beings – totally dependent on our parents, siblings, and other care-givers for our survival. In other words, at this early stage in our life we are objectively helpless. As we age this objective helplessness recedes with the development of our physical and mental capabilities. But for many people the objective helplessness of their youth is replaced by a pernicious subjective helplessness – a helplessness not based on objective reality, as it is for an infant, but instead on one's emotional and psychological attitude towards life.

Those afflicted with this helpless attitude become increasingly incapable of dealing with the often harsh realities of life. They come to believe that nothing they do will make a difference, and that their destiny is largely out of their control. If this attitude lasts for too long life becomes little more than the attempt to flee from anxiety, depression, and boredom – and this should not be surprising. If you believe yourself to be helpless you will stop trying to find solutions to your problems, cease striving to accomplish goals and settle into a complacency that rids your life of any meaning or purpose.

Thus, overcoming subjective helplessness can have a tremendous impact on one's life and fortunately as it is an attitude – a way of viewing oneself in relation to the world – and not objective like it is for an infant, it can be overcome.

What makes it difficult for many to overcome this attitude is that they interpret their failures and struggles as reflecting a personal ineptitude which limits their ability to effectuate positive change. But rarely is it taken into account that all



humans experience these things, and that very often it is the proverbial greats, not the mediocre, who experience the most acute of sufferings.

When one looks at a prominent figure in history, such as a Goethe or Beethoven, focus is usually confined to their great achievements – be it the literary works of Goethe or the symphonies of Beethoven. However, a closer look at these individuals reveals that their lives were shaped as much by the lows they had to endure, as by the incredible heights they reached. Goethe for example was no stranger to suffering, stating that,

“I may well say that in my seventy-five years I have not known four weeks of actual ease.” (Goethe)

But unlike a subjectively helpless individual Goethe did not see his struggles as a reflection that he was somehow less capable than others and should thus resign himself to a life of inaction. Instead he knew that life was a process, filled with challenges to be overcome and that

“The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving.” (Goethe)

Many who have reflected on the human condition have noted that sufferings, hardships, and failures will inevitably afflict us all. But the few who live fulfilling lives also come to realize that this is only one part of what it means to be human and that there also exists in each person an immense inner power to overcome even the greatest of sufferings.

The psychologist William James, in his essay *The Energies of Men* suggested that most people never scratch the surface of their potential and go through life completely oblivious of the great inner powers at their disposal.

“Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake...the human individual thus lives usually far within his limits; he possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use. He energizes below his maximum, and he behaves below his optimum...in every conceivable way, his life is contracted like the field of vision of a hysteric subject — but with less excuse, for the poor



hysteric is diseased, while in the rest of us it is only a [long-established] habit — the habit of inferiority to our full self.” (The Energies of Men, William James)

The only way to tap into these energies, and to diminish the impact of subjective helplessness, is through action. By taking risks and facing one’s fears it is soon discovered that one is far less helpless than was assumed. Behaving in this manner will certainly be challenging as it will inevitably be accompanied by failures, set-backs and disappointments. But it should be kept in mind that occurrences of these things are not a sign that we are somehow less adequate than others. Rather, a fulfilling life is found not in avoiding struggles and hardships, but by continually confronting and striving to overcome them. For as Nietzsche wrote in Thus Spoke Zarathustra:

“And life confided the secret to me: behold, it said, I am that which must always overcome itself.” (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche)