

Weighing Personal Responsibility

Once you have assessed the seriousness of your actions, it is helpful to weigh how much of your perceived wrongdoing is your personal responsibility. Marissa felt ashamed that she was molested as a child. The molestation was certainly a serious event in her life, but was she responsible for it? Vic felt guilty that he blew up in anger at his wife, Judy, one night when she started complaining about their overdue credit card bills. Was he responsible for his angry reaction?

A good way to weigh personal responsibility is to construct a "responsibility pie." To do this, list all the people and aspects of a situation that contributed to an event about which you feel guilty or ashamed. Include yourself on the list. Then draw a circle to represent a pie, and assign slices of the responsibility for the event in sizes that reflect relative responsibility. Draw your own slice last, so that you do not prematurely assign too much responsibility to yourself.

Figure 15.3 shows what people and things Marissa identified as partly responsible for her sexual molestation and how she completed her first responsibility pie. Although Marissa had always felt personally responsible for being molested, when she filled out a responsibility pie, she gave herself a very small part of the responsibility. She decided that she felt responsible only for not saying no to her dad. Most of the responsibility for what happened was her father's, and even the slices representing her mother, grandfather, and alcohol were larger than Marissa's.

When Marissa showed her responsibility pie to her therapist, they discussed further her "responsibility" for the molestation. After a number of sessions, Marissa came to understand and believe that she was not at all responsible for being molested. She learned that molestation is entirely an adult responsibility; like most children, she did not have the knowledge or security to say no at age 6 or even at age 13. When she did finally say no at age 14, the molestation stopped. But stopping her father at age 14 did not mean that she had had the ability to do this all along. Her father might have been unwilling to risk confrontation with her as an older child. But he would have had no trouble over-powering her when she was younger. Even if she had said no when she was younger, it probably would not have stopped him. Even when older children and adolescents say no to sexual molestation, they are often ignored. The responsibility pie helped relieve Marissa of her guilt.

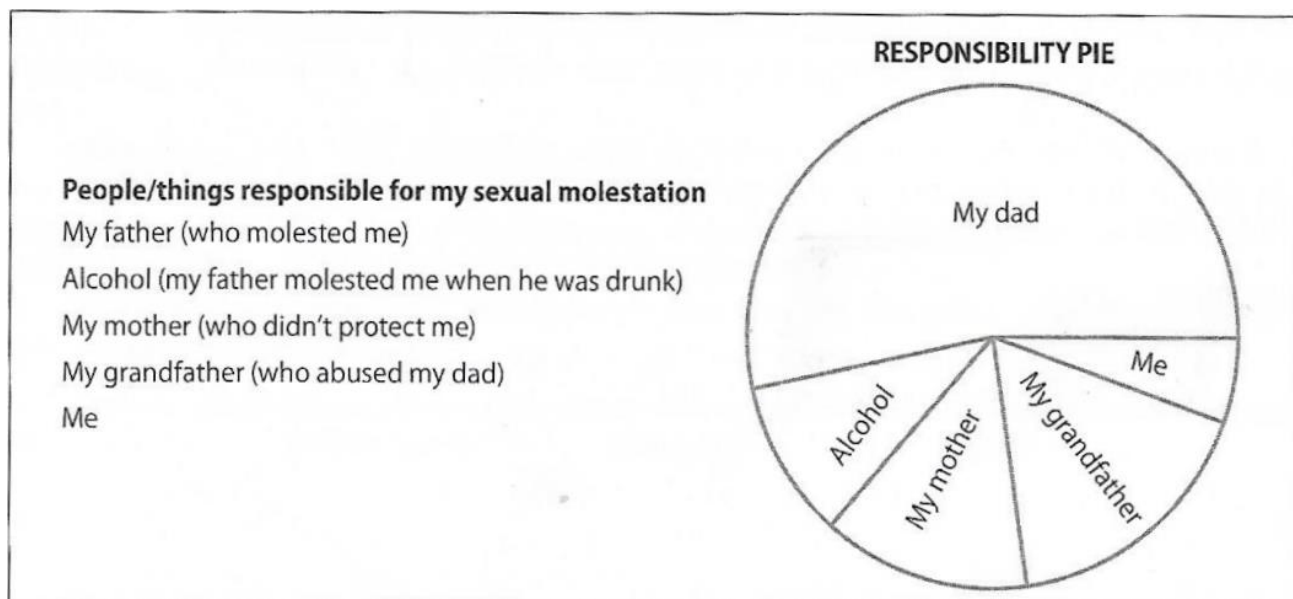


FIGURE 15.3. Marissa's responsibility pie

Vic completed a responsibility pie (Figure 15.4) when he felt guilty about yelling at his wife, Judy, after she complained to him about overdue credit card bills. This was a serious violation of his promise to Judy that he would not attack her in anger. Although he did not hit or shove Judy, he physically intimidated her by standing close to her and shouting in her face.

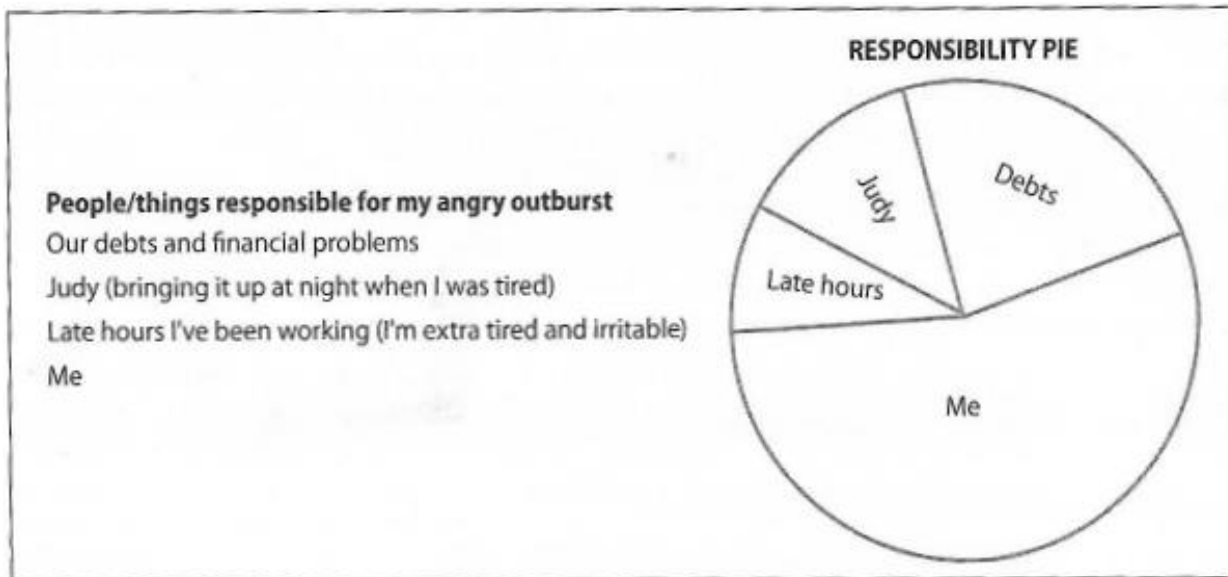


FIGURE 15.4. Vic's responsibility pie

As you see, Vic decided that he was primarily responsible for his angry outburst. Although Judy, their debts, and his late work hours contributed to his anger, he felt that he could have handled the situation in a less intimidating fashion. Therefore, Vic decided that he should make reparations to Judy for what he had done. This incident also confirmed for Vic that he needed to change his anger responses.

As the examples of Marissa and Vic illustrate, responsibility pies can help you evaluate the level of responsibility of each of the contributors to a situation. A responsibility pie is not designed to always reduce guilt. Sometimes it is healthy to feel guilty about what we have done. In these instances, we can take steps to make amends for harm we have done to others. We can also come up with a plan to help ourselves respond in ways that are closer to our values. People who often feel guilty over small things find that responsibility pies help them recognize that they are not 100% responsible for the undesirable things that happen. People who feel guilt or shame when they have caused harm to others can use a responsibility pie to evaluate their role in any damage that was done before making reparations.

Exercise: Using a Responsibility Pie for Guilt or Shame

<https://www.guilford.com/add/greenberger/MOM2-worksheet-15-7.pdf>