

Over-responsible people:

Recently I wrote about the various levels of responsibility one can assume in a family. One can be self-responsible, over-responsible, or under-responsible. I discussed how under-responsible people expect to be indulged and that others will do things for them.

Over-responsible people do too much for others and try to solve other people's problems. The self-responsible person takes responsibility for their own emotional life without blaming others and comfortably carries the responsibilities associated with family life. These categories of responsibility apply to children, teenagers, and adults.

Responsibility is a key issues for every family and family member. Most families have quarrels about the levels of responsibility different members should assume. Most couples have to struggle to find a happy medium regarding responsibility. Today I want to look at people who are over-responsible.

If someone is an over-responsible person it is quite likely that this developed from childhood. If it is quite extreme then it probably developed in response to someone else in their original family being under-responsible. By that I mean that one of your parents was possibly under-responsible due to something like alcoholism, illness, or depression. When a [parent is unable to fully function very often a child steps in to carry that responsibility for them by, for example, minding their brothers and sisters, taking over the cooking, or taking care of the parent. Typically, the child who grows up as over-responsible in this type of family situation will learn some fairly typical things about themselves. If we use the example of a daughter of an alcoholic mother, for instance, these are a number of things that the girl learns. These are, for example:

1. Doing is valued over being – she as a growing child may feel important to her mother only insofar as she carries responsibilities *for* her mother or father. She learns quickly to help out.
2. At times the mother may be so dysfunctional that it seems clear to the child that unless she takes over, her world might collapse. The tremendous anxiety and fear experienced by the child can be relieved only by taking control and over-functioning in whatever way she can.
3. The girl may come to believe that she is completely responsible for her mother's happiness and well-being. She may find herself feeling guilty or inadequate whenever her mother is unhappy – as if she is in some way responsible.
4. The intense focus by the child on the mother may result in the child being unable to make any demands of her own for simple things like comfort or care. The child may tend to become a "little adult" who simply assumes and accepts that her mother will not be able to care for her needs.

You can sense the inherent tragedy in this scenario. Not only does the child grow up with beliefs about having to take care of others, but she also grows up with certain beliefs about her self which become problematic in later life. Let me explain:

Firstly, she will have to deny their own needs. The need to be taken care of will be denied because the child's self-worth will have become dependent on taking care of others. The child will grow into an adult who automatically disqualifies his or her needs in order to take care of others. It is the only way she can be.

Secondly, a sense of being the only one who can understand, take care of, or solve other people's problems may develop. As an adult she may automatically start trying to solve other people's everyday problems as if she is the 'special one' that is required to do this.

Thirdly, a chronic sense of being inadequate, worthless, and not good enough can lie beneath the surface. There can be a chronic experience of burnout for over-responsible people – they might never feel they have done enough or been responsible enough. They are unable to focus on or take care of themselves; they always need to be looking after someone else because this is how they feel adequate and relevant in life. However, since one can never accomplish this perfectly enough the over-responsible person is plagued by self-doubt or guilt.

Women in family life often fall into the role of being over-responsible, although it is not at all uncommon to find men who also carry this role. The line between genuine caring of others and over-responsibility becomes blurred and confused for over-responsible people and they will argue that they have no-choice but to care for others. They tend to be unaware that this has become a reflex rather than a choice. In most instances over-responsibility is fine and not problematic, it is when it becomes entrenched and obsessive that it can create serious difficulties in family life. So look at yourself. Are you worn out from looking after people? Do you never feel you have done enough? Do you feel that if you did not carry the burden of responsibility then your world, or the world of those you care for, would collapse? If these are true for you then take a look in the mirror and think about how you take care of yourself. Maybe it is time for a change.