

# Chapter **1**

# **EXERCISING SELF- RESPONSIBILITY**



# INTRODUCTION

**P**RESENTED IN this first chapter is one of the most important concepts in this workbook - the concept of self-responsibility. It is also one of the most difficult to accept because it is often confused with "selfishness." To exercise self-responsibility means to act in your own best interest. This may sometimes feel as though you are acting selfishly.

"Selfish" is a highly charged word in our society, as we are taught from childhood, "Don't be selfish," "Think of others first," "It's better to give than to receive," etc. Selfishness implies that you do what you want to without regard for anyone else's feelings.

It is true that to act consistently in your best interest may occasionally result in some distress for those you care about. But think about it this way. If you don't take care of yourself physically and mentally, if you become sick or severely depressed, how can you go on taking care of someone else? Instead, someone else will have to take care of you until you can function again in health and happiness. It is usually the case that when you are acting in your best interest to preserve your physical and psychological well-being, you are in a much better position to take care of those you love.

## **GOAL**

We want you to be able to exercise self-responsibility in the course of your everyday life. In this chapter, you will take your first steps toward this goal. Given a scenario of an individual faced with a conflict and a description of his or her course of action, you'll be asked to determine if that individual is exercising self-responsibility.

# DEFINITION

**Self-responsibility** — When you:

1. act in your own best interest, having considered:
  - a. Your wants and goals;
  - b. The long-term and short-term results of your actions; and,
  - c. The possible effects of your actions on those you care about.
2. communicate your intentions and feelings; and,
3. do not blame others or hold them responsible for your behavior, emotions, or feelings.

# ELABORATION

The concept of self-responsibility assumes that you are the world's authority on yourself and that you know better than anyone else what you want. Therefore, you are the only person who can make you happy. This means you must act in your own best interest. It also means that since you are the expert, you can't really hold someone else responsible for your behavior. Following is a more detailed explanation of each point in the definition.

## 1. Acting in Your Own Best Interest

Since you know more than anyone else about yourself, you are in the best position for yourself to achieve satisfaction and experience happiness. In order to act in your own best interest, you consider your desires and goals and the possible results of your actions. The more information you have about yourself, the situation, and the possible results for you and those you care for, the more responsibly you can choose your actions.

### a. Knowing Your Wants and Goals

To decide what's best for your happiness, you need to know what you want. It's far more difficult to do what's best for yourself if you don't know what you want. If you are fully aware of your feelings, wants, and goals, you'll be prepared to make decisions affecting your happiness. We'll discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter Two – Exploring Scope of Feelings.

### b. Considering the Long-term and Short-Term Results of Your Actions

Some individuals get the mistaken impression that exercising self-responsibility means doing whatever you want whenever you feel like it. For instance, if you work, you might decide you just don't feel like going in to work one day, or you don't like the project you're on, or you hate wearing a suit or a dress. It may or may not be in your best interest to skip work, stop work on the project, or wear jeans to the office. If you enjoy your work and your job is necessary to maintain a standard of living that you desire, it would not be in your best interest to jeopardize your job. If you do not basically enjoy your work, even if it is necessary to maintain your current standard of living, then it might be in your best interest to satisfy yourself by trying to change what

you don't like and look for another alternative that better meets both your short-term and long-term needs.

In making sensible decisions about what is and isn't in your best interest, you need to consider the long-term and short-term effects of your actions. If the immediate effect is pleasurable, but disruptive in the long run, that may affect your decision. It depends on what is important to you. It is critical that you identify what you really want and need and be prepared to do what is necessary to get what you want.

In the past, some therapists recommended that individuals focus on long-term goals. Now many therapists recommend focusing on the short-term goals only. Neither of these extremes is likely to help you achieve happiness. Your best interest will be served best by considering both the long-term and short-term results in the light of what is most important to you.

### **c. Considering the Possible Effects of Your Actions on Those You Care About**

It is in this aspect that self-responsibility is most often confused with selfishness. The exercise of self-responsibility does require that you do what's best for yourself, but it does NOT require that you ignore the feelings and desires of others. You need to consider the feelings of others for two reasons.

One reason is that in making any kind of important decision, you need to consider all of the facts and issues relevant to the decision. The way your partner feels is one of those issues. The more information you have about his or her feelings, the more likely you are to make a sensible and self-responsible decision.

The second reason to consider those you care about is that doing or saying somethings that results in the people you love feeling hurt also hurts you and makes you unhappy. Making yourself unhappy is undesirable, and so is doing things that harm someone you love. It is true, though, that on some occasions you will find that in order to act in your own best interest, someone you love will be hurt to some degree.

## **2. Active and Passive Exercise of Self-Responsibility**

Self-responsibility can be exercised actively or passively. Often you will be taking some sort of action to experience happiness or achieve satisfaction. Sometimes, though, you'll just be letting things happen because you have decided they are pleasing to you. For example, if a man carries his partner off to the bedroom after announcing that he's going to make love to her, she can take no action and go along with it because she's decided that she likes what's happening. If, on the other hand, she does not want to make love and takes no action for fear of hurting his feelings, she is not exercising self-responsibility.

## **3. Communicating Your Intentions and Feelings**

Too often the absence of communication results in defensiveness, misunderstanding, and hurt feelings. Because of this, it is essential that whatever you decide to "do," you communicate your intentions to your partner and others you care about. If you are open about your feelings and intentions, your partner is much better prepared to deal with your actions and is less likely to feel hurt by them.

#### **4. Not Blaming Others or Holding Them Responsible for Your Behavior**

When you hold others responsible for your happiness, you're hoping they will guess right about your wants and goals. When they fail to guess correctly and unhappiness results, you may make assumptions about their motives. For example, a man may feel sexually aroused and make subtle advances toward his partner. If she doesn't catch on, he may assume that she doesn't care about his needs or that she's rejecting his advances. Based on these assumptions, he'll probably blame her for his sexual frustration. You can see that this is not going to lead to anything constructive. In reality, his partner may not have noticed his advances.

The fact is that people usually do the best they can with what they know. They cannot accurately read the feelings and thoughts of others. It is inevitable that situations like the one described above will occur, but blame is inappropriate between partners. It is assumed that if either of you could have done better, you would have. The following is a good analogy of this.

Suppose your partner steps on your foot inadvertently. You would, of course, assume that your partner was unaware of hurting you. You would let him or her know and you would assume that he or she would move the offending foot – unless the other leg was broken. In the same way, you may feel hurt because something is distracting or upsetting to him or her or because he or she is operating without important information from you. You will probably find yourself much happier if, when you feel wounded by your partner, you assume the hurt was unintentional and brought about by a lack of knowledge. You can minimize the chances of being hurt by keeping your loved ones well-informed. Don't expect them to guess. Tell them how you feel and what you want.

Of course, you could be mistaken about what you want and act in some way that does not increase your happiness. But your chances of being right about yourself are much greater than anyone else's.

If you're not happy or if you're dissatisfied with the results of your behavior, no one else is to blame. This does not mean you should blame yourself. Whether it's directed at yourself or at someone else, blame is not constructive. What self-responsibility does mean is that you are responsible for acting to make yourself happier. Under normal circumstances (nonviolent), no one can really force you to do anything. So if your behavior or overall happiness is displeasing to you, you must take responsibility for that and see that it does not continue.

Your best chance for experiencing happiness and self-fulfillment is to rely on your self-knowledge and act in your best interest. Determine what your desires and goals are and take the responsibility for achieving them. Don't rely on others to help you out and avoid sacrificing your wants to make someone else happy, since the end product of such sacrifice is usually resentment. Just as you are responsible for your happiness, others are responsible for their own happiness.

## **The Role of Value Systems**

We realize that a normal part of a person's psychological makeup is his or her value system. The development of self-responsibility includes being responsible for doing what you feel comfortable doing.

Your value system can have a great deal to do with what you will be comfortable with. In a given situation, you may decide to do something differently from someone else because of differences in your value systems; and still, both of you may be acting responsibly for yourselves.

For example, one individual may be having difficulties in his marriage and may have given what he believes to be as much as he can to the relationship. For this person, acting in his own best interest may lead to a decision to terminate the relationship. Another individual may be willing to give more to the relationship either because he has a lower pain threshold, or because he has a value system which motivates him to make more of a commitment to the relationship.

The critical thing here is that each of us must evaluate our feelings and determine what we believe is best for us over both the short-term and long-term. Only by considering our own feelings, not what someone else believes, will we be able to take responsibility for ourselves. In the examples that follow, we will present what one person decided or considered. For that person, what was decided or considered will be responsible alternatives. As you read the examples, you may conclude that you would never consider doing what the person in the example did. We understand that this could be the case.

In any of the examples, we are not suggesting what should be decided. Rather, we are suggesting what might be considered. We are also proposing a rationale for why that consideration is a responsible one for the person in the example. This book does not attempt to portray in its examples any single value system. It does attempt to encourage people who are in conflict or who are having communication problems to consider both long-term and short-term effects of their behavior in the light of their own value system.

# EXAMPLES

**T**HIS SECTION contains five examples. For each, a scenario will be presented describing a couple in a conflict situation. Following the scenario, two courses of action will be described. In each, one partner's reaction to the situation will be detailed. Course of Action A, described on the left, will show the individual not exercising self-responsibility. The same individual will exercise self-responsibility in Course of Action B on the right. Beneath each course of action is a commentary explaining how the individual is or is not exercising self-responsibility. We suggest that you read the scenario and then compare the courses of action. Read the commentaries only if you want to or if you need help understanding how the individual is or is not exercising self-responsibility. Study only as many examples as you need to be able to identify when an individual is exercising self-responsibility.

**NOTE:**

We would like to point out that, ideally, you need to evaluate your own behavior and not anyone else's. We are evaluating other individuals in the examples and practice items in this chapter in order to illustrate and teach the concept of self-responsibility. Outside of these materials, we would like to discourage judgment of other people's behavior. We suggest that you use your own actions as examples.



# EXAMPLE 1

## Scenario

Art is a very punctual person, but Lisa is chronically late. Whenever they try to go somewhere together, there is a conflict of wants. He wants to be on time. She is not nearly as concerned about punctuality.

### Course of Action A

Art usually tries to hurry Lisa, but this only irritates her. He gets more and more frustrated as time goes on, and they often end up in an argument that causes them to be even later. The evening is often unpleasant.

#### COMMENTARY

Art is not exercising self-responsibility.

- Art is not acting in his best interest because he doesn't consider the short-term effect of trying to hurry Lisa - she gets irritated and they end up arguing.
- He hasn't clearly communicated his desires.
- Art is holding Lisa responsible for making him late.

### Course of Action B

Art decides to take some precautions to prevent anxiety. When he feels that punctuality is crucial, he arranges for them to go separately. Other times he accepts being late and is content rather than getting angry. He discusses all this with Lisa and asks if there's any way he can help her be on time for his own sake.

#### COMMENTARY

Art is exercising self-responsibility.

- Art is acting in his best interest by arranging to be on time when it's important to him. He's considering Lisa's feelings by arranging for her transportation as well.
- He communicates his intentions to Lisa.
- He stops blaming her for their being late.

# EXAMPLE 2

## Chapter 1 Scenario

Tom and Martha have been together for about ten years. Lately, Tom has been under a lot of stress from his job and their sex life has suffered. Tom is preoccupied much of the time and often depressed. First he began to lose his erection during sex. Now he has stopped approaching Martha sexually altogether.

### Course of Action A

Martha tries everything she can think of to interest him in sex. She buys special lingerie and arranges candlelight dinners. Nothing seems to help, and she feels hurt and frustrated. She's convinced that Tom is either seeing someone else or that he no longer finds her sexually attractive. She blames him for her frustration and begins pressuring him to prove that he still loves her.

### COMMENTARY

Martha is not exercising self-responsibility.

- Martha is not acting in her best interest because she has not considered the long-term result of pressuring Tom to prove himself. She has not really considered his feelings.
- She has not communicated her needs very well before taking action.
- She blames Tom for her frustration and holds him responsible for making her feel better.

### Course of Action B

Martha discusses her feelings and fears with Tom and asks for feedback. She recognizes that her sexual frustration is a product of not having any sexual activity for a significant period of time. Tom tells her that he is having problems in other areas, and is not rejecting her personally. She asks if there is any way for her to help. In the meantime, to determine what is in her best interest, she considers the alternatives for relieving her sexual tensions: trying to get Tom more interested, distracting herself with cold showers, finding a lover, masturbating, etc.

### COMMENTARY

Martha is exercising self-responsibility.

- Martha is acting in her best interest because she has taken both the short-term and the long-term results into account before acting. She asked Tom to discuss his feelings and has considered them carefully. Her actions will probably result in her getting some degree of sexual satisfaction without Tom's help.
- She communicates her desires to Tom and tells him how she plans to handle the situation.
- She stops blaming Tom for her frustration and assumes responsibility for taking care of it herself.

# EXAMPLE 3

## Scenario

Ellen and Donna are a same sex, married couple in their early thirties and have been together for about ten years. They have two children. Ellen is a housewife with no outside job. Donna is a firefighter / medic. At this point in her career Donna is concentrating on moving up the ladder in the department. Consequently, Donna trains heavily and works frequent overtime shifts. Donna socializes with other firefighters while off duty. Often, Ellen is not included in the social engagements. More and more Ellen is feeling the pressure of being solely responsible for the children and the house. Her own desire for social interaction is not being met.

## Course of Action A

Ellen decides that she must sacrifice her needs at this point so Donna can further her career. Ellen immerses herself in the tasks of child-rearing and taking care of the house. Ellen attempts to find things to substitute for her desire to socialize. She pledges her support to Donna but becomes resentful when Donna doesn't seem to appreciate it. Donna is rarely home, but when she is, Ellen finds it difficult to interact with Donna pleasantly because she resents Donna for not fulfilling her needs.

## COMMENTARY

Ellen is not exercising self-responsibility.

- Ellen is not acting in her best interest. Instead, she is committing herself to acting in Donna's and her children's best interests. She's ignoring the short-term frustration and unhappiness that this is causing her.
- She has not clearly communicated her desires or intentions to Donna. In this case, Ellen's expecting Donna to know how much she's sacrificing for her.
- She's blaming him for not appreciating her and for not fulfilling her desires.

## Course of Action B

Ellen realizes that Donna is pursuing a goal that is very important to her, but at the same time Ellen is determined to fulfill her own wants. Ellen wants to socialize and interact with friends so when invited to parties, Ellen accepts with or without Donna. Ellen leaves the children with a babysitter more often so she can get away from the house. Ellen discusses her plans with Donna and tells her that she is no longer going to attend to all the household business, and if Donna doesn't want to take care of it, she intends to hire an accountant or business manager. At the same time, Ellen is examining the relationship she has with Donna to determine whether it is in her best interest for them to stay together.

## COMMENTARY

Ellen is exercising self-responsibility.

- Ellen is acting in her best interest because she is considering both the long-term and short-term results or her actions.
- She communicates her feelings and plans to Donna.
- She stops blaming Donna for her unhappiness and assumes responsibility for making herself happier.

# EXAMPLE 4

## Scenario

Fred and Mary have recently bought the dream house for which they've been planning and saving for five years. From the time they moved in (February) until September, they spent every weekend working together on the house and the yard. Now that football season has started, Fred has stopped working on the house and spends every weekend watching football on TV. Mary is getting irritated and frustrated at the state of the yard, but Fred just isn't as interested in doing yard work as he once was.

### Course of Action A

Mary begins to prod Fred more and more about his responsibilities to the house. The more she prods and the less response she gets, the angrier she becomes. She accuses him of not living up to his responsibilities and of jeopardizing their investment. In addition, she is wearing herself out trying to do all the housework, yardwork, and make improvements on the home as well.

### COMMENTARY

Mary is not exercising self-responsibility.

- She is not acting in her best interest because she hasn't carefully considered the short-term results of her actions - she is exhausted and frustrated. In addition, she has not considered Fred's feelings. She doesn't even know what they are.
- Rather than communicating her desires and intentions clearly, she nags Fred about his responsibilities.
- She is blaming Fred for her dissatisfaction and holding him responsible for "making things right."

### Course of Action B

Mary expresses her concerns to Fred, and he tells her that right now his primary interest on weekends is watching football. She accepts the problem as her own and starts figuring out ways that she can get housework, yardwork, and home improvements done without exhausting herself, such as hiring help. She tells Fred that she's going to try to get as much done as possible and accept what she can't achieve.

### COMMENTARY

Mary is exercising self-responsibility.

- She is acting in her best interest because she has considered more carefully the long- and short- term results of her actions. She has taken Fred's feelings into account and has made her choice of action based on all this information.
- She expresses her desires more clearly and tells Fred what she's going to do.
- She stops blaming Fred and accepts the problem as her own. She assumes responsibility for taking care of it herself.

# EXAMPLE 5

## Scenario

Bob wants to fly to Utah to hunt deer for five days with some friends. During his trip, his and Judy's anniversary will occur, and Judy is very anxious that he be home to celebrate. He suggests that she come on the hunting trip, but she is not interested in hunting or camping. She tells Bob it is really very important to her that they celebrate their anniversary together. He explains that the hunting trip is important to him because it's the only one planned for the year.

## Course of Action A

Bob decides that he will go on the hunting trip and celebrate their anniversary when he returns. While on the trip, Bob begins to feel guilty about disappointing Judy. Thinking about how upset she might be when he returns eventually ruins the expedition for him. He goes home feeling resentful toward her for taking the enjoyment out of the week.

## COMMENTARY

Bob is not exercising self-responsibility.

- Bob is not acting in his best interest because he did not take into account the long-term result of his action. i.e. that he would feel guilty about going.
- He doesn't communicate to Judy his desire to celebrate when he gets back.
- Bob then blames Judy for his not enjoying himself.

## Course of Action B

Bob decides to go on the hunting trip even though he knows Judy will be very disappointed. He tells her that he will be glad to have a special celebration when he comes back because their anniversary is important to him, too. Knowing that Judy is still rather upset about the trip, he goes and has a good time. When he returns, he makes the offer again of a late, but special, celebration.

## COMMENTARY

Bob is exercising self-responsibility.

- Bob is acting in his best interest because he does consider Judy's desires, and he does think about the long-term results before making his decision. He tries to satisfy his desires as well as hers.
- Bob tells Judy about his plans and his (desire to celebrate when he returns.
- Bob then has a good time and does not blame Judy for her feelings.

# PRACTICE

**T**HIS SECTION presents four scenarios. Following each is a description of the course of action taken by one of the individuals involved. You are to determine if, in your opinion, the individual is exercising self-responsibility. Once you have made your choice and written YES or NO in the blank provided, you are to state your reasons for making that choice. In other words, if you said YES, tell why you think the individual is exercising self-responsibility. If you said NO, tell why the individual is not exercising self-responsibility. Your remarks need not be lengthy or detailed.

After completing each practice scenario, study the feedback on the following page before going to the next item. Your YES/NO response is correct if it matches the response given in the feedback. However, your explanation may be a little different. If, after doing the first two, you feel you are doing well, skip to Item 5, and then go on to the next chapter. If you have any trouble with the practice, go back and review the definition, the elaboration, and the examples.

Item 5 is a bit different, and you'll find directions about how to do it when you get to it.

# PRACTICE 1

## Scenario

Ralph invites Emily to a baseball game one Saturday afternoon. Having never been to a baseball game at a stadium, Emily doesn't know if she would enjoy it or not. She decides to go and find out.

## Course of Action

While at the game, Emily decides she is bored and uncomfortable, and she wishes she hadn't come. She sits through the game feeling very frustrated because she wants to go home and the game seems endless. By the end of the game she is angry and resentful that Ralph didn't sense she wasn't enjoying herself. She blames him for her wasting her afternoon.

Is Emily exercising self-responsibility? Yes/No

How is Emily exercising / **not** exercising self-responsibility?

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Did you remember to write your answer? If not, we'd like to emphasize again how important it is that you do. Not only will it help you focus your attention on what you're learning but getting it down on paper will help you evaluate it more objectively. If you don't want to write in the book, write on scratch paper. Also, you don't have to write as though you were writing for an English composition class. Just get your ideas and answers down in a way you are most comfortable with.

# FEEDBACK 1

Is Emily exercising self-responsibility? NO

How is Emily not exercising self-responsibility?

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- Emily is not acting in her best interest because she isn't considering either the short-term or long-term results of getting angry. In addition, she's not really thinking about what she wants, which is to go home.
- Emily hasn't communicated her desires to Ralph and is expecting him to know them anyway.
- Emily is blaming Ralph for her discomfort and for not paying attention to her desires.



# PRACTICE 2

## Scenario

Grace has been married for 25 years and, for the most part, the union has been a disaster in her eyes. She gave up a modest career to be married and have a family. The last of her children moved out several years ago, and since then Grace's dissatisfaction with her marriage has steadily increased.

## Course of Action

Grace realizes that although her 25-year marriage may have been a mistake, it was her choice to get married and to stay married for 25 years. Grace recognizes that people and situations change over the course of time. She begins to examine her present desires and goals to discover what changes need to be made for her to become happier. She talks with her husband about her feelings and asks for his help in finding a solution.

Is Grace exercising self-responsibility? Yes/No

How is Grace exercising / **not** exercising self-responsibility?

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# FEEDBACK 2

Is Grace exercising self-responsibility? Yes

How is Grace exercising / not exercising self-responsibility?

- Grace is possibly feeling vulnerable in admitting that she may have married for the wrong reasons a quarter century earlier.
- She is acting in her best interest by carefully examining what she wants, so she can become happier now and in the long run. She's considering her husband's feelings by asking for his input.
- She communicates her feelings to him.
- She does not blame him for her present situation or her past unhappiness.

# PRACTICE 3

## Scenario

Robert has just been informed that a high school girl friend has moved to his city, and he decides that he would like to see her. Nancy is extremely jealous and tells Robert she would rather he didn't make the visit.

## Course of Action

Robert decides that he would still like to see his former girlfriend. He explains to Nancy that, while he loves her, he still has some feelings for his friend, and he's curious as to what she's been up to for the last six years. He tells Nancy that he can understand her concern and invites her to come along with him.

Is Robert exercising self-responsibility? Yes/No

How is Robert exercising / **not** exercising self-responsibility?

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# FEEDBACK 3

Is Robert exercising self-responsibility? Yes

How is Robert exercising/not exercising self-responsibility?

- He is acting in his best interest because he has considered his wants, i.e., visiting his friend, the long-term and short-term effects of his action, and the effects of his action on his relationship with Nancy.
- He has communicated his intentions and feelings to Nancy.
- He hasn't blamed Nancy for being jealous. In the best interest of his relationship with Nancy, he has suggested that she be included in the experience.

# PRACTICE 4

## Scenario

Barbara and Henry have received an invitation to a party given by a friend of Barbara's. Henry doesn't know Barbara's friend or anybody who will be at the party and is reluctant to go. Barbara is very eager to attend, but is uncomfortable about going by herself, so she tries very hard to persuade Henry to go.

## Course of Action

Henry decides that he feels very strongly about not going to the party and tells Barbara so. He also tells her he doesn't mind if she goes by herself. She is very aggravated with him and goes to the party without saying good-bye. Henry feels sorry that he had to disappoint her, but spends an enjoyable evening alone.

Is Henry exercising self-responsibility? Yes/No

How is Henry exercising / **not** exercising self-responsibility?

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# FEEDBACK 4

Is Henry exercising self-responsibility? YES

How is Henry exercising/not exercising self-responsibility?

- He is acting in his best interest because he has considered both the long-term and short-term results of going to the party. He's considered Barbara's desires even though he's decided not to go, he assures her that he doesn't mind her going.
- He communicates his desires and intentions to Barbara
- Henry does not blame Barbara for being aggravated with him and enjoys his evening.



# FEEDBACK 5

To find out how well you responded, use the checklist we've provided below. If you mark any of the questions "No," you may want to go back and add to your description.

- |  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Did you describe Barbara acting in her best interest?<br>(Your answer will be "Yes" if the answers for a, b, and c, are "Yes.") | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| a. Did you describe Barbara examining what her wants and goals are and acting in accordance with them?                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. Did you describe Barbara considering the long-term and short-term results of her actions?                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. Did you describe Barbara considering Henry's feelings?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Did you describe Barbara communicating her feelings and intentions to Henry?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Did you describe Barbara as NOT blaming Henry or holding him responsible?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |