

## CHAPTER 3 AN INVITATION TO BE RESPONSIBLE

*'People talk a lot of nonsense these days about the sanctity of the family' said Liz. 'I don't know why. If they'd seen some of the cases I'd seen, they wouldn't think it so sacred. The things people do to one another in the name of family. Somebody has to speak up against it. For the sake of the outcasts.'*

*(A Natural Curiosity, Margaret Drabble, p. 114)*

In this chapter we will begin to explore issues related to Level 2 of the process of change. By the end of this chapter you will be clearer about what stops or hinders you changing, you will understand the process of shifting responsibility on to other people or other factors, and you will have established your part in the problem. We will also explore the process of censoring and how this acts to blind men to the impact of their behaviour on others. This is important material. To embark on the journey of change without appreciating what may trip you up on the way may mean that good work further down the track is undermined.

### Whose Problem is it Anyway?

One of the difficulties men I have worked with talk about is clarifying what issues are their responsibility and what issues belong to others. 'When men first present their story to me they often blame others, implying that the other person caused their self-righteous anger or that they wouldn't be abusive if it wasn't for something the other person did. You may find it easier to shift responsibility onto others than face your own part in it. It takes a strong man to stand up and admit that things are not what they should be.

Understanding what drives self-righteous anger is like putting together a jigsaw. There will be the pieces that obviously fit and there will be the pieces that do not fit easily until other pieces are in place. By the end of this book you will be clear about which pieces fit where.

You may be unclear about the balance between how much of the issue is your problem and how much belongs to someone else. Once destructive patterns of behaviour begin, everyone is affected. Actions impact in all sorts of ways and ripple outwards like a stone thrown into the middle of a pond.

*Malcolm came to one of my groups. He was a man in his mid-fifties, in his second marriage, and had recently been made redundant. He was not physically violent when he got into his self-righteous anger but he put his wife down verbally and emotionally. He insisted that he wasn't really that bad and that his was a mild problem compared to the other men in the group. He also insisted we know how much of his problem was to do with his wife's lack of concern for him, her emotional*

*distance, and her unwillingness to talk about important things. Malcolm was inviting us to focus on how terrible his wife was instead of hearing what he was doing.*

*I met with Malcolm's wife a couple of weeks later. She said that the more Malcolm hounded her to fully inform him of what she was doing, who she was seeing and to spend time with him, the more she felt hemmed in. Mary had been living alone for six years when they met and had developed a high degree of independence. The more Malcolm tried to force Mary to be close to him, the more distant she became. And the more Mary became distant, the more Malcolm tried to force Mary to be close.*

*A pattern had emerged whereby each person's behaviour was impacting on the other. Both were afraid of failing the relationship game again, as they put it. Each was responsible for their part in the puzzle. Malcolm worked out that, although he was fearful of the relationship ending, he did not have the right to be verbally and emotionally abusive to Mary. If he continued to make that choice separation was probably the most sensible option. In counselling, Malcolm was able to see how this pattern of behaviour was quickly destroying his closeness with Mary; the very thing he did not want to happen. While there were issues for Mary to resolve, she was not in a position to act differently until Malcolm took charge of his own behaviour and learnt to act respectfully towards her.*

One way to begin working out differences is to make a list of justifications for problem behaviours — things you say to others or yourself. If people have suggested you change an aspect of your behaviour or thinking, think about the things you have said to them or yourself about why you shouldn't change.

### **A Word about Censoring**

When a person does something they know deep down is not okay, it is normal to find reasons to justify what happened. To some extent all of us will censor out certain information if it does not fit with our view of the world. It is difficult to be brutally honest because for years you may have been hiding what has really been going on from yourself. You could read through this book and find justifications for what is happening to let yourself off the hook. If you choose to censor your story as you work through this book, what will be the impact on yourself, your partner, your family and those wider relationships?

Think about a scale of zero to ten. Zero is being totally dishonest while ten is being totally honest. Where would you put yourself on that scale? Some of the feelings that come up when you choose to be 100 percent honest are pretty hard to handle — pain, hurt, shame and guilt. How will you handle these feelings? Will you and others feel better if you give it your full effort or if you put in less than 100 percent?

Many men tell me that while it is a challenge to be totally honest — and for many this is a new thing — doing so means they are open for the first time to hearing what others may have been telling them for years.

### **Questions to Ponder**

- What is going to keep my level of honesty really high as I work through this book?
- What can I do to keep my honesty level at 100 percent?

- What arguments could I use to persuade myself to keep being honest as I work through this process of change?

### *Exercise*

- ✍ Make a list of the justifications or explanations that you have used in the past to shift responsibility or downplay the seriousness or impact of your abuse on others. I've made a start. You continue.

If you were different then I wouldn't get abusive.

I get angry because of having to put up with you.

You don't seem to care about me.

It's my culture.

I learnt from my family.

We talked earlier in this book about how difficult it is to face up and admit to behaviours that hurt or upset others, so it is fairly natural for you to tell only part of the story or your version of the story. There are four basic things you may do to shift responsibility away from yourself — deny the existence of a problem and/or the extent of the abuse, deny the significance of the problem, deny responsibility for the problem, and deny the likelihood of abuse happening again.

Now compare what you have written for the previous exercise with what other men have said:

#### *Denial of the existence of a problem and/or the extent of the abuse.*

- I don't have a problem.
- There are many people much worse off than us.
- She's got it good compared to others; at least I don't hit her.
- I might have hit her but **it** was only a tap; **it** couldn't have hurt her.
- She's the one with the problem. If only she didn't bitch on at me so much.
- What, me be violent? I'm not the sort of bloke who is violent to women.
- She's the one with the problem; she should be reading this book.
- I can't remember anything of that night.
- There are always two sides to any problem.

#### *Denial of the significance of the problem.*

- I didn't hurt her
- We went to bed and made love just afterwards.
- We argue a lot but that's a normal part of all relationships.

- I just snapped; **it** was nothing really.
- We've got a communication problem.
- You're blowing this out of all proportion.
- I can control myself.

*Denial of responsibility for the problem.*

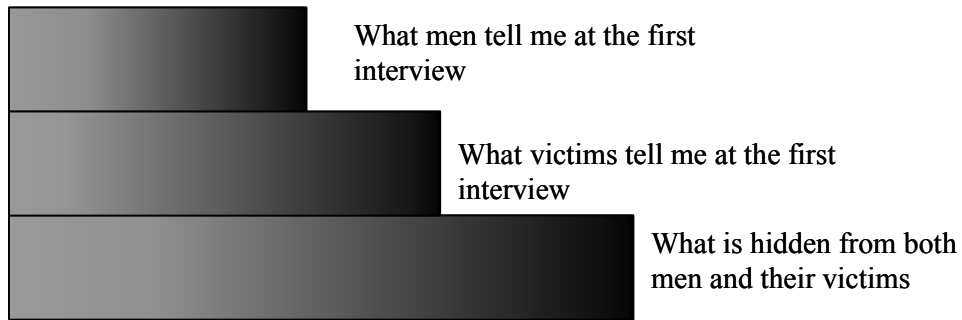
- We were both out of it on drugs.
- Your family are the problem, always interfering.
- She asked for it.
- You needed it.
- You shouldn't have called me that.
- She knows I don't like being talked back to.
- If it wasn't for her friends we would be real happy.
- I've been under a lot of stress lately.
- I inherited my dad's temper.
- I was born like this.
- If she wasn't so verbal I wouldn't need to hit her
- I was drunk/drugged out at the time.
- I don't know what happened.

*Denial of the likelihood of abuse happening again.*

- It won't happen again.
- I've learnt my lesson this time.
- I've promised her I'll be different.
- It's all behind me now; I'm looking to the future.
- I've found the Lord.

Because it is difficult and embarrassing to tell all of your story, there can be a tendency to minimise and tell only part of it. Admitting your part of the story is only part of the picture. Hearing what others have to say about the experience helps to make sense of the big picture. Part of your story may even be hidden from yourself and it is only by talking with others about their experience that you can gain a bigger picture of how things really are.

Over the years I have found that men initially find it hard to fully appreciate the big picture. The following diagram shows levels of disclosure at the beginning of the process of change. Men will tend to under-report the level, significance and impact of abusive behaviour on others.



One way to measure your change is to see if the boxes change during the time you work through this book. Let me explain. As you appreciate more the impact of your behaviour on others and their experience of your abuse, then you will report more accurately what is happening. At the same time as you take control of abusive patterns of behaviour, then the level of abusiveness declines. This means that you are more aware of your own behaviour and are able to hear others' perceptions or stories about what is going on.

While I acknowledge the hope or the desire to never abuse again, I am acutely aware that unless something dramatic changes in a person's beliefs, values and behaviour, abuse is likely to recur. It takes more than good intentions to turn around patterns of behaviour that you may have been engaging in for years.

**The Blocks-to-Change Wall**

When you consider changing old and redundant patterns of behaviour you will come up against blocks — all of the reasons you can come up with that make it hard or even impossible to make real changes. The image of a block wall comes to mind. I am often impressed, firstly, by how easy it is for men to identify the beliefs and ideas that get in the way of acknowledging a problem exists and, secondly, by how these ideas and beliefs interfere with the process of change. It is as if men know these blocks to be true but are reluctant to own them.

<b>Blocks-to-Change Wall</b>			
<i>Resentment</i>	<i>Embarrassment</i>		<i>Feelings</i>
<i>Shame</i>	<i>Good old male pride</i>	<i>Hopelessness I'll never change</i>	
<i>Fear of closeness and intimacy</i>			<i>Fear of the unknown</i>
	<i>Competition</i>	<i>Patterns from the past</i>	

Look at the Blocks-to-Change Wall diagram and see if you can pick out which blocks fit for you.

### *Questions to Ponder*

- Which of these blocks have I used to stop me from taking responsibility for my abusiveness?
- What will I do to avoid shifting responsibility for my behaviour onto someone else?
- What will stop me hearing other people's views of the situation and giving them the same weight as my own?
- What personal blocks do I need to add to the wall?

Resistance to change seems to be universal, and it is perhaps more a matter of how the blocks are dealt with which dictates whether or not you will embark and continue on the change process. Let's explore some of these blocks in more depth.

### **Resentment**

Resentment is a common theme. No one likes being told what to do and the normal reaction is to resist any pressure to change.

Perhaps resentment should be directed more appropriately at the years of conditioning, as well as the pressures and enticements that have encouraged you to remain the same, rather than at the person requesting you to change. Many men blame external situations, events or people for their behaviour. The danger in this view is that, if you do relapse, you will resist taking responsibility for your own behaviour and blame these same situations, events or people.

### **Good Old Male Pride**

It is not easy for men to admit that they make mistakes, haven't measured up or that they are not coping well with problems in their lives. In fact, admitting to a problem requires a great deal of strength because it is contrary to the very essence of male conditioning and the Old Rule Book.

What gets paraded as pride is in essence false pride. False pride gets in the way of men seeking the necessary help for often serious problems. Many men end up doing too little too late. I have observed that men who stand up and admit to themselves what is going on, who make the necessary changes and stick with them, can then truly reclaim their pride. They can stand tall as men.

### **Fear of Closeness and Intimacy**

To be intimate is to be vulnerable. Often when men become close to someone they become afraid of what might possibly happen, particularly if they have been hurt in the past. Men are taught not to be vulnerable so this is not a comfortable feeling to have. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable does permit you to be open to new information about yourself and others. It is an important key to understanding much of how we act towards others.

We also have a fear of intimacy with other men. Because men often see intimacy closely linked to sexuality, we find close trusting relationships with men difficult. This fear of being close to men (homophobia), remains one of the stumbling blocks to men's change. Learning that developing intimate fellowship with other men does not require that you must give up your maleness or become homosexual, is unblocking and liberating for many men.

Homophobia, like other forms of prejudice, feeds on myths and untruths. Most heterosexual men have very distorted ideas about gay people. They are often described as being 'less good, less honest, less fair, less positive, less valuable, less stable, less intellectual, less friendly, less clean, more shallow, more unhealthy than the typical male heterosexual' (*In A Man's World*, Perry Garfinkel, p.165).

When heterosexual men discover that gay men are very similar to themselves and that most information received about homosexuals is wrong, it is the fear of similarity, not difference, that is so frightening. Denying this reality is one way heterosexual men avoid taking a close look at their own sexuality and intimacy.

Homophobia prevents emotional closeness between heterosexual men, and becomes an obstacle to friendships, self-disclosure and touching. The only time touching or intimate disclosure seems to be acceptable is either on the sports field or after having too much to drink. It seems sad that these situations appear to be the only legitimate times that men can have this level of intimacy with each other

## **Embarrassment**

It can be incredibly embarrassing admitting to yourself and others that you are not handling certain situations, especially when you have been told all your life that you should be able to cope with every situation. It is even more difficult to talk about it. Because of a strong belief that what takes place at home is private, men have rarely had to bare their souls about their private behaviour.

Over the past ten years I have witnessed a dramatic change in this phenomenon. More men are now seeking out groups, counsellors and help for problems that they would have ignored or kept to themselves in the past. Initial feelings of embarrassment soon disappear when men recognise that they are not alone in their problems, and that what they are experiencing is shared by many others.

## **Patterns from the Past**

Another block to change concerns our patterns from the past. Patterns of thinking and acting are also known as scripts. They are really messages that each person carries about how the world is and how they should be in it. You would have learnt these values from your family of origin or the family system that you grew up in.

These messages or scripts can have the effect of limiting the choices that you feel you have, with the result that you may turn to old and familiar patterns when difficulties arise. These messages are guides to what you may or may not like to happen. When you adhere to them strictly, you will find yourself stuck with no way out.

*For example, Jack had received a script that said men had to work hard to achieve anything in life. His parents grew up through the depression of the 1930s and instilled these values. Unfortunately, Jack had no way of gauging when to stop and was working 50 to 70 hours a week. In fact too much of Jack's meaning in life related*


*to his work and not the balance of other things in his life. Members of Jack’s family got the rough end of the deal. When he came home he was tired and grumpy, not having much energy to participate in family life. He had become a stranger to his family and a favourite joke was ‘Who are you?’*

*Jack felt guilty at not being around his family more, but he also felt guilty if he slackened off his work pace. He found himself caught in a bind over what was most important.*

*When Jack explored this script, he decided on the following course of action: he limited his work to 45 hours per week, looked closely at how he organised his time and re-engaged with his family. He found that by doing this he was just as productive (much of his extra ten to twenty hours were unproductive because of his tiredness), he had energy for his partner and children, and he was more content with his life. He recognised that he used work as a way of avoiding some of his own anxieties about being a good father. Jack was able to break the family tradition of being an absentee father, like his own father.*

Everyone carries around with them a whole bag of these messages. You will be able to identify your scripts by the language you use to describe them. They often start with ‘I should’ or ‘I must’ or ‘I shouldn’t’ or ‘I must not’.

**Exercise**

 Fill in a chart like the following by making a list of the ‘should’ and ‘must’ messages you carry around, and the impact of these messages from your childhood on how you should act towards others. I have made a start. You carry on.

<b>The Script</b>	<b>Impact on how I act towards others</b>
Others should be on time.	I get angry when others are late.
Men deserve respect.	Demanding and abusive when not respected.
I shouldn’t get angry.	Others know I am angry and get anxious.
I should please everyone.	I am impatient with people’s demands.
I am entitled to peace and quiet when I come home.	Others will be on edge.
I must provide well for my family.	I worry a lot about losing my job.
Men can’t change.	I can’t change my behaviour.

Men have often told me that they vowed and declared they would not be like their fathers. Many finally stood up to their fathers at some time during adolescence, taking back their power. But they took it using violent means, which acted to reinforce that, if nothing else, violence works. They become confused when ten or so years later they act in exactly the same manner as their fathers.

In this way they perpetuate family patterns of violence, acting out earlier scripting. In turn, they pass these patterns on to their own children. Making a break with past patterns, which

may have been in families for generations, is no easy task. It requires a great deal of perseverance and support. We men do not need to be slaves to our past.

### **I'll Never Change**

Many men who have low self-esteem, or who have been told over many years that they are hopeless or useless, can have a feeling of defeat. When a person tries many times to change a behaviour without much success, or has come to believe that they can never change, the change will be blocked.

Hopelessness or defeat becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – the more you may think you cannot do something, the more likely it is that you don't do it. The issue is not that people cannot change but that they haven't the right tools or ideas to see the situation differently. Many men I have met find themselves stuck with beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that they can't see a way out of. Remember, you have probably done more of the same behaviour to solve a problem, but that only made the situation worse. When men are given a new view of the situation, they see that change is possible.

### **Shame**

Shame is not a good motivator for change. When men feel shame they are saying to themselves and others that they are no good, and that it is hopeless to make changes. Changing because you are feeling ashamed often means a reaction to relieve discomfort. Often this can mean that action is not thought through. The best strategies can therefore be overlooked.

I have met many men who feel shame about being born a man and part of the long history of men's violence. If you get stuck with this shame for too long there is a high likelihood that you will begin to find reasons to make your behaviour seem okay.

Guilt is a much healthier emotion to have. When you feel guilty, you know you have done something wrong and need to own up to it. You can be immobilised by shame but guilt allows you to look at what you have done and do something to make sure it doesn't happen again. While shame invites the situation to stay the same, guilt opens the doors for taking responsibility and making change.

### **Competition**

Men are often validated by how successful they are in the workplace or on the sports field. Listen to the conversation at any party and you are likely to hear discussion on work, how well someone is doing, who is in line for promotion, how much money someone is making, which team won, who was the best player, and so on.

Men's conversation very rarely ventures into the realm of personal feelings, fears and vulnerabilities. You may also notice that, although men rarely talk about personal feelings, they do talk about themselves a great deal — their successes, who they know, what they are doing. Sound familiar?

You may also notice a game occurring which I call the one-up/one-down game. It goes like this: one man starts talking about something, only to have another man butt in over the top, usually disagreeing and using a louder voice. The first man waits for an opportunity to regain control of the conversation, and so on. Rather than listening to others and developing discussion, each seems to be preparing their own argument as to why they should be seen to have 'the facts'.

## Fear of the Unknown

It is never comfortable facing the hidden parts of ourselves. There is the fear of what you will discover, whether you will like what you see and whether you will be able to do anything about it anyway. Perhaps it is better buried where it doesn't get in anyone's way. It takes a great deal of courage and strength to face up to this part of yourself and unless you do, you are destined to keep making the same old mistakes.

One of the challenges is whether you will allow fear to stifle your change or whether you will take courage and face it. With fear you can either wait for something that may or may not happen, and so do nothing, or gather your strength to understand and conquer it.

## Feelings

Expressing feelings can be very difficult for men, unless of course we are talking about self-righteous anger. Few men would argue that boys grow up with messages like 'Big boys don't cry', 'Don't be a cry-baby', 'Don't be a girl' and so on. As young boys hear these messages, they may in effect shut down their emotional responses. In time, they are left with few legitimate outlets for expressions of emotion.

## Fear of Being Alone

Facing up to the responsibility for your abusiveness may require you to be apart from your family until you are able to guarantee their safety. It can be scary to realise that love for your family may require you to leave them. Also, stopping your violence and threats may make it safe for your partner to make the decision to leave you, taking the pain of her experiences and memories with her.

You will have now recognised a number of blocks that may get in the way of your journey of change. I would be very surprised if you had none. It would be a shame if these blocks got in the way of you developing a non-abusive lifestyle. Further on in this book I will address this in some detail, as you put into practice your New Rule Book for living. You will need to be creative in overcoming your blocks and I have included some ideas that you may find useful. The following chapters will also help you work through these blocks. Here are some quick pointers to be getting on with:

## Strategies for Overcoming Blocks

<b>Block</b>	<b>Action</b>
<i>Resentment</i>	Work out who or what you resent. What are their intentions towards you?; for example, many men feel resentment towards their partners or the courts. What these other people are really saying is that abusive behaviour needs to stop before more people are hurt. I see this as a caring gesture. How would you come to see it in this way?
<i>Pride</i>	Is it real pride — facing what has happened — or false pride — hiding behind a lie? Be honest with yourself and those around you.
<i>Embarrassment</i>	Accept that we all get embarrassed at times. Laugh it off and accept

	you have made a mistake. Admit you feel embarrassed. What messages encourage you to be embarrassed?
<i>Patterns of the past</i>	Work out how these affect you. Be aware of how these influence your thinking. Examine situations where you react and identify which script or pattern is operating.
<i>I'll never change</i>	Look at the things you have managed to change. Think about what helped you to change. Don't give up.
<i>Competition</i>	Think about your need to win. Can you see a situation where all of you are winners? Explore what would stop you compromising.
<i>Fear of the unknown</i>	What is the worst thing that could happen? Talk to others who know something about changing.
<i>Intimacy</i>	Look at the ways you avoid intimacy. Try talking to someone close to you about your inner thoughts.
<i>Shame</i>	Feel guilty about what you have done but not shameful about yourself. Use your guilt to work out what you will do to make sure you act in a responsible safe way next time.

I invite you to be creative in both finding ways to be aware of the blocks standing in the way of change and of dealing with those blocks. As you move through the change process they will come up from time to time. One cue for recognising blocks is your internal dialogue or what you say to yourself. If you have a rigidity about certain things, then this is one indication of a block working.

### ***Questions to Ponder***

- How will I resist blaming others for my behaviour?
- Am I man enough to take on the challenge of change?
- How will I recognise a block when it threatens to undermine the work I have done in standing up against abusive patterns of behaviour?

## **Summary**

It is good to be aware of your blocks or restraints to change. By now you are well on the way — by admitting your part in the problem, by admitting how you have shifted responsibility onto others for what are your issues, and by acknowledging how your Blocks-to-Change Wall can get in the way of your ability to change. You may notice how this new awareness is helping you to see that the situation has changed already. But it will still remain hard facing up to your abusiveness and making the effort to act in a respectful way to others. Many of these blocks will be revisited as you work through the remaining chapters.

I invite you to read on. Next we explore your family traditions and the culture of masculinity, two things that have a large impact on how men act as adults.