

Playing the Victim - A Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Victimisation is a classic stance in counselling, psychotherapy and well-being. In this paper I will explore the interactions within the psychotherapeutic theatre of acting out this position from a patients perspective in which attention seeking, rejection of help and self justification take a central role in maintaining this unhealthy behaviour leading to backlash from rescuers and creating persecutors from less sympathetic viewers. Be aware we are not talking about real victims of such things as child abuse, crime or social injustice but self inflicted victimhood from mental imbalance.

Introduction

Many patients enter counselling with a perspective on what is wrong with them. Some talk in the first instance of depression or anxiety or both (bipolar) in which they define themselves as a victim of the past. That in the present they are feeling life has been generally unfair to them taking a life-position of not being alright while everyone else is doing better. This can make the client (patient) feel envy of others, spend an inordinate amount of time in social comparison and may lead to destructive jealousy in which they can self sabotage their lives and others. Other clients can take a different position in which they feel they are fine, but it is everyone else, they feel they are superior, and that others are not to be trusted, with thoughts of persecution or being cheated. They too can sabotage themselves through paranoia in which they see everyone as a threat and only they can be trusted, know what they are doing and display perfectionism as a life goal. Of course perfectionism itself can lead to further disappointments, as of course the expectations are impossible to achieve. In both extremes the client takes the stance of victimhood. That they are the ones suffering while everyone else is fine [1,2]. What these clients do not see is that they are often being inauthentic, meaning, that they are not acting out a realistic script for life but one based on attention seeking and psychological game playing [3]. Game playing exists in the stance or method the client uses to maintain their place as victim.

Victimhood

One psychological game is called, Poor Me, in which any help that is offered can be rejected on the grounds that - you do not

understand - I cannot help myself - I have tried that already - , each time the therapist tries to suggest a strategy the client can reject this on the grounds of another psychological game called, Yes, But - here the client can constantly rebut the suggestions of the counsellor or friends and family but staying in the victim position because you cannot help them. Why would anyone want to stay a victim in the first place. One is attention seeking, while the client rejects advice and suggestions they can continue in the victim position and claim they are not help-able. This choice to stay in misery has benefits to the client in that help continues to be offered for quite some time. Playing poor me or yes, but - can have considerable stress on those around the client. Many helpers become discouraged by the constant rejection of what they think is good advice.

Inevitably this can lead to the person trying to rescue the victim, to become frustrated and even angry at the client. This in turn can lead to anger as an expressed emotion and so in the eyes of the client (playing victim) you are now like everyone else and persecuting them. In this instance they can claim to be victim again and so continue to play the psychological games that bring so much attention to them. Another effect of withdrawal of attention by turning to frustration and anger is that the client (victim) can extend the game of Poor Me, to another, No One Cares game, and so talk of suicide and an extra game of, You'll be Sorry, both designed to re-establish the position of victim by forcing the rescuer to return to that position for fear of the consequences and being made to feel responsible for the clients self-harming threats. Why do clients allow themselves to be in the

position of a victim other than attention seeking is, I cannot help myself, and so I must be persecuted for being helpless or useless and the person rescuing reinforces this feeling by continuing to try and help them. So do other parties by playing their part in the psychological game can by definition, discount the clients ability to help themselves out of their emotional turmoil.

Therapeutic Strategy

When dealing with clients who play the victim position bear in mind, they defend that position vigorously, by first a defence mechanism of denial [4] this meaning that they will talk of others being responsible for their feelings of victimhood and that in fact they could feel better tomorrow if they got the right help (using the game of poor me) but cannot find it (yes, but games) and so it is not their fault. This resistance is best dealt with by an educational approach of utilising a white board to demonstrate the positions taken by the victim in the maintaining of their psychological games. That they can clearly visualise the roles that they and others take. That their own behaviour maintains the position of victim through their psychological games and seeking of constant attention. Also when that attention is withdrawn they can become the persecutor of the rescuer or even further into victimhood by forcing the rescuer into the persecution position. Stephen Karpman used a triangle as a useful visual tool to demonstrate clearly the positions [5].

Another approach which has proved useful is a biographical analysis. The client writes a one page biography, first paragraph covering their early years, such as, I was born here, to these parents and this is what happened to me. In the second paragraph writing about their developing years, school, college, early relationships, what happened of significance to them. Finally a short paragraph in the, here and now position and how they are currently feeling emotionally [6]. Using Eric Berne's model of PAC (parent, adult, child model) the therapist can analyse the content in line with Transactional Analysis, an improved therapeutic method derived from Freud's theory of mind [7,8]. This analysis uses the past as remembered by the client to highlight where the victimhood may have originated from and maintained over a long period of time, by childhood strategies for attention that lead to adulthood behaviour that eventually becomes dysfunctional and destructive.

Once the client can clearly see they are playing several psychological games of victimhood they can take the first steps to - step out of the game - and become an authentic person in the present (here and now) and leave the past behaviour that was maladaptive to their present situation. Thus rebuilding can take place in which alternative methods can be adapted to bring happiness and most of all contentment.

Further Comments

Psychological well being can be achieved once the client has accepted they are playing victim and dragging others into their games, by inviting people to rescue them and others to persecute

them, for not being perfect. That their attention seeking is a product of maladaptive psychology in which they may simply need to be appreciated for who they are and not what they think others believe they should be. Moving on the client can be introduced to the concept of self management through self esteem and the idea of a public ME and a private I. The I and Me model supposes that all humans maintain a ME that is our social mask in which we try to present ourselves to the world as a certain type of person.

This social me helps maintain relationships and our social position. The private I on the other hand is our real self or hidden self, that only we know about, our disappointments, our shame, our past secrets, all that would endanger our public self (the social ME) that we carefully hide away from even our closest confidant. In therapy or under trauma the private I can surface as anger, attitudes and even violence in order to defend our social ME. It is not necessary to reveal the private I to be authentic as over time the social ME becomes the person I truly believe I am - except deep down I know it is all a game to maintain my position with others. Playing the victim is as much a social mask as any other. The victim is hiding their private I away from the judgemental world in which it may not be acceptable to that social world or culture. So in therapy the counsellor can introduce the concept of the private I and social ME, but not ask the client to reveal their inner secrets, but be aware that the private I can be a powerful subconscious force behind that social mask.

Summery

In summery the client who arrives for counselling may already have the idea that the therapist can be a form of rescuer and so actually maintain their desire to remain a victim. Therapeutic circles must recognise how easy it is to fall into the clients psychological game and actually collude with the client in maintaining their position through trying to rescue them and end up frustrated and angry at the failure to do so. By stepping out of the games victims play, the therapist has a chance to make real change and help the client to be more authentic with less attention seeking by ruining the lives of their friends and family in the process of continuing a destructive psychological game.

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