

*Who's the*

# Boss?

It's not what happens to you, but rather how you choose to react to what happens to you, says behavioural psychologist Jon Lavelle

LET'S START with a very fundamental, yet telling question: 'Who's in charge of your life?' Seriously... 'How much of *you* do *you* control?'

For example, has anyone you know ever made you feel guilty, ashamed, irritated or angry?

Assuming the answer's 'Yes' then join the club. However, if your answer is 'Yes, every moment of my waking day, and often in my dreams', then it's possible that you might need more than just this article to help you!

Of course it's perfectly normal to feel such human emotions in response to other people's behaviour or their provocative comments. If someone insults you, for example, how else are you expected to feel, other than insulted?

However, my challenge to you is that by reacting in the way that most people do, you're conforming to what other people *want* you to do, and fully *expect* you to do.

- When the dog owner holds a doggy treat high in the air, and the pet runs over excitedly, drooling uncontrollably onto the kitchen floor and feeling a rush of positive emotions... who's in control?
- When your boss tells you that you should be ashamed of the quality of the piece of work that you've just submitted, and you sit there with your head low and eyes averted, shifting uneasily in your seat, and feeling the weight of helplessness and inadequacy pressing down on your shoulders... who's in control?
- When the boy-racer aggressor steams up behind you in the fast-lane of the motorway, flashing his lights and driving on your tail... who's in control?

Aggressive acts and remarks, whether direct or indirect, are almost always used as a technique to control another person or situation.

The comments of others certainly have the potential power to do so, and they can easily put you on the back foot, feeling un-nerved and forced to adopt a defensive position.

Aggressive acts and cutting remarks are pushy behaviours that attempt to dominate the other person, but, and this really, really is the hardest part of this to come to terms with and accept...

***“If you feel ‘guilty’ about something then it’s you who’s making yourself feel guilty”***

***“Reacting in a ‘normal’ way may be the worst thing you can do”***

After all, why wouldn't they expect you to react that way, it's 'perfectly normal' to do so; they've learned this themselves from countless human interactions without you having to tell them.

However, if you react in a 'normal' manner, in the way that they expect, then you've already relinquished a degree of control. You're being led and influenced by someone else, and you may even be potentially falling into their trap... if they're cunning enough to lay such traps?



If you feel 'angry', 'guilty', 'inferior' or whatever other negative emotion about something, then it is *you* who is making *yourself* feel guilty, angry or inferior.

Nobody can do anything to *make* you feel guilty, or to force you to experience any other emotion for that matter, unless *you allow* yourself to feel guilty.

Just examine the words... 'I feel guilty'. It's you who owns your feelings so it's you who's doing the feeling!

To put it another way, you may have done something that you shouldn't have, or let someone down, but 'guilt' is only one of a range of emotions and reactions that you could choose to adopt.

How about choosing to respond with feelings

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of regret, confusion, arrogance, disbelief, curiosity, ambivalence, or just plain 'sorry'?

If you're in charge of your own emotions and reactions then you should have a degree of choice, *surely?*

If you feel intimidated it is because you are allowing yourself to feel intimidated – end of story!

Another person in the same situation, or even yourself on a totally different occasion, might stand their ground, argue back, shrug their shoulders, go for a beer, admit that *'There seems to have been a communication breakdown here'*, sit down and have a sensible discussion, or try to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution.

So, if you feel angry it's because you've chosen to become angry. You've chosen to react to the behaviour or comments of another person, or situation you find yourself in, by thinking the thoughts that you do, feelings the emotions you choose, or by doing the things you decide to do.

In most circumstances we have a choice as to how we respond to a stimulus.

***“You almost always choose your emotional response to the situation you find yourself in”***

## HISTORY LESSON

Viktor Frankl, a famous Jewish survivor of the Nazi death camps, is probably one of the best known testaments to the power of choosing your reactions to what life throws at you.

The key, he asserts, to his psychological survival is his 'Stimulus-Response' theory in which he believes that between any external stimulus and the subsequent human response lies the concept of human choice.

Frankl spent his time in the camps practicing exerting increasing levels of control over how he chose to react to the things that he could not control around him.

*'The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.'*

Viktor Frankl  
Austrian psychiatrist and psychotherapist: 1905-1997

The dog that salivates in response to the expectation of food has a more primitive Pavlovian response, but in humans we have the ability to moderate our primeval responses with intelligent thought... well most people do anyway!

To argue otherwise is to admit that we are pre-programmed automatons acting against our will, or that our emotions and feelings can be triggered by other people as easily as if they'd flicked a switch in our minds.



We know this already as it's ingrained in our language in phrases such as:

**'Who's pushed your buttons then?'**

**'Someone's touched a raw nerve with you, haven't they?'**

**'How come you're being so touchy?'**

Just reading the three expressions above may have had an effect upon you.

Some people report a prickly feeling in the hairs on the back of their neck when reading or hearing such. Maybe you feel the same when thinking about such scenarios, or you find yourself sliding into a defensive or irritated state when such comments are directed at you.

It's not what happens to you, but rather how you react to what happens to you that's important.

It's not what people say or do to you, but how you choose to react to those behaviours that's important, and that's what determines the outcome.

Unlike thousands of his less fortunate fellow prisoners, Frankl's story (see box) is an inspiration to us all. After all, it's the ultimate proof that his assertion works, as unlike tens of thousands of his fellow prisoners, he survived to tell the tale... what better proof can there be?

Like Frankl, you need to take yourself to a deeper level; away from the normal surface reactions you have in response to daily irritations and annoyances, and to examine more closely just how 'in control' you truly are capable of becoming.

By applying just some of what you are beginning to learn here you will emerge a more confident, assertive, controlled, and dare I say 'happier' person as a result.

## Take Action

- Think about how you typically react to the actions and comments of others, and ask yourself whether your 'normal', instinctual reactions either help you, or hinder you?
  - Keep a log throughout the week of how you react to the things that people say and do, and the circumstances that you encounter. How do you respond verbally (what you say), how do you react physically (what do you do), how do you feel (what do you do inside your head), and what were the consequences – good or bad?
  - Start to take more control over how you **choose** to react to people and events.
  - Broaden your range of responses, focusing on those actions, reactions strategies and tactics that help, not hinder you.
  - Recognise that between 'stimulus' and 'response' is a gap, an opportunity for you to pause and to consider how you will respond.
  - Practise using the gap to think, before you respond, and lengthen the amount of time you have by getting into the habit of pausing. The extra thinking time, even if only momentary, means you're likely to make a more intelligent and helpful response.

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This column is an excerpt from Jon's latest book...

**Water Off a Duck's Back**

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## ONE MINUTE COACH

Last week a friend told me that she had woken up feeling unwell and was feeling guilty for letting down her co-helpers at a local charity shop where she volunteered.

My response was to ask her to replace any feelings of 'guilt' with a feeling of 'liberation', as for once in her life she could justifiably lie in bed, which is where she should be, whilst someone else looks after the shop.

I also asked her to think through how much time she devoted to this worthy cause, and how that compared with the time invested by others.

We went on to explore how, rather than feeling 'guilty' about letting her co-workers down on this one occasion, she could, and indeed should be feeling proud of the amount of time that she does willingly donate, and the positive impact this has upon those who benefit from her work.

Our conversation passed on to other matters and fifteen minutes later I asked her how she was now feeling?

**'Liberated'** she exclaimed, with a big smile on her face. We both laughed at her response, which in a sense just goes to show how we can beat ourselves up with feelings that are not only undeserved, but also unhelpful... to everyone!