

Are you the Designated Scapegoat?

By Sharie Stines, Psy.D

When two people get married I don't think either one of them plans on becoming their partner's scapegoat. Most people assume that there will be both good times and bad times, and they will persevere through any problems together. This is reasonable; after all, no one is perfect and life can have challenges at times.

However, all bets are off if you marry an abuser, master manipulator, or narcissist. When this happens you discover that rather than being a spouse in the true sense of the word, you really serve more of a role of an emotional whipping boy. But, the insidiousness of it all is that you may not even realize this until years in to the relationship. This can be a very rude awakening.

Or, do these behaviors occur outside of your marriage with other family members or with your in-laws? Do they occur at your workplace? Do you find yourself subject to unfair treatment, harsh judgment, and "bullying" behaviors from your boss or coworkers? The basic principles of scapegoating can apply in any arena where people socialize.

What is a scapegoat?

Most people have heard of the childhood role of scapegoat – where one child in the family tends to be the "identified patient," "black sheep," or "problem child." This can occur in two ways: either the child acts out this role to show the dysfunction in the family, or the parents or siblings project the scapegoat status onto the child.

In a relationship with an abusive or manipulative person, the scapegoat is created by the scapegoater. A scapegoat fulfills a multitude of roles for his or her abusive partner:

- takes on projected guilt or shame of abuser
- serves as an emotional punching bag for displaced anger
- helps narcissistic and insecure people feel superior and smug, thus enabling them not to look at their own weaknesses
- raises the abuser up by being put down themselves
- acts as a container for an abuser's rage, contempt, and disdain
- People who scapegoat others have certain particular traits; these include a sense of superiority and pride, a large ego which needs maintaining, feelings of entitlement and grandiosity, limited personal self-reflection, poor character, self-righteousness, and hypocrisy. Did I mention arrogance? Realize this list is neither exhaustive nor all inclusive, but lists general characteristics only.

No matter what a scapegoat does, he or she cannot win and always makes the wrong move as far as the scapegoater is concerned. In fact, the scapegoater seems to exhibit an "expectation of failure" toward the chosen scapegoat, looking for flaws at all times.

What traits make a person a good scapegoat?

- a person with compassion and empathy
- someone self-sacrificing
- an individual who easily forgives
- an independent person
- one who is resourceful
- a person who tends to have an external locus of control (looks out of oneself for validation)

- has a low ability to identify manipulation and abuse
- What do you do if you realize you are the scapegoat in a relationship?

As in most instances of recovery from anything, awareness is the first step. Realize you are a scapegoat. Identify the traits that keep you in this role. Determine how being a scapegoat meets your needs in the relationship. Here are some specific steps to take to remove the scapegoat mantle from your identity:

- Consciously and volitionally remove the role of scapegoat from your selfhood; in other words, don't let others blame you, treat you condescendingly, or otherwise mistreat you.
- Do not operate from a victim mentality, but choose, instead to be a victor. That means, take your life in your own hands.
- Treat yourself with dignity. Act with integrity.
- Do not take responsibility for other people's actions, behaviors, moods, or feelings – don't personalize.
- Learn to love yourself internally.
- Learn to look within yourself for validation, rather than to others.
- Choose relationships with people who are empathic and compassionate.
- Don't listen to the negative "noise," either inside your own head or out of the mouths of others.
- Walk away from people who do not respect you.
- Set good internal boundaries with people who have a personality disorder.
- Avoid judgmental people.
- Do not reveal personal information without proper discernment. Not everyone will respect your privacy or your problems. In fact, save personal information for trustworthy friends.
- In general, be positive.
- The bottom line to scapegoat recovery is to ultimately build the relationship you have with yourself. You will have to work hard to trust your own opinions, emotions, and intuitions. As long as you are in the world with others, you will face the possibility of being someone's target for negativity. Learn to step away and love yourself regardless of what anyone else believes about you.

For more information on abuse recovery please email me at: therecoveryexpert@gmail.com and I will send you my free monthly newsletter on the psychology of abuse.

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