

Why Me? (Or, How to Stop Feeling Sorry for Yourself)

Description

[Murphy's Law](#) states that if anything could possibly go wrong, it probably will — and often at the worst possible time. As cheerily optimistic a world-view as this may be, we can usually recall enough examples of such times that it feels true.

Such as, showing up for an audition, thinking you have plenty of time, only to find out they are running *ahead* of schedule. Airline losing your luggage and lucky audition socks. Flight gets delayed, arrive at the hotel at 2am, and your only credit card gets declined with only 7 hours left before your audition. A string breaks moments before you walk on stage. Horrible acoustics. Wobbly chair. A pianist who doesn't listen. Page turners who space out. A pianist who inexplicably fails to show up for a concert (yes, really).

The list is endless. And unfortunately, there is not much we can do to prevent or even predict such surprises. As it is often said, [s#!% happens](#) (or perhaps, the more eloquent “c'est la vie”).

Yet, such situational challenges needn't derail our performances. Thankfully, we don't have to rely on the stars all lining up perfectly for us to have a great performance, and we certainly don't have to drive ourselves nuts by trying to control every last detail either. We do, however, have to train ourselves to respond differently – in a way that does not feel natural to most, but is necessary if we wish to handle adversity more successfully.

The normal reaction

For most of us, the natural reaction is to get upset, frustrated, even angry. We look for something or someone to blame (the airline, the incompetent cab driver, the traffic, the weather, anything!), and in the process, get even more worked up. Perversely, we might even start hoping things go horribly, so we can feel more justified in feeling how we do (e.g. “I'll show them” or “That'll teach them for losing my luggage”). At other times, we crawl up in a little ball and start feeling sorry for ourselves. “Why me?” “Why can't I ever catch a break?” “Why is the universe still punishing me for hiding the class frog in little Susie's backpack in Kindergarten?”

Of course, none of this helps us play better. Preoccupied with thoughts of revenge or self-pity, not only are we far from an ideal emotional state for performing our best, but worse, we are taking our precious energy and attentional resources and putting it where it can't help us. And in an audition or competition situation, this can easily be the difference between advancing and going home early.

An alternate response

In any given situation there are an infinite number of things we could choose to focus on. Stop reading

and just sit for a moment, identifying all of the different things around you that you could attend to. The sound of the washing machine on spin cycle down the hall. The books on the shelf to your left. Traffic noise from outside. The pleasant wallpaper you are using on your computer screen. The awesome shade of brown behind the text of this post. The font used in this sentence. The individual letters in each word, the size of each letter, the period at the end of this sentence. The tiny pixels that make up the period. Infinite. Note that of all the things you could focus on, very few are actually relevant to what you're trying to do right now, which is simply to read.

It's much the same in a performance. No matter what sort of misfortune befalls us, we can choose to bypass our automatic victim/self-pity tendency and deliberately shift our focus onto those things that are a) relevant and helpful to our performance and b) under our direct control.

An example

Let me clarify with an example.

Recently, a client (let's call him Fergus) traveled halfway around the world to perform in a nationally televised concert with some vocalists. They had never before met or played with each other, but the schedule called for a rehearsal the day prior to the big event, and a short dress rehearsal the day of.

Straightforward enough, but then Murphy's Law takes effect, as Fergus is handed completely different transcriptions of the music at the first rehearsal. Annoyance turns to frustration and anger when Murphy's Law kicks it up a notch and the performers turn out to be of the highly critical, insulting, and patronizing variety.

Following the rehearsal, all Fergus wanted to do was dwell on the performers' lack of professionalism, but this only served to get him more riled up. Was he justified in feeling upset? Of course. But right or wrong, for better or worse, 36 hours + new music to learn + difficult performers to work with + jet lag was the hand he was dealt. And regardless of whose fault this was, whether it was theirs for being difficult and not providing the right scores ahead of time, or his for not being prepared enough, he couldn't afford to perform poorly in such a high-profile concert.

Realizing he couldn't afford to waste his time, energy, and resources, Fergus resolved to limit his focus to only those things he knew would help him play his best. Getting enough rest to minimize the impact of jet lag. A strategically timed nap before the concert. Staying well-hydrated to counteract the extremely hot climate and keep mental processes and reaction time sharp (as a curious aside, it appears that mild dehydration has a greater effect on reaction time in women than men). Mental practice to increase his familiarity and comfort with the new scores without tiring himself out physically. Visualization to prepare himself for the live performance. And so on.

In the end, the performance went well, and Fergus was both relieved and surprised at how successfully he was able to handle the adversity of the situation.

Take action

One way to start making victim/self-pity mode a thing of the past is to begin practicing this attentional shift in our day-to-day lives. The next time you catch yourself complaining or asking “Why me?”, instead of looking for a target to blame, begin looking for solutions instead. Give yourself a few moments with a piece of paper and answer two simple questions:

1. What *can* I do?
2. What, of all these actions, would *most effectively* move me a step closer to what I want?

This probably seems like way too simple an exercise, but it’s actually pretty surprising how much time we spend every day (and thus waste) thinking about things that we have no control over and can’t change even if we wanted to. The consequences aren’t critical on a day-to-day basis or when we don’t have to perform our very best, but when faced with a critical situation like a big performance or audition where we want to play as close to 100% as possible, we simply don’t have the energy and attentional resources to spare.

Bonus exercise

I learned quite a bit from doing this next exercise myself. Try making a pact with a friend where neither of you are allowed to complain about anything (both out loud and in your own thoughts) for 7 days. Sound easy? Give it a try — you may be surprised. Increase the [fun factor](#) by turning this into a contest where, say, the loser buys lunch.

One-sentence summary

“A bend in the road is not the end of the road... unless you fail to make the turn.” ~Author Unknown

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