

The next move is yours

A short book about the victim mentality, and how to get out of it

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book. You can read it in two or three evenings.

"Victim mentality" is mostly used as an insult. People say it to end a conversation, and they often say it to someone with a real complaint that they'd prefer not to hear. If it's been said to you, you were probably right to be annoyed. I'll use the phrase as little as I can, and I want to say what I mean by it before going any further.

I don't mean that nothing bad happened to you. I'm going to assume it did. You were passed over, lied to, left, cheated, brought up badly, or treated worse than the person next to you for no good reason. This book won't ask you to decide it wasn't so bad. It won't ask you to look for the part you played, or to be grateful for the lesson.

What I mean is a habit that can grow up after a wrong. You go over what happened. You tell it to people. You wait for whoever was responsible to put it right, and while you wait, the part of your life it touched stays where it was. Months go by like that, and sometimes years. The wrong was done to you. The waiting is something you do, and it's the only part of the whole business that this book is about.

One thing comes before all of that. If someone is harming you now, a book about habits is the wrong place to start. If a partner or relative hits you, threatens you, or controls your money or who you see, that's abuse, and the first job is your safety. A domestic abuse helpline will talk through your options in confidence, and in

an emergency you should call the police. If you're being harassed or discriminated against at work, a union rep, an employment adviser or a solicitor will be more use to you than a change of attitude. Nothing in this book is an argument for putting up with mistreatment. A good deal of it argues the opposite.

The same goes for what a wrong can leave behind. If what happened still comes back as nightmares or flashbacks, or if your mood has been low for weeks, that's something for a doctor. Chapter 12 says more.

The middle chapters each take one belief that makes the habit seem reasonable. "It wasn't my fault." "Nothing I do makes any difference." "If I let it go, they get away with it." "After everything I've been through." Each of these is partly true, and I'll try to give each one its due before I argue with it.

Some of the arguments rest on research. The notes at the back say which studies, and how far I think they can be trusted. The rest is my own reasoning, and I'll say so where it matters.

The practical chapter is number 11. It comes late because the method is simple and you could guess most of it now. What stops people using it is the set of beliefs in chapters 3 to 10, so those come first. You don't have to wait, though. If you see something you could do about an old grievance tomorrow, do it. Nothing later in the book depends on you holding off.

A few chapters ask you to check a claim against your own life. Please do those. Your own history is better evidence than my say-so.

Thursday, and still explaining Monday

Here's an example. On Monday the head of department announces that the team leader job has gone to a colleague who joined two years after you. Nobody warned you. By Thursday you've told the story to your partner, two friends, your sister and the person at the next desk. Each telling has picked up a detail, such as the way the head of department didn't look at you, or the lunch those two had in March.

You haven't asked your manager why you weren't chosen. You haven't asked what would make the answer different next time. You've decided that asking would be pointless, and anyway it's their job to explain themselves to you.

A second example. Eight years ago your parents helped your brother with the deposit on a flat. They didn't help you. You've never said this to them plainly. It comes up every Christmas all the same, inside your head if not out loud, and it decides how long you stay.

A third. Your ex left, and some of the debts were in your name. Three years on you still describe your finances as "what he did to me". There's an envelope from the bank on the shelf in the hall that you haven't opened.

And a fourth. A friend has rung you twice since you moved away, and you've kept count. You're not going to ring her, because it's always you who rings.

If some of these are familiar, look at how each one went. First there was a wrong. I'm taking your word for that, and in all four examples I think the person has a fair complaint. Then came the sense of being wronged, which I'll call the grievance. It may have arrived as a thought, such as "that wasn't fair", or as a hot feeling in the chest with no words. It arrived without your permission, and it was probably accurate.

Then you did something. You gave the next move to someone else. It became the manager's job to explain, the parents' job to notice, the ex's job to pay, the friend's job to ring. Until they do, you go over it, you tell it, and you wait. I'm going to call this handing over.

The grievance and the handing over feel like one event. They're two. The grievance is a feeling, and you don't choose it. Handing over is a thing you do, and my argument in this book is that it's a habit. It can be looked at and changed without anybody having to pretend the wrong was all right.

The usual explanation, when other people give it, is character. You're "negative". You "play the victim". I don't think that survives a look at your actual life. You probably don't hand over everywhere. When the boiler breaks you ring someone. If your child were treated badly at school you'd be in the office by nine the next morning. The handing over shows up in particular parts of your life, and usually they're the parts where you were hurt worst, or where making a move feels most dangerous. Something that selective is more likely to be learned than built in. Chapter 10 looks at where.

Habits last because they pay, and this one does. When the next move belongs to someone else, nothing that happens next can be your fault. You're spared a conversation that might go badly. People who hear the story are kind to you. In the story you're the one who behaved decently. These are real benefits, and the next chapter goes through them one at a time. I'll try to show that each is smaller than it looks and costs more than it seems to.

You can see one of the costs in the first example. The next team leader job will come up in a year or so. The person in that example will go into it knowing exactly as much as they know today about why they lost the last one.

Let me say what this book doesn't claim. It doesn't claim you brought your troubles on yourself. It doesn't claim you should be over it by now. It doesn't claim the people who wronged you shouldn't answer for it, and chapter 5 is partly about how to make them, where that's possible.

Before you go on, try one thing. Pick a grievance that's more than a month old, and write down what happened in two lines, with the date. Underneath, write one more line saying what you've done about it since then, apart from thinking and talking. Don't judge the answer. You'll use it in later chapters.

What handing over buys you

Go back to the envelope on the hall shelf. Every time the person in that example walks past it, two things could happen. They could open it, or they could think "this is his mess" and keep walking. The second brings a small, quick easing, because the dread about the number inside goes quiet for a while. That easing is what the habit pays, and it comes in several forms.

The first is innocence. If the next move is someone else's, then whatever happens now isn't down to you. This matters a great deal to anyone who was blamed a lot, as a child or in a marriage. For them "not my fault" is a place of safety, and they're slow to leave it.

The second is a rest from risk. Asking the manager why you were passed over might get you an answer you don't want. Ringing the friend might show that she isn't much bothered either way. While the move is theirs, you don't have to find out.

The third is sympathy. When you tell the story well, people are warm to you, and the warmth is real. For some of us it's the most dependable way we've found of getting any.

The fourth is the high ground. In the account of what happened, you're the one who behaved properly. That's often true, and it's pleasant to go over.

The fifth is an explanation. "My career stalled because of what they did" is simpler than the real mixture of causes, and kinder to you.

I'm not going to tell you these are imaginary. What I'd ask you to look at is what the relief is relief from. It's relief from the discomfort of having an uncertain move to make. Handing over ends that discomfort in a second or two. But the debt in the envelope is still there, and so is the unasked question at work. What you've bought is a gap before you next have to think about it, and meanwhile the debt or the question is usually getting harder to deal with.

Now the costs. I count five.

The waiting has no end date. The person you're waiting on often doesn't know they're being waited on. If they did know, they might not agree that they owe you anything. You could be waiting on someone who has forgotten the whole thing.

You've also put the person who treated you worst in charge of your timetable. I think this is the oddest feature of the habit. You wouldn't trust your ex to choose your curtains, but whether your finances get sorted out this year now depends on his conscience.

Moves go out of date. The conversation with your parents would have been awkward in the first year. After eight years of silence it's a much bigger thing to bring up. Job openings close, deadlines for complaints pass, and friendships cool beyond the point where one phone call would mend them.

The sympathy runs down. The first telling gets warmth. By the tenth, people change the subject, and you can see them doing it. That feels like one more wrong, and it gets added to the list.

The last cost is the one I'd worry about most. After enough practice, the question "what could I do about this?" stops coming up at all. You no longer notice moves even when they're in front of you. From inside, this doesn't feel like a habit. It feels as though life doesn't offer you any openings.

So how do you tell a fair grievance from the habit? You can't do it by checking whether the complaint is true, because it usually is. The test I'd suggest is one question. Is there something I could do about this that I'm not doing, because I think someone else ought to be the one to do it? If the answer is yes, the habit is at work, however right you are about the facts.

There's an objection here. Sometimes waiting is correct. You've put in a formal complaint and the firm has twenty-eight days to reply. Your sister has asked for some time before you talk. Those are waits you chose, for a reason, and you know when they end. The habit is the other kind of wait. Nobody agreed to it, it has no end date, and you didn't really choose it.

Take the grievance you wrote down at the end of the last chapter. Ask what a move would have looked like in the first month. Then ask what you were afraid would happen if you'd made it. The answer to the second question tells you which of the five payments you've been collecting.

"It wasn't my fault"

Suppose someone drives into your parked car during the night and leaves no note. It's entirely their fault. You were asleep. All the same, the car with the crushed wing is yours, and if you want it repaired, you're the one who has to ring the garage.

Nobody finds that confusing when it's a car. You can be furious with the other driver and book the repair on the same morning. With a marriage, a childhood or a career, the two things run together, and "it wasn't my fault" starts to mean "so it isn't mine to deal with".

The belief underneath is a decent one. Whoever caused the damage should repair it. It's what we teach children, and it's the basis of a good deal of law. Where you can make it happen, you should, and chapter 5 comes back to that. The trouble starts when the person responsible won't repair it, or can't, or has died, or doesn't accept that they did anything. Then the principle gives you nothing to do. You're left holding a rule that only the other person can carry out.

It helps to split one question into two. Whose fault was it? Whose move is it? The first looks backward at what happened. The second looks forward at what happens now. They have different answers more often than we'd like.

This split has some history in psychology. In 1982 Philip Brickman and his colleagues published a paper on how people think about helping and coping. They argued that responsibility for a problem and responsibility for its solution are separate. You can hold

someone to account for one without the other. They set out the four possible combinations, and they favoured the one in which a person isn't blamed for the problem and is still treated as the one in charge of the solution. Their reason was that it lets someone accept help without shame and keeps their life in their own hands. The paper is a framework and didn't test anything, so take it as a useful way of cutting things up.

I think people resist this because making the move feels like pleading guilty. If I'm the one sorting out the debt, it looks as though I accept the debt was mine. If I'm the one who rings, it looks as though the silence was my doing. English doesn't help. "Take responsibility" means both "admit you were to blame" and "deal with it". People who told you to take responsibility often meant the first, and that's why it grated. I only ever mean the second.

Some readers have the opposite trouble, and swing between "it's all their fault" and "it's all mine, I'm the sort of person this happens to". The second is no improvement. In 1979 the psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman separated blaming your own behaviour, which you can change, from blaming your character, which you can't. In her study of students, the depressed ones did more of the second kind. The question "whose move is it?" needs no verdict on your character at all. It doesn't even need the fault question settled. Two people can disagree for ever about who wrecked a marriage, and the envelope from the bank can still be opened this evening.

The honest objection is that this is unfair. You didn't break it, and now you're doing the work of mending it. Yes. It is unfair, and I'm not going to argue that it's fair underneath if you look at it

properly. You're paying a cost that belongs to someone else. But look at the choice that's actually open to you. It isn't between a fair outcome and an unfair one. It's between an unfair situation with the damage repaired and an unfair situation with the damage still there. The other person's bad behaviour took the fair options away.

You also don't have to choose between the two questions. You can ring the garage and report the driver to the police on the same day. Pursuing the fault and making your own move can run side by side. The habit is what happens when the first one stalls and you let the second stall with it.

Go back to your written grievance and put the two questions underneath it. Answer them separately. For the fault question, write whatever's true, and it may well be "entirely theirs". For the move question, list anything you could do, however small, and leave out whether you should have to.

"Nothing I do makes any difference"

Here's an example. In her last job a woman complained twice about a supervisor who bullied her. Nothing was done, and she found out later that she'd been written down as difficult. She works somewhere else now. The rota here is unfair to her in a small, fixable way, and she hasn't mentioned it. When a colleague asks why not, she says there's no point and they never listen.

I want to be fair to this belief, because it's usually drawn from experience. For many people it was the most accurate belief available at the time. A child can't leave home, and can't make a parent stop drinking. An employee in a firm that protects its managers really can't get a complaint heard. If you learned that trying gets you nowhere, the chances are that someone taught you.

There's a well known line of research here, and its authors changed their minds about it in a way I find useful. In the 1960s Martin Seligman and Steven Maier gave dogs electric shocks that the dogs could do nothing to stop. Later, when escape was made easy, many of those dogs didn't try. The researchers concluded that the animals had learned that nothing they did mattered, and they called it learned helplessness.

Fifty years on, the same two men looked back over what brain research had found since, mostly in rats, and said they'd had it backwards. Staying passive appears to be the built-in response to bad events that go on and on. It doesn't have to be learned. What has to be learned is control. An animal that has acted and found that acting worked is protected against the passivity later.

Rats are a long way from your career, and I don't want to lean on this harder than it will bear. I still find the reversal helpful. It suggests that nobody trained you to be helpless. More likely you spent a long time somewhere that trying didn't work, and you haven't since had enough experience of trying that did. If that's right, the remedy is that experience, in small amounts. Being argued with won't do it, and that includes being argued with by me.

The trouble with the belief is that it travels. It was formed in one place about one set of people, and it goes with you into places where it isn't true. An old door in a shared house might be locked every time you try it, for years. You stop trying, and you're right to. But nobody tells you on the day someone unlocks it.

You can often hear the belief travelling in the words. In 1978 Lyn Abramson, Seligman and John Teasdale revised the helplessness theory for people. They argued that what does the damage is how you explain a bad event. Explanations that are permanent, such as "it'll always be like this", and that cover everything, such as "it's like this with everyone", predict giving up. The words to listen for are "always", "never", "everyone", "nobody" and "typical". "My last manager ignored two complaints" is a fact about one manager. "They never listen" is a forecast about every manager you'll ever have.

A sorting exercise helps here. Take a grievance and put everything about it into three piles. The first pile is what you can't change, which includes what already happened, other people's characters, and decisions that are final. The second is what you can influence. You can ask, apply, complain, negotiate or propose. The outcome

isn't yours to decide, but you can always make the attempt. The third pile is what you can simply do, such as opening the envelope, updating the CV, making the appointment, or leaving.

Helplessness puts everything in the first pile. I should say that the opposite mistake exists too. Some self-help writing puts everything in the third pile and tells you that your life is whatever you decide it is. That's false, and it's cruel to people who are up against poverty, illness or prejudice. Some situations leave you very few moves. Even then there are usually one or two, and they often involve other people, such as a union, an advice service, or a neighbour who knows how the council works.

The way to test the belief is with small experiments. Choose something from the second pile, small enough that a no won't flatten you. Before you do it, write down what you expect to happen. Then do it, and write down what did happen. The woman in the example might write "they'll brush me off", and then ask about the rota.

Some of these experiments will fail, and chapter 12 is about that. The aim isn't to prove that trying always works, because it doesn't. The aim is to swap "never" for an actual count. My guess is that the count will be better than you expect.

"If I let it go, they get away with it"

Think again about the deposit, eight years on. The person in that example could tell you the amount, the month, and what their mother said on the phone. Keeping hold of those details feels close to a duty. If they stopped being angry, it would seem as though they'd agreed it was fine. The grievance can feel like the only remaining record that a wrong was done.

Wanting wrongs to count is a good instinct. A society where nobody minded being cheated would be a bad one to live in, and I wouldn't want to talk anybody out of minding.

Now look at what holding on does to the other person. The ex has no idea how you spent Tuesday evening. The parents don't know that Christmas is hard work for you, or if they sense it, they don't know why. None of it reaches them. You're the one serving the sentence.

I think two things have got tangled together, and they come apart quite easily. One is holding someone to account. The other is carrying what they did around with you.

Holding someone to account happens outside your head, and it's aimed at the person or at some authority over them. You tell them plainly what they did and what it cost you. You make a formal complaint, use the small claims court, go to the police or see a solicitor. You end contact, or you warn other people where that's fair and safe. Each of these has a start and a finish, and afterwards something in the world is different.

Carrying happens inside your head, and it has neither a start nor a finish. My observation is that people who carry the most have often done the least holding to account. That makes sense, because holding to account is frightening and carrying is familiar. The parents have never been told. The manager has never been asked.

So the first question for an old grievance is whether there's a way of holding them to account that you haven't tried. If there is, that may well be your next move. It will serve justice better than another year of carrying would.

Sometimes nothing of that kind is possible any more. The time limit has passed, or the person has died, or there's no evidence, or confronting them wouldn't be safe. That's a hard place to be. But carrying doesn't do the job that those measures would have done. It changes nothing for them, and all the cost falls on you.

You may be expecting me to tell you to forgive. I'm not going to. It's your business, and the research gives a reason for care. Laura Luchies and her colleagues ran four studies, one of which followed 72 newly married couples for five years. People who forgave a partner who made amends and treated them well gained self-respect. For people who forgave a partner who didn't, self-respect went down. The authors called this the doormat effect. If the person who wronged you isn't sorry and is still doing it, forgiving them may cost you something.

There's evidence on the other side too. Nathaniel Wade and colleagues pooled 54 studies in which people were taken through structured forgiveness work, usually with a therapist or in a guided group. Those people ended up more forgiving, and also less

depressed and anxious, than people who got no help. Longer programmes did better. So forgiveness can be good for the person doing it. It's slow work, and whether it's wise depends partly on how the other person has behaved.

What I'm asking for is narrower than forgiveness. Stop making your next move depend on theirs. You don't have to like them, see them, excuse what they did or tell anyone it's all right now. You only have to stop waiting for them before you get on with your own life.

The objection is that then there'd be no record. So make one. Write down what was done, when, and what it cost you, in plain words, and keep it somewhere safe. A fact on paper stays true without being rehearsed every day. Some people find that once it's written, the urge to keep going over it gets weaker. I can't promise that.

One last exercise, about apologies. Work out how long you've been waiting for this one. Ask yourself honestly how likely it is to come. Then picture the day after it arrives, and ask what you'd do differently that day. Whatever that is, consider whether you could do it without the apology. In most cases I think you could.

"I just need to get it off my chest"

By Thursday, in the first example, the story of Monday had been told five times. There's also the phone call to your sister that lasts ninety minutes and ends where it began. And there's the three in the morning version, where you go through the whole scene again and this time you say the perfect thing.

The belief behind all of this is that telling lets the pressure out. Feelings are supposed to build up like steam, and talking opens a valve. There's some truth in it. Telling someone what happened, and being believed, is worth a great deal. A wrong that nobody has ever acknowledged is harder to live with than one that somebody has. I'd never tell you to keep it to yourself.

The evidence doesn't support the steam idea, though. In a 2002 experiment, Brad Bushman made students angry and then had some of them hit a punchbag while thinking about the person who'd angered them. They ended up angrier and more aggressive than students who simply sat quietly. In 2024 Sophie Kjærvik and Bushman reviewed 154 studies of ways to manage anger. Activities that fire the body up, venting among them, didn't reduce anger. Activities that calm the body down did.

Going over things does no better than letting off steam. Susan Nolen-Hoeksema spent much of her career studying rumination, which means dwelling again and again on how bad you feel and why. Her 2008 review with two colleagues concluded that it

deepens low mood and makes thinking more negative. It also makes people worse at solving problems and less likely to act, and it wears out the people supporting them.

There's even a name for doing it in company. Amanda Rose studied what she called co-rumination in 608 children and teenagers. Friends who went over their problems together at length had closer friendships, and they also had more symptoms of depression and anxiety. A follow-up six months later found that for girls the habit predicted both of those results. These were young people filling in questionnaires, so be careful with it. It does match something many adults will recognise. A friendship built on shared complaint is warm, and you often come away from an evening of it feeling worse.

So why does the tenth telling still feel like relief? Each telling pays out a little of what chapter 2 described. You get some sympathy, and another look at yourself as the decent one. There's also something less obvious. Telling the story feels like doing something about it. You come off the phone tired, as if you'd put in work. It gives you the feeling of activity, and no move gets made.

One test separates useful talking from replaying. Ask whether this round produced anything new. It might be a new way of seeing what happened, or a decision, or a request you're going to make. If the tenth telling matches the second, it's a replay.

Here's what I'd suggest in its place. Tell it properly, once, to someone who listens well. Or write it down. Joanne Frattaroli pooled 146 experiments in which people wrote about upsetting

experiences, and found a benefit on average, though a small one. Small is about right. Getting it out has some value, and you can collect that value in one or two goes.

After that, give your complaints an address. A complaint with an address goes to someone who can do something about it, and it comes with a request. "I'd like to understand why I wasn't considered, and what I'd need to show next time" has an address. The same feelings told to the person at the next desk don't.

It also helps to bring your usual listener in. You might say, "Next time I start on this, ask me what I'm going to do about it." Most listeners will be glad to have something to say.

As for three in the morning, you can't stop a thought arriving. When it does, ask whether there's anything new in it. If there isn't, name it to yourself as a replay, and turn your attention to something physical, such as your breathing or the weight of the blanket. It will come back, and you can do the same again.

Please don't swing from all this into silence. The choice isn't between airing a grievance and bottling it up. You can take it to the person who can do something about it.

"They did it on purpose"

You walk into the kitchen at work and two colleagues stop talking. A text you sent yesterday morning still has no reply. An email about a project you're part of goes to six people, and you aren't one of them.

Someone who has been badly treated reads these quickly. They were talking about me. She's ignoring me. I was left off deliberately. The reading arrives in well under a second and it feels like something you saw, when in fact you guessed it.

This is understandable, and up to a point it's sensible. If a partner lied to you for a year, you'd be foolish not to be warier afterwards. People who have been hurt watch for the next hurt. And sometimes the quick reading is right. People do talk behind backs, and people are left off emails on purpose.

Some research bears on this, and it's the nearest thing there is to a study of the subject of this book. In 2020 Rahav Gabay and colleagues in Israel published a questionnaire measuring what they called the tendency for interpersonal victimhood. They meant a lasting sense of being the victim across many kinds of relationship. They found it had four parts. One was a strong need for your suffering to be recognised. One was a sense of being morally better than the people who hurt you. The other two were having little room for other people's suffering, and going over past hurts again and again.

In one study, people read short descriptions of unclear situations. Those who scored higher on the questionnaire were more likely to expect to be hurt in them. In another, people imagined being a lawyer getting critical feedback from a senior partner, and the story was written so that you couldn't tell whether the criticism was deserved. Higher scorers were more inclined to put the criticism down to the partner's bad character or bad intentions, and they were keener on revenge. The links were modest. Everyone in the studies was a Jewish Israeli adult answering questions online or on paper. It's a first sketch, and I wouldn't treat it as settled.

The mechanism is easy to follow all the same. You fill an unclear event with the worst available reading, and the reading then gets filed as another wrong. The file grows. The bigger it is, the more obvious it seems that the next unclear event belongs in it too. Meanwhile you've been cool with the two colleagues in the kitchen. They've noticed, and they really are a little cooler with you now. In that way the file can make some of its own evidence.

A referee who watches only one team will finish the match sure that team committed every foul. He hasn't invented any of the fouls he saw. He just never looked at the other half of the pitch.

Here I have to be careful. This is exactly where the phrase "victim mentality" gets misused. It's used to tell people that bullying or discrimination is all in their head. Patterns are real. Suppose the same thing keeps happening to you, from the same person or the same organisation, and it doesn't happen to colleagues who differ from you in sex, race, age or health. That's evidence, and you

should treat it as evidence. Keep a written log with dates, what was said and who was there. It's the first thing a union rep or a solicitor will ask for.

What I'm describing is narrower. It's the single unclear event, read in an instant, and never checked.

For those, try three explanations. When something stings and the facts are thin, write down your first reading. Then write two others that are at least as likely. The colleagues might have been talking about a surprise for someone, or about one of their own troubles. Your friend might have read the text in a queue and forgotten it. The email list might have been copied from an old one. You don't have to believe the alternatives. You only have to admit that they fit the facts as well as your first reading did.

Then, where it matters, check. "I noticed I wasn't on the email about the project. Was that deliberate?" This is a move in the sense this book means. Most of the time the answer will be dull. When it isn't dull, you've learned something solid, which is worth more than a suspicion.

It also helps to keep harm and intent apart. Something can hurt you without having been aimed at you. Carelessness still counts, and you can still raise it. But "you forgot me, and I minded" opens a different conversation from "you wanted to hurt me". The first is usually nearer the truth, and it's far more likely to go well.

"After everything I've been through"

Here's an example. Someone has had a terrible year. There was a redundancy, and then a parent's long illness. One evening their partner asks if they could do the school run on Thursday, and the first thought is "after the year I've had?" That week they're also short with a shop assistant, and they skip a friend's birthday without sending a message. Nobody says anything. They feel, without ever putting it into words, that some slack is owed to them.

The belief is that suffering earns credit, and in part it does. People who are going through a hard time need allowances made, and good friends make them. Nobody expects you at a party the week after a funeral.

The research shows what happens when that feeling spreads beyond the hard time itself. Emily Zitek and colleagues ran three experiments in 2010. In one, some students were asked to recall a time when life had treated them unfairly, and afterwards they were more likely to refuse a small favour than students who'd recalled a time they were bored. In another, people who lost a computer game because of a glitch later asked for a bigger share of some money than people who'd lost fairly. In both cases the link was a sense of being entitled to good outcomes. These were students and the stakes were small. Gabay's group found something similar, in that people who scored high on their questionnaire felt freer to behave badly towards someone who had slighted them.

I don't think the feeling of being owed is wicked. What worries me is who ends up paying. A credit note is only good at the shop that issued it. The people who wronged you aren't around to honour yours, so it tends to get presented to whoever is nearest. That means your partner, your children, your friends and the man on the till, and none of them did it. They'll make allowances for a while. Then they get tired and pull back a little, and that feels like one more wrong.

The second part of this is the high ground. In your account of what happened, you behaved decently and they didn't. That's probably true of the event. The risk is that it spreads into a general sense that having suffered makes you see more clearly and behave better than people who've had it easy. Once that sets in, criticism becomes nearly impossible to hear. Any complaint about you feels like another attack on someone who's been through enough already. You also stop noticing the harm you do. A person can be wronged and can wrong others in the same week. That's true of nearly everybody, and it's true of you and me.

The third part is comparing. Someone tells you about their trouble, and before they've finished you've answered with yours, which is worse. It rarely feels like competing. To you it feels like showing that you understand. To the other person it feels like not being listened to, and over time they stop telling you things.

You might object that you can't pretend to be fine. I'm not asking you to. You need the slack, so ask for it, plainly and in advance. "I'm having a bad week. Could you do the school run on Thursday?"

is a request. The other person can say yes to it, and you can thank them. When you take slack without asking, other people pay a cost they never agreed to, and nobody gets thanked.

Two practical things. Listen for the phrase "after everything" in your own thinking, or its cousins, "you'd think that just once" and "the least they could do". When one turns up, look at who's about to be asked to pay, and whether they had anything to do with it.

And try one experiment this week. Ask someone about a difficulty of theirs, and keep listening to the end without mentioning one of your own. It's harder than it sounds.

"It's all right for some"

Not every grievance has a person at the other end. A colleague your age has just bought a house, with family help that you never had. Someone from school has the career you wanted, and you remember that her father knew people. You scroll past a holiday photo and think, "it's all right for some". There's nobody to complain to here. The complaint is about how things were handed out in the first place.

It's a true complaint. Starting points differ enormously, and nobody earns theirs. Family money, health, the country and decade you were born in, whether anyone read to you as a child, and a surname that gets you an interview are all given out before you've done a thing. Anyone who tells you we all have the same twenty-four hours hasn't been paying attention. I won't argue that the sharing out was fair.

There is some research on how we count our luck, though, and it's uncomfortable for all of us. In 2016 Shai Davidai and Thomas Gilovich reported seven studies showing that people notice their barriers far more than their advantages. The reason isn't vanity. A barrier has to be dealt with, so it holds your attention. An advantage can be enjoyed without your ever thinking about it.

Their image was a cyclist. You feel a headwind every second it blows. When the road turns and the wind is behind you, you notice for a minute, and after that you just feel that you're riding well.

Some of their findings were almost funny. American Democrats and Republicans each believed the electoral system was tilted against their own side. In another study, people tended to think their parents had been harder on them than on their brothers and sisters, and the brothers and sisters didn't agree. In the last study, the people most aware of their own headwinds were also more willing to approve of cutting ethical corners, which fits with the previous chapter.

This cuts two ways. Your own count of your luck is probably tilted, with your obstacles counted in full and your advantages hardly counted at all. That isn't because you're self-pitying. Everyone's count is tilted the same way. Your count of other people's luck is tilted in the opposite direction. You see their results and their advantages. You don't see their obstacles, because those are dealt with in private. The colleague with the house may have a parent with dementia or a marriage in trouble. You don't know, and you can't really compare.

You might object that even an honest count won't come out equal. No, it won't. Some people have had it far easier than you, and an honest count will confirm that. So take the three piles from chapter 4. The start you were given belongs in the first pile, with everything else that has already happened, and it's probably the largest single item there. The other two piles are where they were. An unfair start changes which moves are open to you and what each one costs. The moves that remain are still yours to make.

Resenting lucky people has a practical cost that's easy to miss. The people who've done what you'd like to do are your best source of information on how it's done. Many of them will tell you honestly

which advantages they had, and some will know the routes used by people who didn't have them. Resentment keeps you from asking.

The phrase also works as a reason not to try. If the results are decided in advance, there's no point trying, and you're spared the risk of trying and failing. That's the second payment from chapter 2 again.

If your real complaint is with how a society shares things out, that complaint has an address too. You can vote, join, organise, give or campaign. Those are moves, and they'll do more good than bitterness towards individuals who happened to benefit.

Try two lists. First write five headwinds in your life, which you'll manage quickly. Then write five tailwinds, which will take longer. They might include a relative who took you in, a teacher who noticed you, decent health, a language you speak, free schooling, or a friend who once lent you money. I'm not asking you to feel grateful. The point is to make your count more accurate.

Then pick one person you've envied and ask them one question about how they did it.

"Who would I be without it?"

You're at a dinner, sitting next to someone you've never met. Within twenty minutes they know about the divorce, or the firm that got rid of you, or what your family is like. You didn't plan to tell them. It's simply how you explain yourself these days. It accounts for the flat you live in and the job you do, and for why you're on your own.

Over the years a grievance can stop being something that happened and become part of how your life is arranged. At that point the thought of giving it up brings real fears, and I'd like to take them one at a time.

The first fear is that if you stop, it will mean the wrong didn't matter. It won't. What happened stays true whether or not you arrange your life around it. It's a fact in your history, as fixed as the town you grew up in. Plenty of people who were seriously wronged will tell you it was the worst thing that ever happened to them, and they have lives with a good many other things in them too.

The second fear is losing the explanation. If the redundancy isn't the reason you're not where you expected to be by now, then what is? That's a frightening question, and I think it keeps more people in place than anything else in this book. My answer is that the explanation can stay, for the past. "That's why the last five years went the way they did" may be entirely true. The question is whether it also explains the next five. It can't unless you let it, because the event is over.

The third fear is losing people. Some relationships run on a shared grievance. It might be the alliance with your sister against your parents, or the group chat of former colleagues who all hated the same boss. If you stop supplying your half, things will change. My suggestion is to try changing the subject and see what's left. A good relationship will have plenty besides the grievance, and it may improve. A few relationships will turn out to have had nothing else. That's a real loss, and I won't pretend otherwise.

The fourth fear is having to try without cover. While the grievance explains your life, no failure is quite your own. Without it you might apply and be turned down, or go on the date and be bored, or start the course and find it hard. That's the true price of what this book proposes. Set against it are the costs from chapter 2, which you've been paying for a long time already.

It helps to know where the habit came from, because it usually made sense there. In some families the person who suffered most got the attention, and children in those families learn very early what brings care. In others, a parent narrated their whole life as a list of things done to them, and the child picked up the style without anyone meaning to teach it. Some people spent years in a home, a school or a marriage where they really were powerless. For them it wasn't a mentality at all. It was an accurate description. Gabay and her colleagues suspect the roots lie in an anxious kind of attachment to early carers, though their evidence for that is a correlation in adults. However it started, the habit was a reasonable response to the place you were in. You've moved on from that place, and nobody has gone back to check whether the habit still fits.

One more thing, and this is my interpretation. Under a long grievance there's often a loss that hasn't been grieved. A grievance holds the matter open, as if there were still a ruling to come. Grieving means accepting that the matter is closed. The marriage isn't coming back, and the childhood you ought to have had can't be given to you late. When people stop waiting, that sadness tends to arrive. If it does, it doesn't mean you've gone wrong. I'd take it as a sign that the waiting is over.

Try something once, in private. Tell your history to yourself in a version where the wrong gets a single honest sentence and everything else is about what you did. You're not swapping the true story for a false one. Both versions are true. You're finding out how the other one sounds.

The decision

Everything so far comes down to one rule.

Whoever's fault it was, I ask what my next move is, and I make it.

The rule doesn't say the fault was yours. It doesn't tell you not to feel wronged, because you can't choose that, and the feeling is often correct. It doesn't tell you to leave the other person alone. It says that your life doesn't wait on them. I'd suggest you decide now, and once, that this is how you'll deal with grievances. If you don't, you'll find yourself deciding it afresh each time, in the heat of a new one.

The method has seven parts. Take them in order for your first grievance. After that you'll mostly need the second and the fourth.

Write the wrong down once. Say what happened, when, and what it cost you, in plain facts and with a date. This is your record, and you should keep it. Its job is to hold the truth of the matter so that you don't have to keep rehearsing it.

Ask the two questions separately. Whose fault was it? Whose move is it? Write the answers on different lines. If you notice the first answer leaking into the second, as in "theirs, so they should", start the second line again.

Sort it into three piles. There's what you can't change, what you can influence, and what you can simply do. Be strict about the first pile. It holds the past, other people's characters and decisions that are final. Be generous with the other two.

Pick the smallest move and make it within a day. A small move takes under half an hour and doesn't depend on anyone's reply. You could open the envelope, look up the complaints procedure, draft the email to your manager or ring the friend. If a big move is needed, find its first small piece, because the point is to start.

Give every complaint an address. Before you tell the story, ask yourself who you're telling and what you want from them. If what you want is sympathy, that's allowed. Say so, and have it once. Otherwise take the complaint to someone who can act on it, and bring a request.

Put a date on any waiting. Waiting is fine when you've chosen it. "I'll give them until the 14th, and then I'll write to the director" is a plan. If a wait has no date, it's the old habit again.

Decide what you'd do if the apology never comes. Then begin doing it. If the apology turns up later, you'll be in a better state to receive it.

Here's how it might go for the person who was passed over on Monday. The record is three lines, giving the job, the date and the cost, which is a pay rise and a good deal of pride. The fault is the department's, for deciding without a word to them, and perhaps for deciding wrongly. The move is theirs.

The decision itself goes in the first pile, because it's final. The second pile holds asking the manager for the reasons, asking what they'd need to show next time, and asking for a project that would

show it. The third holds updating the CV and finding out what similar jobs pay elsewhere. The smallest move is a two-line email asking for half an hour.

The complaint's address is the manager. The sister gets a shorter version, once. The wait gets a date, so if there's been no meeting in two weeks they'll ask again in person. Nobody apologises for a promotion decision, and they know that, so they can drop the wait for one and carry on with the plan.

If you have a long list of grievances, don't begin with the biggest. Begin with the one where a move is still open and cheap. One completed move will teach you more than a month of thinking about your childhood.

Some old grievances have no move left that involves the other person. They've died, or they're unreachable, or contact wouldn't be safe. The moves are then all on your side. You can make the record, and you can grieve. You can deal with the practical leftovers, such as the debt, the qualification you never got, or the friendships that lapsed during those years. A therapist may help with this, and chapter 12 says when I'd go to one.

Plans work better when they're tied to a moment. There's good evidence for putting them in the form "when X happens, then I'll do Y", decided in advance. Here are three I'd start with.

- When I catch myself starting the story with someone who's heard it, then I'll tell them what I'm going to do about it, or I'll change the subject.
- When I think "they should", then I'll ask what I could do.

- When something unclear stings, then I'll write down two other explanations before I respond.

One caution. If the move you have in mind is confronting someone who has been violent or threatening towards you, don't do it alone, and take advice first. A domestic abuse service or a solicitor can tell you how to do it safely, or whether to do it at all. The rule is about not waiting. It doesn't ask you to take risks with your safety.

Here's what I'd expect in the first weeks. The early moves will feel wrong. Opening the envelope will feel like letting him off. Ringing first will feel like losing. That's the old principle from chapter 3 objecting, the one that says whoever broke it should mend it. Let it object, and make the move anyway.

Some moves won't work, and the next chapter is about that. Some sadness may turn up, as chapter 10 warned. You'll still feel wronged from time to time, sometimes sharply. The rule is about what you do, so a bad feeling on a Tuesday isn't a breach of it.

I can't promise that people will start treating you better. What I'd expect is that you'll spend less of your time waiting on them.

When the move doesn't work

You asked your manager why you were passed over, and you got a vague answer and an uneasy smile. You rang the friend, and she was pleasant and distant and hasn't rung back. You put in the formal complaint, and six weeks later a letter came saying it wasn't upheld.

The thought arrives at once. "See? Nothing works. I was right all along."

Look at what actually happened, and compare it with what you had before. One move failed. That tells you about that move and that person. A manager who won't give you a straight answer has told you something important about your future in that team. The moves now open to you are different. You could ask someone else for honest feedback, or go to the manager's manager, or start looking elsewhere. Before you asked, you didn't know any of that. You were in the same job, knowing less.

In a useful sense a failed move still moves you, because it closes a question. Under the old habit every question stayed open. You never found out whether the friendship could be mended, so it sat there for years, neither alive nor finished. Now you have a better idea. That's sad, and it also frees up the attention you were spending on it.

I said in chapter 4 that some walls are real, and this is the place to be straight about them. Some organisations protect their own. Some systems are stacked, and a person on the wrong side of them

has fewer moves, and each one costs more. The rule still holds, but the moves look different. You find allies, because a complaint from five people is harder to ignore than a complaint from one. You go outside, to an ombudsman, a regulator, a tribunal or your elected representative. Or you leave.

Leaving is a move, and I wouldn't call it a defeat. You might also look squarely at a fight and decide it isn't worth what it would cost you, and that's a move as well. What separates it from the old habit is that you chose it, you know why, and you've stopped waiting. You can still think they were wrong. You've decided to spend the next two years on something else.

Then there are lapses. At some point you'll notice that you're a fortnight into replaying something, old or new, and that you've told it to four people and done nothing. When that happens, please don't conclude that you're back where you started. You know things now that you didn't know before, and a lapse doesn't remove them. Ask the same question, today. What's my move?

It's worth a minute to see what set the lapse off. Common causes are tiredness, an anniversary, contact with the person, or a fresh wrong that looks like the old one. I'd advise against counting days or weeks of doing well. A count turns one bad fortnight into a broken record, and that makes a second bad fortnight more likely.

Fresh wrongs will keep happening. Nothing in this book makes other people behave. A complaint made to the right person with a clear request does tend to get further than one told to the next

desk, so a few things may go better. Most of the change will be on your side. You'll have the same number of wrongs and spend less time stuck in each.

Some things need more than a book, and I'd see a doctor or a therapist in any of these cases.

- The event was frightening or violent, and more than a month later you have nightmares or flashbacks, avoid anything that reminds you of it, or feel constantly on edge. These can be signs of post-traumatic stress, and there are talking therapies designed for it that a doctor can refer you to.
- Your mood has been low most days for more than two weeks, or you've lost interest in things you used to enjoy.
- You have thoughts of harming yourself. Speak to a doctor or a crisis line today. If you think you might act on those thoughts, call the emergency services.
- You were abused or neglected as a child. A good therapist is a better setting for that work than any book.
- You feel wronged in nearly every relationship you have, you can see it, and nothing you try makes any difference. That's a pattern a therapist can work with.

If you're being harmed now, the advice at the start of the book still stands, and safety comes first. And if you take prescribed medication, don't stop or change it because of anything you've read here.

The next wrong

Some time in the next few weeks, somebody will treat you unfairly. It may be a small thing, such as a queue jumped or a favour forgotten. It may be a serious one. You can't prevent it, and neither can I.

The first day after it will matter most, and I'd plan that day now. Feel what you feel, since you've no choice about that. Tell one person who listens well, and let them be kind to you. Write down what happened, with the date. Ask the two questions on separate lines. Then find the smallest move and make it before you go to bed.

On most days that will be enough. A day-old wrong that you've dealt with like this is much less likely to turn into an eight-year-old one.

For today, go back to the grievance you wrote down in chapter 1. You've added the two questions to it, and perhaps the three piles. Find the smallest move on the page. Open the envelope, send the two-line email asking for a meeting, or ring her. Do it before you read anything else, this evening if you can. It will probably feel unfair while you're doing it. It is unfair, and I'd do it anyway.

I can't tell you that you'll stop feeling wronged. You have been wronged, and you may be again, so the feeling is often just an accurate reading of events. What I think will change is how long

each wrong holds you. A year from now I'd expect you to have about the same number of complaints against the world as anyone else, and to be waiting on far fewer people.

What they did is theirs to answer for, and I hope they do. You still have a next move of your own, and you don't need them for it.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical, psychological or legal advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor, therapist or solicitor who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes the split between the grievance and handing over, the five payments and five costs in chapter 2, the difference between holding to account and carrying in chapter 5, and the account of identity and grief in chapter 10.

Chapter 3. Brickman, Rabinowitz, Karuza, Coates, Cohn and Kidder, "Models of helping and coping", *American Psychologist* 37, 1982, pages 368 to 384. It's a theoretical paper. The authors call their preferred combination the compensatory model, and they say people in it need power more than they need motivation or treatment. Janoff-Bulman, "Characterological versus behavioral self-blame: inquiries into depression and rape", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, 1979, pages 1798 to 1809. The depression study compared depressed and non-depressed female students at one point in time, so it can't show which came first.

Chapter 4. The original work is Seligman and Maier, "Failure to escape traumatic shock", *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, 1967, pages 1 to 9. The revision is Maier and Seligman, "Learned helplessness at fifty: insights from neuroscience", *Psychological Review* 123, 2016, pages 349 to 367. Most of the brain evidence

comes from rats, and the authors themselves describe the application to depression in people as speculation. My step from it to grievances is a further stretch. Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale, "Learned helplessness in humans: critique and reformulation", *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 87, 1978, pages 49 to 74. Their theory also included a third feature, which is blaming yourself as opposed to circumstances. I've left it out of the chapter because the reader of this book is usually blaming someone else. I've used only the parts about explanations that are permanent and that cover everything.

Chapter 5. Luchies, Finkel, McNulty and Kumashiro, "The doormat effect: when forgiving erodes self-respect and self-concept clarity", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98, 2010, pages 734 to 749. Two of the four studies were experiments and two followed people over time. Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell and Worthington, "Efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions to promote forgiveness: a meta-analysis", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82, 2014, pages 154 to 170. It covered 54 studies and about 2,300 participants. The effect on forgiveness was moderate. The comparison that showed less depression and anxiety was with people who received no treatment at all, which is an easy comparison to win. The suggestion that writing a record weakens the urge to rehearse is my own.

Chapter 6. Bushman, "Does venting anger feed or extinguish the flame?", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, 2002, pages 724 to 731. Kjærviik and Bushman, "A meta-analytic review of anger management activities that increase or decrease arousal", *Clinical Psychology Review* 109, 2024, covering 154 studies and 10,189

participants. Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco and Lyubomirsky, "Rethinking rumination", *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, 2008, pages 400 to 424. Most of that work concerns rumination about low mood, and I've extended it to going over a grievance. Rose, "Co-rumination in the friendships of girls and boys", *Child Development* 73, 2002, pages 1830 to 1843. The follow-up is Rose, Carlson and Waller, *Developmental Psychology* 43, 2007, pages 1019 to 1031. For boys in the follow-up, co-rumination predicted closer friendships and didn't predict more symptoms. Frattaroli, "Experimental disclosure and its moderators: a meta-analysis", *Psychological Bulletin* 132, 2006, pages 823 to 865. The average effect across 146 studies was a correlation of .075, which is small by any standard.

Chapters 7, 8 and 10. Gabay, Hameiri, Rubel-Lifschitz and Nadler, "The tendency for interpersonal victimhood: the personality construct and its consequences", *Personality and Individual Differences* 165, 2020, article 110134. The study of unclear situations had 202 participants and a correlation of about .3. The lawyer study had 113 and a correlation of about .2 with blaming the senior partner. A further study of 181 people used a money-sharing game, and higher scorers took more from a partner who'd treated them unfairly, though that result sat right on the conventional line for statistical significance. The authors point out that their participants grew up in a society with a strong collective memory of persecution, and that results may differ elsewhere. They also say that this outlook can develop in someone who has never suffered severe trauma, and that being traumatised is a

different thing from having it. I'd add that a questionnaire score is a description of a tendency and says nothing about whether any particular complaint is justified.

Chapter 8. Zitek, Jordan, Monin and Leach, "Victim entitlement to behave selfishly", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98, 2010, pages 245 to 255. Three experiments with students. The favour in the first was helping the experimenter with an extra task.

Chapter 9. Davidai and Gilovich, "The headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry: an availability bias in assessments of barriers and blessings", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 111, 2016, pages 835 to 851. The seven studies show that people attend more to barriers than to benefits. They don't show that any particular person's sense of having had a hard start is mistaken.

Chapter 11. Plans in "when, then" form: Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119, covering 94 tests with a medium to large effect. The seven-part method is mine and hasn't been tested as a package by anyone.

Chapter 12. The guidance on post-traumatic stress follows the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, guideline NG116, "Post-traumatic stress disorder", 2018. It recommends trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy for adults whose symptoms have lasted more than a month. It's written for England, and services differ elsewhere.

One thing I left out on purpose. Many books on this subject use a model called the drama triangle, with its roles of victim, rescuer and persecutor. It comes from a 1968 article by the psychiatrist Stephen Karpman and it's widely taught. I couldn't find research testing it that I'd be happy to rest an argument on, so I haven't used it.