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Blame: A Human Response To Threat

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Understanding Blame

Blaming is a natural human response in an attempt to attribute responsibility for something perceived as unjust and threatening. When a situation is seen as threatening to us, our loved ones, the family farm or the family business, we may experience fear, anger, betrayal and hurt. Blaming is an attempt to bring some control into a difficult situation that seems unacceptable and unfair.

Blaming often accompanies anger and resentment. It's only natural to feel anger when one's livelihood, which has meant so much in the past and held so many hopes for the future, is in danger. Blaming occurs because the situation violates a sense of justice and is contrary to our expectations. So, we point fingers at the "cause" of the problem in the hope that we may have some control over the outcome. We blame just about anyone or anything – other persons, organizations or the government – for anticipated or actual events.

Blaming is often a simplistic response to a complex situation. ***While blame and anger are natural human emotions, they do not help in solving problems.*** We must move beyond blame, through each phase of the loss cycle, if we are to get on with the business of living.

Blaming and loss. Loss is defined as a *separation from, a detachment from something or someone of great value*. Whether an individual copes with a significant loss in a positive and a constructive manner depends upon their psychological responses and emotional reactions when adjusting to their situation. People often go through several phases or stages when adjusting to real or anticipated loss:

1. **Anger and resentments** are common emotions against what seems to be a cruel, unfair and incomprehensible fate. It is a reaction to a frustration, the source of which cannot be removed, so the person feels trapped and helpless. When this happens, the individual may project this anger onto more accessible or convenient targets (e.g., a spouse, family member, the government) or others involved in the loss chain.
2. **Fear and anxiety** are other emotional aspects of loss. Individuals may feel helpless, hopeless, hurt and anxious. A loss of a great magnitude means rapid change and demands great adjustment.

Starting over – with a new job, in new relationships, or in a new location – can be frightening. Since the loss is often not of one's own choosing, there may be great anxiety about an unknown future.

3. **Shame** occurs when someone is in a situation that is incompatible with the image that the person wishes others to have of him or her. Shame, guilt, anger and regret often overlap. A farmer who involuntarily leaves the farm may believe this reveals an intrinsic weakness or unworthiness in himself. He may blame himself for being in that situation and for the shame he has brought on himself and others.
4. **Guilt** becomes focused as the individual searches for the cause of the loss (e.g., "*What did I do wrong?*" "*If only I hadn't _____.*") It is human for a person to feel guilty and to want a chance to do something to change the situation or outcome.
5. **Depression, loneliness and withdrawal** are the most painful processes. When a loved one is removed from our lives, or when a ranch that has been in the family for generations is lost, people often are overcome by feelings of utter depression and isolation. Problems that are manageable when shared with another become magnified when faced alone. Rather than making sudden, impulsive decisions, it is best to delay major changes until an individual can gain new perspectives.
6. **Relief and recovery** are so intertwined with our sense of loss that they are difficult to admit and acknowledge openly. A feeling of relief does not imply any criticism of that which is lost. There is an overlap between relief and recovery; in fact, feelings of relief may signal recovery. As the individual brings closure to that painful experience, and as hope softens the intense feelings of loss, a new life can begin.

Only after the individual feels relief and a sense of recovery can there begin the return to meaningful life. People vary in the ways they move through these emotional stages and how long they spend at each stage. Sometimes we become stuck on a certain level and are unable to progress through the cycle.

Blaming in the Family

Blaming in the extended family. It is quite painful when blaming goes on within families. It is extremely difficult for the older generation to witness the loss of the farm that they, their parents and grandparents were able to hold onto through the farm crisis of the 1980s and the Great Depression of the 1930s. As a result, older family members may be in pain from seeing the younger generation in danger of losing the family farm.

Parents or grandparents may have lent money or cosigned loans for their farming sons and daughters, and perhaps may lose some or all of their savings for retirement. The fear of parents for their own future may be expressed through blame. Then, there is a love of the land itself, as well as a commitment to farming or ranching as a way of life, that makes it painful for the whole family when a financial crisis threatens its future.

The guilt that young and middle-aged farmers/ranchers experience is made even worse when they are blamed by the older generation. They may be struggling to keep the family farm or ranch, but feel like failures who have betrayed a generational trust because the land has been in the family for four or five generations. At this point, the blame they feel from the older generation may lead to anger and resentment, strained relationships and lack of hope for the future.

Spouses blaming each other. The story goes that when the boss is feeling grumpy he yells at the

employee who goes home and yells at his spouse. The spouse, in turn, gets after the child, who then kicks the cat. The point is that it's easy to take out frustration on those closest to us. In a family that is in danger of losing the farm, everyone is apt to feel hurt, angry and frightened. Just when husband and wife need each other most, each person's own painful feelings make it difficult to be understanding and sympathetic. One reason for blame and guilt is that each person may be at different stages coping with the loss. For example, the husband may be in the depression and withdrawal stage while the wife is still angry and blaming. In that case, the husband may think that she doesn't understand him and his feelings. The wife, on the other hand, may think the husband isn't trying hard enough or has given up.

Husband-wife blame can happen when the farmer/rancher, for example, works 16 hours a day, seven days a week, or stays awake at night trying to figure ways to cut corners and reduce costs. He may begin to blame his wife for spending more than he thinks she should on food, clothing, and other family expenses. It also might occur if a husband and father begin neglecting his wife or children.

Blaming also can occur if the wife has brought property or money into the marriage. It might be easy for her and her family to blame the husband if he has had direct responsibility for the day-to-day operation. Or, a husband or wife might blame their spouse who urged buying a piece of land, remodeling the home, or purchasing expensive equipment.

People blaming themselves. *"We're losing the farm and I'm the one who's been in charge. It must be my fault."* After the stage of anger and blame against others, farmers may begin to blame themselves and feel guilt and failure. They may ignore the fact that problems may have been due to factors beyond their control. Instead, they play the **"if only"** game: *"If only I hadn't bought so much machinery ... If only we hadn't borrowed money from ..."*

While some self-blame is natural, the intensity of guilt feelings and the length of time they persist can create a real problem for both the individual and the rest of the family. It is probably fair to say that the biggest reason for suicidal thoughts and feelings is the sense of intense guilt and failure on the part of the person experiencing great loss.

Blaming at local and national levels. During a severe economic crisis, there may be lots of blaming and finger pointing going on at the community, state and national levels. If people say that only "poor managers" are in danger of losing their family business, they are blaming the people themselves. These blamers apparently are ignoring the effects of the world market, the national political and economic situation, and U.S. and international trade policies. They are ignoring low crop and livestock prices, high variable and fixed costs and the relative high value of the U.S. dollar in foreign markets.

Avoiding the Blame Trap

There are ways to escape from the misery of self-blame or the hurt and anger of feeling blamed by others. Just as the willingness to talk with others is the way to move out of the loss cycle, giving and receiving support from others is a way to get out of the "blame trap." Here are some ways to begin:

1. **Don't let your anger and resentment spill out into hurtful words and deeds.** Talk through these feelings with someone you trust. Ask for forgiveness when necessary.
2. **Let people in the family know that you are blaming yourself or feeling hurt because others are blaming you.** A spouse, for example, may be more supportive of you if he or she knows you are already feeling pain. Ask for help when needed.
3. **If you are the spouse, parent, or other relative of a person who is feeling guilt or sadness, let**

the person know that you don't blame him or her. Try to tell the person that while you may be feeling anger over the situation, it isn't directed at him or her personally. Sometimes during difficult times, silence from family members can be interpreted as blame.

4. **Remind yourself and others about the many factors beyond personal control** that may have helped create your financial difficulty.
5. **Talk to others in a similar situation.** When you visit with a respected neighbor, relative or friend who is similarly facing a possible loss of great magnitude, you may see that he or she is not entirely at fault. This may help you quit blaming yourself.
6. **Remember, "to err is human, to forgive is divine"** If you hurt someone by your words, deeds or behavior, resolve not to do it again. Forgive yourself as you would forgive the other individual. Even if a decision turns out wrong that doesn't mean you are a bad or stupid person.
7. **Keep in mind that your family business is separate from the future of you as a person** and from that of your family. More and more families have faced and lived through the pain, anger and fear of losing their livelihood and have gone on to find new jobs and a new life.
8. **Talk to a clergy person or seek counseling from a qualified individual** if anger, resentment and blaming is affecting one's personal life and health, or when strains in the family relationship become difficult.

While blaming is a natural human response to anger and resentment, in the long run it doesn't help in solving problems. If blame goes on for a long period of time, families may miss the opportunity to come together to help each other through what is already a painful situation. One couple who learned to stop blaming made this comment: "*We may still lose the farm, but at least we've got each other. You don't want to hurt the one you love. It may be all you have left.*"

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