

A Moral Code

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Appropriately discussing the issue of personal responsibility requires the understanding that everyone develops what could be described as a value or belief system that becomes encoded within their being as a moral code. This moral code sets expectations for the individual's own behavior as well as expectations for others. Personal responsibility involves recognizing the freedom of choice and its incumbent obligation to choose wisely while living in harmony with personal beliefs and values, and accepting the consequences of their choices. The crux of the issue in relationship to personal responsibility does not lie in the philosophical battle over what is right or wrong, but rather in the inability of individuals to make decisions and behave in a manner consistent with their own moral code.

By the time individuals become teens and adults, much of their sense of moral right and wrong has been set. For parents and society to continue to barrage them with an endless diatribe of what they believe is right only builds resistance in most teenagers and young adults. Parents and society should redirect the energy they use in teaching correct principles toward strengthening the character of teens and young adults. Improving individuals' ability to be consistent and true to their own moral code will improve outcomes not only for the individuals themselves, but also for society.

In fulfilling their responsibility to themselves and society, individuals should be concerned with issues of accountability, selflessness, and their behavior's impact on others and their relationships. Unfortunately, society has replaced the importance and power of personal responsibility with the concept of personal rights. When individuals focus on rights, they reframe their thinking to worry only about themselves, their appetites, self-gratification, and lack of consequences for their own decisions and behaviors. Helping teens and young adults understand and make decisions based on a sense of responsibility — rather than ensuring his or her rights — significantly changes the decision and the behavioral patterns for good.

The solution to virtually all individual or social problems is for individuals to simply follow what they believe to be correct. The next part of the equation for individuals' personal responsibility and success rests on their ability to accept appropriate responsibility for their decisions and behavior. Today's society, unfortunately, has put forward very persuasive arguments, such as social relativism and the cry for tolerance and diversity, that encourage and allow individuals to abdicate their true responsibility.

Of all the decisions an individual makes perhaps none has as much importance as the decision of when to conceive and bear children. Unfortunately, in today's society many children are conceived and born by individuals using no process of active decision-making. The act of procreation has been reduced to a recreational activity. Few, if any, believe it is in the best interest of a child to be born to a single parent, and yet that is the choice made by nearly 40% of parents in the United States today. We must turn the tide of conception and childbearing from an unintentional accident with all of its inevitable unwanted consequences, to a well-thought out decision

with appropriate responsibility and accountability in place to ensure the well-being of all individuals involved.

The ills of most individuals and societies today are not as complex as many would like to make them. There is, in fact, a simple answer to most of today's personal and societal problems: it is simply taking personal responsibility, which primarily means finding the strength and courage to do what the individual knows to be correct, and then accepting appropriate responsibility for those decisions and actions.

Fred M. Riley has served as Commissioner of LDS Family Services since 1996 after serving six years as Assistant Commissioner. In 2008 he was asked to direct strategic planning and development of Health Services in the Welfare Department of the LDS Church. He has served as a Bishop in the LDS Church for thirteen years. Over the years his wide range of professional experience in both the for-profit and non-profit areas, as well as his background in counseling and ecclesiastical callings have allowed him to see the best in people, organizations and institutions around the world. He continues to be dedicated to strengthening organizations, institutions and governments in ways that would enhance the quality of life for individuals and families.