

No Excuses

JOAH SPEARMAN
INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT



The first step in personal responsibility is admitting you're wrong without making excuses. If there ever were two more important words than personal responsibility, I haven't heard them yet. Many of this nation's greatest leaders, past and present, agree and have spoken about personal responsibility and its role in the American way of life.

Ben Franklin said, "He that is good for making excuses is seldom good for anything else."

The lesson: don't make excuses.

Teddy Roosevelt said, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

The lesson: make the most of what you have.

John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

The lesson: seek to change yourself, then you can change the country.

Barack Obama said, "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for."

The lesson: no one can make your dream a reality except you.

With these four statements — don't make excuses, make the most of what you have, make a difference, and start now — we have a pretty good idea of what personal responsibility means.

So, now that we are done with definitions let's talk about applying those two words in our lives. Personal responsibility is an integral part of everyday life.

On sports teams, there are two kinds of players — those who constantly make excuses for failure and those who constantly look for ways to do better the next time. It's usually the latter who succeed in the ultimate game of life.

In the workplace we are familiar with different types of supervisors and not all of them are enjoyable. Some of us have struggled with that supervisor who makes a mistake or poor decision on a big project and chooses to blame a subordinate instead of accepting responsibility. Alternatively, the supervisors who are unafraid to admit mistakes in judgment are the ones for whom we enjoy working the most. These are the types of stories almost any adult can tell. Unfortunately, we don't spend nearly enough time sharing these lessons of personal responsibility with young people.

And, thus, personal responsibility, or the lack thereof, has plagued our country for years now, especially when discussing family planning.

A faction of the U.S. Congress fails to accept responsibility for the failed and flawed legislation that leads to more and more teen and unplanned pregnancies. Year after year, we hear the same talking points about the need to help families and not let the government get in the way of parenting or religion. But the last time I checked, church leaders didn't seem to mind doctors offering prescriptions for Viagra nor does Congress mind making legislation that dictates how sexual education is taught. So why do the words family planning incite so many tired and lame excuses and very little personal responsibility from those who shoot down good ideas without presenting better ones?

And much like the high unplanned pregnancy rate in this country, the trend of “opposition-without-recommendation” isn’t limited to Congress. Personal responsibility should be invoked at all levels. State health officials and legislators fail to accept responsibility for policies that prevent young people from getting much-needed information about their sexual health. Even parents sometimes refuse to accept responsibility for talking to their children about relationships.

So what can be done?

For starters, we can face facts. If you spill a drink on the floor, do you look for a broom? No and the same common sense should be applied to family planning.

It’s time to stop pretending that the broom — in this case, abstinence-only education — is the most effective tool to prevent teen pregnancies. It’s time to look for a mop, a paper towel, or some other proven method and not the broom that’s only spreading the mess instead of cleaning it up.

Don’t get me wrong, there are some “messes” that certainly can be remedied with a broom here or there. Abstinence is a very essential component of family planning. Teens should learn to treat sex and relationships with a higher level of respect and value. Waiting until later in life to become sexually-active is much preferred. I love the idea of abstinence education. It’s the abstinence-only part that gets in the way of truly making a difference.

Again, you can’t clean the wet floor with only a broom. We also need to use a mop and whatever other methods there are that have been proven to be effective at cleaning the floor or, in this case, preventing unplanned pregnancy in America.

Luckily, there are organizations and officials around the country giving us plenty of examples of how to approach this mess.

In Michigan, Surgeon General Dr. Kimberlydawn Wisdom is spearheading the state's efforts to reduce teen pregnancy by getting more involved in communities and cities like Detroit.

In colleges and universities all over the nation, health departments are stepping up their efforts to get information to students who are sexually active and are trying to make healthy decisions.

Neither Dr. Wisdom in Michigan nor those university health departments are proselytizing their beliefs about family planning. Instead, they are focusing on personal responsibility: "If you want to have good health and make good decisions about your sexual activity, we will help you as best we can."

Meanwhile, the opponents of such efforts are doing and saying the exact opposite: "We will help you by making your decisions about health and sexual activity for you; otherwise good luck."

Something tells me — based on the widely-available statistics at the state and federal levels that indicate a consistently high level of unplanned pregnancies — the latter approach isn't exactly working out the way you would be led to believe.

In writing this, it is my whole-hearted hope that the people behind such ineffective solutions will heed the words of Franklin, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Obama. Because, part of personal responsibility is admitting when you've been wrong instead of making excuses or blaming others.

Joah Spearman has written speeches for Cabinet-level politicians, articles for an array of magazines and websites including Tom Joyner's Radio Show and the University of Texas at Austin, and is the author of the upcoming book, Real Role Models, a profile book about successful African-American professionals. An avid blogger, Joah now lives and works in Austin, TX, where he consults a number of businesses

and non-profit organizations on communications strategies that rely on social media.