

Responsibility is the Key to Surviving and Thriving in Dangerous Times

Paul T. P. Wong¹

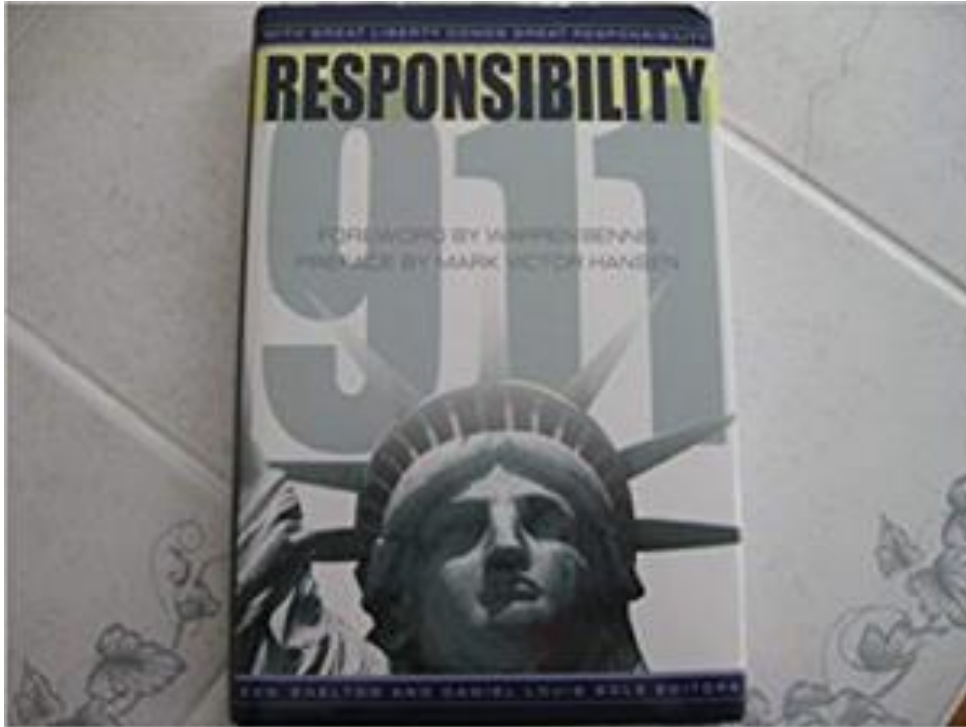
¹Trent University

Abstract

In a democratic society, people are free to choose, but are not free from the consequences of their choices. A sense of responsibility towards the self, others, and a higher authority serves the important function of guiding people to make the right choices. Therefore, the survival and wellbeing of individuals and society depends on the responsible use of freedom. Most areas of self psychology, such as internal control and self-efficacy, are predicated on the assumption of human beings as responsible instrumental agents (Wong, 2019a), but the important role of responsibility in wellbeing remains underresearched. It seems most appropriate that for the 18th anniversary of 9/11, this paper maps out major areas of responsibility for further research and draws extensive support from the book, *Responsibility 911: With Great Liberty Comes Great Responsibility* by Ken Shelton and Daniel L. Bolz (2008).

Introduction

It has been more than 10 years since I first read *Responsibility 911: With Great Liberty Comes Great Responsibility*. Recently, I reread this book for the purpose of writing this President's Column on the theme of responsibility. To my surprise, almost all the important things that needed to be said about responsibility were already well-stated in this book. I was so impressed with the richness of this edited volume that I was determined to write a review.



This book is an anthology of 70 essays on the topic of responsibility, written by many individuals from different walks of life, such as past U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, John McCain, Pope John Paul II, Desmond Tutu, Christopher Reeve, Oprah Winfrey, Dallin H. Oaks, Norman Schwarzkopf, Rudolph Giuliani, Jack Canfield, Tom Peters, Howard Gardner, Alexander Pattakos, and Paul T. P. Wong.

It is awkward for me to write a book review when I am also a contributing author. Therefore, I decided to write an essay on the responsible use of freedom and cite relevant materials from this book. I took on this challenging task because I was deeply convinced that this book should be in every person's hand at this critical time, when the future of humanity hangs in the balance. Unfortunately, this book is already out of print, but the quotations used will illustrate how this book was quite the treasure trove.

Historically, freedom has gained an upper hand in the struggle between democracy and authoritarian regimes. But the current political crises in Washington and London and the existential threat to the free world from authoritarian regimes can be attributed to the eroding of personal responsibility in the West.

My thesis is that freedom without responsibility leads to anarchy; responsibility without freedom leads to tyranny. Neither is desirable. The only acceptable condition is when freedom

and responsibility co-exist as inseparable twins, with responsibility being the big brother. Without either one of the pair, the system is not sustainable.

Even the strongest authoritarian regime is fragile because, no matter how brutal the oppression and how complete the surveillance and control, eventually it will collapse. The truth is that no government can forcibly suppress the basic human yearning for liberty, self-determination, and the freedom to worship God or a Higher Power.

America, the first successful experiment in democracy, remains the ideal form of human government and the magnet for all lovers of freedom and all the oppressed in the world. However, this experiment is doomed to fail, when anarchy prevails in the form of carnal indulgence and nihilistic violence.

The recent anti-government protests in Hong Kong lends some credence to my hypothesis about the basic human need for freedom. On one occasion, almost two million people took to the streets, risking the danger of teargas and baton attacks by the police. It reminds me of the early stages of the massive student protests in Beijing that ended in the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

It is most telling that Hong Kong protestors marched to the American consulate for protection from the prospect of bloody oppression by the Chinese Communist Party. These young protestors have paid a high price in taking a stand for freedom and democracy because they believe that it is their last chance to fight against an oppressive totalitarian government in Beijing, even if they know that they have little hope of success.



It goes without saying that Hongkongers, like everybody else, want to live a normal, peaceful life—going to school, getting a job, raising a family, and pursuing their own dreams. They don't believe that such liberty is possible when Hong Kong becomes just another city in China, because many of them are descendants of refugees, escaping to Hong Kong from

persecution in China. To them, no sacrifice is too great to protect the last haven for freedom within Chinese territory.

Many years ago, I wrote: “Never in the history of humanity had so many freedoms been won for the individual in so many countries. Yet, liberty without responsibility poses the greatest threat to democracy” (Wong, 2001). Freedom is never free. Countless people have given their lives in the struggle for democracy.

On this 18th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy, let us remember that life is short and freedom is fragile; we need to make responsible use of our time to build a stronger democratic society and defend our precious freedom. Mark Victor Hansen (2008) put before us the never-ending challenge of fighting for freedom and democracy:

You are coded at a DNA level to be free. Once you are free and love it, you want to help free every person everywhere. Abe Lincoln freed the American slaves in 1865. Yet today, over half of the world’s population is politically enslaved. More are economically enslaved. (p. 10)

This paper will focus on three main themes of responsibility—responsibility to the self, to others, and to God, supported by selected quotes from *Responsibility 911*.

I have always argued that responsibility is a master virtue (Wong, 2019b), responsible for all other virtues identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as illustrated by Figure 1.

Future research will show that the above three kinds of responsibility will map these three broad categories of virtue perfectly—head virtue, heart virtue, and spiritual virtue. It is my hypothesis that the most effective way to safeguard democracy is for all free people to internalize and practice personal, social, and spiritual responsibility.



Figure 1. How responsibility is related to different virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The Statue of Responsibility

Viktor Frankl has long contended that meaning in life is predicated on the responsible use of freedom of choice and personal responsibility. His vision of erecting a Statue of Responsibility was to remind people of the fragility of democracy without responsibility. *Responsibility 911* was originally published to promote the Statue of

Responsibility project, sculpted by Gary Lee Price (Figure 2), with Daniel Louis Bolz as CEO (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Gary Lee Price Sculpturing the Statue of Responsibility.



Figure 3. Daniel Louis Bolz, director of the Statue of Responsibility Foundation and co-editor of Responsibility 911: With Great Liberty Comes Great Responsibility.



This is what Frankl (1985) wrote in his bestseller, *Man's Search for Meaning*:

Freedom, however, is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility.

That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

As stated eloquently by one of the editors, Daniel Bolz (2008):

As Dr. Viktor Frankl stated, “Freedom is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half the truth. The positive aspect of freedom is responsibility.” There comes a time in a nation’s history when its core values must be revisited, re-energized, and re-enthroned, in order for that nation to endure. We live in such a time. We all know what America stands for. Our beacon of hope and freedom reaches out to all. For democracy to thrive under the banner of freedom, responsibility must co-exist with liberty. (p. 12)

For me (Wong, 2008), the value of the Statue of Responsibility lies in its symbolic value rather than its artistic appeal:

Can you visualize the Statue of Responsibility of two intertwined hands? It symbolizes one person helping another person. This statue is a powerful reminder of all the victims of oppressions and all the starving people in poverty-stricken countries. They are our neighbours. They are us. When we learn to fully appreciate the gift of freedom, not only as an inalienable human right, but also as the innate human capacity, then we are on our way towards creating a compassionate, responsible society. (p. 33)

Obama (2008) reminds us of both the exceptional freedom America offers, and the important principle of responsibility that comes with such freedom:

America is an unlikely place—a country built on the defiance of the odds; on a belief in the impossible. It’s now your turn to keep this daringly radical notion of America alive. No matter where you’re born or how much your parents have; no matter what you look like or what you believe in, you can still rise to become whatever you want; still go on to achieve great things; still pursue the happiness you hope for. (p. 128)

You need to take on the challenge because you have an obligation to yourself. Because our individual salvation depends on collective salvation. Because it’s only when you

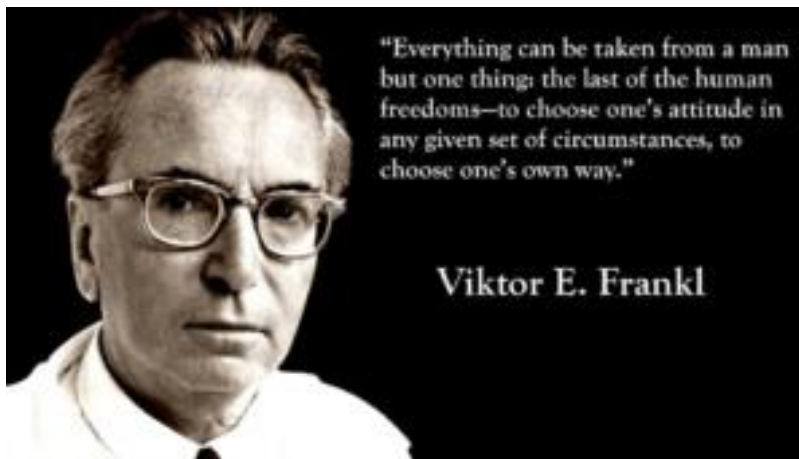
connect to something larger than yourself that you realize your true potential. Keep these principles alive in your own life” (p. 130)

Another way to look at responsibility is that it is part of our human nature and innate capacity. Our salvation, individually and collectively, depends on responsibility, which can be considered as nature’s way for survival and flourishing even in dangerous times. Here are the four immutable natural Laws of Responsibility:

1. The law of cause and effect: Your every action or decision has consequences.
2. The law of karma: You reap what you sow, both good and bad.
3. The law of effort: Your productivity depends on your efforts.
4. The law of habit: You are what you do repeatedly, leading to either success or failure.

Personal Responsibility to Oneself

The first responsibility is towards oneself. One’s survival and wellbeing depend on it. People with a conscientious personality will take their work more seriously, but everyone needs to develop a sense of ownership for their own lives and achievements. A sense of entitlement can destroy us.



Our capacity for freedom is the source of our greatest achievements and worst punishments. Responsibility is the key to prevent us from the broad way of self-destruction and guide us to the narrow path of striving to become our best.

Jack Canfield (2008) gave us the most important success principle—take responsibility for your life:

One pervasive myth in American culture today is that we are *entitled* to a great life—that somehow, somewhere, someone (certainly not us) is responsible for filling out lives with

continual happiness, exciting career options, nurturing family time, and blissful personal relationships—simply because we exist. The truth is that there is only one person responsible for the quality of the life that you are living, and that person is you! If you want to be more successful, you have to take 100 percent responsibility for everything that you experience in your life. This includes the level of your achievements, the results you produce, the quality of your relationships, the state of your health, your income, your debts, your feelings—everything! (p. 23)

It behooves us to meditate on John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s quotation as inscribed at the Rockefeller Center, which clearly states the principle of personal responsibility:

I believe in the supreme worth of the individual and in his right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I believe that every right implies a responsibility, every opportunity, an obligation; every possession a duty. I believe that the law was made for man and not man for the law; that government is the servant of the people and not their master. I believe in the dignity of labor, whether with head or hand; that the world owes no man a living but it owes every man an opportunity to make a living.

Do you want happiness and success? Do you want freedom from addiction and slavery? Then wake up from your semi-slumbering state of wandering through life and take full responsibility for your wellbeing and future each and every day. Stop wasting your time and wasting your talents and potentials. Get actively involved in life and discover your meaning for living. When everything fails, the human capacity of meaning-seeking and meaning-making can be the bridge that takes us from desperation to hope for a better future.

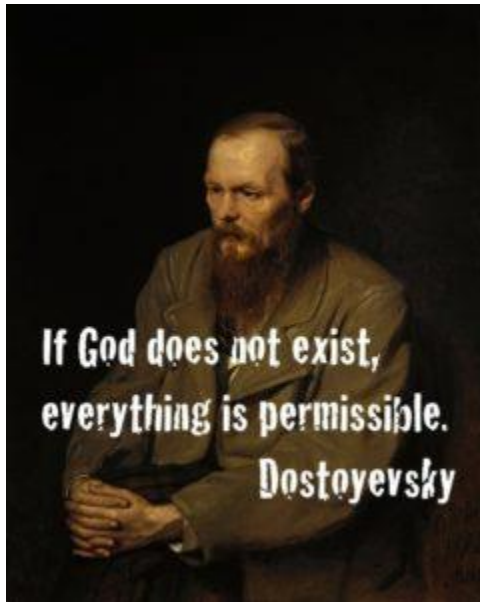
To Viktor Frankl (1985) and myself (Wong, 2012), responsibility equals meaning. Following Frankl, Wong defines meaning in terms of Purpose, Understanding, Responsibility, and Enjoyment (PURE). Frankl's genius was identifying responsibility as an important half of the freedom-responsibility pair, essential for launching the quest for meaning and self-transcendence.

As the first tenet of logotherapy, freedom-of-will is a necessary step for a meaningful life; it hypothesizes that people who believe in the inherent human capacity for freedom and responsibility, regardless of circumstances, will show higher autonomy, authenticity, and live more meaningful lives than those without such beliefs (Wong, 2014). Thus, apart from a deep

sense of responsibility, all the activities designed to achieve meaning in life would not survive the horrors of human existence.

Social Responsibility to Others and Society

Society as a whole cannot function or exist in harmony without civil responsibilities that counteract individuals' selfishness and greediness. Fighting only for individual rights will threaten social stability and wellbeing. Social justice is another urgent issue, to which psychologists can no longer turn a blind eye. Thomas Jefferson once said, "Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things."



Most pages of *Responsibility 911* are devoted to this theme, underlying the importance of social responsibility in a civil society. We are not only accountable to others for our words and actions, we are also our neighbors' keepers, as depicted by the Statue of Responsibility.

Howard Gardner (2008) pointed out that we are responsible not only for good work, but also for the wellbeing of others:

Most of us think in terms of our *rights* of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and a comfortable life. Yet, we all have certain responsibilities. We're expected to assume responsibility for our health and welfare; for those who depend on us—spouses, offsprings, and as they age, grandparents and parents; for those at our workplace, profession, neighborhood, community, and society. (p. 44)

Finally, we are all responsible for climate change. If we cannot protect our planet, humanity along with other animals will no longer have a home to live. Gifford Pinchot (2008) posed this environmental challenge to us:

Make every individual an ecological champion. Environmental responsibility can't be tucked away in a staff group; for peak performance, nearly everyone must feel the urge to serve both the customer and the environment. The primary job of leaders is lighting the fire that drives people to make the right decisions on their own and keeping the system from putting that fire out. Good leaders are making bold statements of ecological concern that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. (p. 159)

Human Responsibility to God or a Higher Power

A belief in God and supernatural punishment for moral and social transgression is favoured by evolution biology; such a belief was wired in the human brain to promote ethical behaviour and cooperation (Johnson, 2005). This hypothesis has plenty of empirical support in both ancient and modern societies. In an atheist society, there is less moral constraint; some if not all evils are permissible.

Throughout history, the greatest evils were committed by individuals playing the role of god without any fear of supernatural punishment. Human survival depends on our humility to recognize our creaturehood and the belief that we are held accountable for our behaviours by a higher authority.

Pope John Paul II (2008) emphasises that all people in this world hunger and thirst for human rights and dignity. He asked this rhetorical question:

How can a state call for trust and collaboration while proclaiming itself atheist and taking up positions against the faith and beliefs of its citizens? Justice, wisdom and realism all demand that the baneful positions of secularism be overcome. Every person must have the opportunity within the context of our life together to profess his or her faith and belief, alone or with others, in private and public. (p. 63)

Bishop Desmond Tutu (2008) also pointed out that if we want to make this messy world a better place, we need to collaborate with God. We need to relieve human sufferings, help the underprivileged, and serve others: "Remember, God has no one, except you" (p. 56).

Corporate Responsibility

Multinational corporations, especially big technological companies such as Google, Apple, and Microsoft, have increasingly become a major force in shaping entire countries and public life. Their policies and products can affect every aspect of society. That is why Wong, Ivtzan, and Lomas (2016) have emphasized the importance of social responsibility in good organizations.

Peter Senge (2008), founder of the Society of Organizational Learning, argues that profits cannot be the only motive for business. Excellent corporations must have a higher purpose:

Our work is all about making a better world. You take any area of real concern—like long-term environmental issues—it’s difficult to have improvement without a significant change in the way businesses operate. (p. 90)

Finally, Anita Roddick (2008), founder and CEO of the Body Shop, hits the right note on free trade. She emphasizes the importance of making moral business decisions, such as safeguarding the environment and protecting human rights, as far more important than just making more profits.

The world is like a runaway train on a collision course, accelerating its speed each day, because corporations want to produce faster, better gadgets to make more profits, without wondering whether it is good for human society. Waterworth Owen (2008) had this observation:

“Stop the world; I want to get off” is the wish of many feeling disillusioned with the manic “society of speed” we have created, or perhaps lacking the necessary courage, pray to find themselves lucky enough to be thrown clear of the collision. This need for speed pervades entire cities and many societies, every crook and cranny. (p. 19)

The Challenges of Responsibility

I have thought long and hard on the subject of responsibility (Wong, 2004). Regardless of one’s philosophical position on the thorny issue of free will and determinism, we do experience the freedom of choice in everyday living. Our choice may have been shaped by our culture and past experiences; nevertheless, we are conscious of our own intentions and agency in making the decision. It is in choices and actions that we reveal our authentic self:

“This lofty view of freedom ensures human dignity and lasting hope, regardless of the situation. With freedom, everything seems possible and every dream can come true. We

choose; therefore, we exist. We cannot escape from the reality of having to make choices. Deciding not to choose is still a choice. Since there is no escape from freedom, we might as well learn to use it wisely. The real issue in life is not what happens to us, but how we choose to react; not what circumstances we are in, but how we choose to live in these circumstances. It is in choosing that we reveal our humanity or lack of it. How empowering the gift of freedom! At the same time, how sobering it is to realize the awesome responsibility freedom entails. Since we do the choosing, we are responsible for the consequences of our actions. The immutable law of action and consequence operates in the natural realm as well as in the spiritual sphere. (Wong, 2004)

Jean-Paul Sartre (1973) affirmed the limitless possibilities of individual freedom. To Sartre, freedom is the fountain of hope, the foundation of all human values in an absurd and chaotic world. Freedom constitutes us as human beings. Freedom, not biology, is our destiny. Through the exercise of freedom, we can transcend our genes, our past history, and the environment. Our capacity to choose how we exist determines what kind of people we will become. Thus, “existence precedes essence”.

It is important to remind ourselves that desperate times do not automatically justify desperate violent action, as long as there is the option for responsible resolve to find creative solutions. The only exception that justifies rebellion is when life becomes unbearable under a brutal dictatorship. Hence, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” has become the rallying cry for all the uprisings and revolutions.

The relationship between freedom and responsibility is indeed complex, and so much hangs in the balance. The challenge facing psychologists is this: How do we foster the responsible use of freedom, and how do we develop leaders capable of promoting the common good without taking away people’s fundamental human rights for liberty and dignity?

Conclusion

I want to conclude this essay by quoting two passages from *Responsibility 911*:

When one dares to choose responsibility, one needs to be prepared for the arduous journey ahead. It is never easy to live responsibly, but the alternative is much worse. Only through carrying out our responsibility toward self and others, can we find fulfillment and selfhood. From a larger perspective, we need to embrace the heart of

darkness, the unbearable burden of our history, the horrors of a million innocent deaths, the unspeakable evils of tyranny, the bottomless abyss of human suffering – the endless drumbeats of terror and kills hammer a thousand nails into our hearts. But that is part of being human. We need to own up what is wrong in order to fix it. It is our willingness to accept the enormity of the human problems that test our resolve and courage to move forward. (Wong, 2008, p. 34)

Carter LeCraw (2008), CEO of American Values Investments, reminded us of the Founding Fathers' vision of values-driven investments as evidenced by the last line of the Declaration of Independence: "And for the support of this *Declaration*, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

RESPONSIBILITY MANIFESTO

**My life
is my
responsibility!**

I alone am responsible for all the major choices in life—the kind of person I want to be, the career path I want to follow, the future I want to create, and the person I want to marry.

I alone am responsible for my own wellbeing—physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. Therefore, I will do what is necessary each day to improve my wellness.

My optimism in eventual success depends on taking responsibility for my failures rather than making excuses or blaming external factors. My confidence comes from believing in the noble value of my goal, making sacrifices, doing my best each day, and praying for wisdom, guidance, and strength from God.

I am morally accountable for everything I say or do. I will never knowingly say or do anything to harm another person, but I am not responsible for how others react.

I am accountable for the quality and outcome of my work as a free agent.

I will reap whatever I sow. That is the natural law of karma.

I am responsible for my family, society, the world, and planet earth to the extent of my ability and influence.

My personal, social, and spiritual responsibility is always my main concern. That is how I can always maintain my self-respect and dignity, no matter what others say about me.

Happiness is having a clear conscience before God and having inner peace in my waking hours and in my sleep, knowing that I have done everything to the best of my knowledge and ability.

**Responsibility is the only key to living
a meaningful and productive good life.**

Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

LeCraw (2008) reminded his readers that the future of America and the free world depends on taking responsibility to carry out their vision:

These brave and visionary men committed (invested) their entire fortunes to *build* America; therefore, let us pledge our fortunes, our investment dollars,

towards *building a better* America and thus strengthening freedom and liberty around the world. (p. 180)

It is my hope and prayer that you will get a copy of *Responsibility 911* and meditate on its precious lessons on responsibility, as I have done in this essay. Remember, the greatest need today is the responsible use of freedom, which remains the most effective weapon we have to protect freedom and democracy and defeat nihilism, terrorism, and totalitarianism.

I all urge all my readers to think on the Responsibility Manifesto, and to let it guide their daily decisions and actions. I also encourage them to complete the Responsibility Scale as an exercise to find out how accountable and conscientious they are, and to what extent they take ownership for their lives.

The Responsibility Checklist by Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

Responsibility means having to deal with something within one's control; it also means a moral/legal obligation or duty. One is always held accountable for one's action to the extent one has instrumental and ethical responsibility.

In all cultures, responsibility is ranked as one of the most important virtues. The key to one's happiness and success is **taking responsibility for one's life**. Which of the following statements are characteristic of you?

Answer **Yes** or **No** honestly, if you really want to improve yourself.

-
- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. Do you make the best use of your time doing productive things? | Y / N |
| 2. Do you plan for your future and strive daily to achieve your life goal? | Y / N |
| 3. Are you conscientious in whatever you do, big or small? | Y / N |
| 4. Do you always get things done as promised rather than making excuses? | Y / N |
| 5. Do you take responsibility for interpersonal conflicts rather than blaming the other person? | Y / N |
| 6. Do you find ways to get things done even without the necessary resources and help? | Y / N |
| 7. Do you overcome obstacles rather than giving up in despair? | Y / N |
| 8. Do you pamper yourself and give yourself justification for not working hard? | Y / N |
| 9. Do you feel responsible for your "neighbours"? | Y / N |
| 10. Do you take responsibility for your own happiness and wellbeing? | Y / N |
| 11. Are you responsible for your decisions to difficult circumstances? | Y / N |
| 12. Do you take responsibility for doing the right thing no matter what? | Y / N |
| 13. Do you have the self-discipline to improve yourself each day? | Y / N |
| 14. Do you take responsibility for what you said rather than denying it? | Y / N |
| 15. Are you willing to confront your own Shadow and identify your blind spots? | Y / N |

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Wong, P. T. P. (2019, October 10). What is the Greatest Need Today? Responsibility is the Key to Surviving and Thriving in Dangerous Time. *Positive Living Newsletter*. Retrieved from <http://www.drpaulwong.com/what-is-the-greatest-need-today-responsibility-is-the-key-to-surviving-and-thriving-in-dangerous-times/>