

Unpack Your Emotional Baggage

Last week at a party, a woman I was chatting with said that she thought people give up on marriage too easily. Even if the marriage can't be saved, people need to dig deeper to understand their problems, she said. Otherwise, we just carry our baggage to the next relationship.

What is baggage, anyway? How do you know when it's weighing down your relationship? And what can you do about it?

Baggage consists of habitual beliefs, feelings, and actions that you learned in your relationship with your parents and other partners. Like all habits, they have become automatic--so automatic that you repeat them in your present relationship, even when they don't really fit the situation. It's hard to see what you're doing because it's second nature to you. And it doesn't help that your partner is doing the exact same thing. When you react to each other with hurt or anger that's really leftover from a past situation, it's confusing at best and often very painful.

In moments like these, you have three choices. You can sweep things under the carpet, grow apart, and have one of those polite, passionless marriages in which the two people lead parallel lives. You can wound each other over and over again, until your marriage becomes a source of pain rather than comfort. Or, you can learn how your relationship habits work. This brings you closer together and gives you the free choice to respond to each other in more loving ways. This is how you turn romance into a deep bond that grows over the years.

Since you are reading this, I assume you favor the latter approach, so here's a short course in how to unpack your baggage. Study the clues that reveal your relationship habits.

Clue #1: What did your parents model and teach?

Like so many people, Dave's parents showed they loved him through actions rather than words. They volunteered at his school. His dad coached his teams. When he left home, he knew how to balance a checkbook, apply for a job, and save to buy a house. What he didn't know how to do was tell someone when he felt sad, upset, or lonely. That kind of talk wasn't seen as productive in his house. He can still hear his mom telling him not to "borrow trouble," which was her view of emotional processing.

This style of operating worked OK for him when things were going well. But when something stressful happened, like a fight with his wife or the time he got laid off, he would find himself confused and overwhelmed, and sometimes a bit depressed. This was pretty frustrating for his wife, who tended to take it personally when Dave wouldn't talk to her.

Clue #2: How do you communicate?

Most of us have a tendency to either under react or overreact. If you had parents like Dave's, your natural tendency might be to avoid talking about relationship issues until you are so upset you absolutely have to or your partner turns up the pressure. On the other hand, if there was a lot of drama in your house, just deciding who's going to the grocery store might turn into a highly emotional discussion.

We have a natural drive to seek balance in our lives. If your habit is to under react, you'll probably find yourself in a relationship with someone who overreacts. Those of us who are constantly taking our own emotional pulse are attracted to the person who would rather clean out

the garage than talk about a feeling. At some level, we know this is going to make us grow and make our lives much more interesting. But sometimes the growth can be more than we bargained for. Then we think, to heck with healthy balance. We just long to do what comes naturally. And instead of seeing someone who can help us grow, we see someone who is doing horrible things to us.

Clue #3: What pushes your buttons?

When Karen and Jack were first married, they had a hard time talking about the every day financial details that every couple has to deal with. Karen had a way of “checking out” that Jack didn’t understand or know how to deal with. The result was that they overspent and some missed out on some opportunities. Karen’s family had been quite poor when she was young and she can remember times when her parents couldn’t pay the rent. Knowing too much about adult problems just overwhelms a child and that feeling of being overwhelmed can become a habitual reaction that continues into adulthood. When she and Jack would try to talk money, she would get that same feeling of panic that she did when she was young. A problem wasn’t just a problem to be solved. Anything relating to money felt like a crisis to Karen.

If you study these clues, your thoughts, feelings, and behavior will start to make a lot more sense to you. Once it does, you’ll find you have more ability to choose your reactions, which means you can respond more to the present and less to the past.

The best way to unpack your baggage is with the loving support of your partner. In fact, many relationship experts will say that this emotional growth *is* the main purpose of an intimate relationship. If by chance you’re reading this and thinking, that’s not happening in my relationship, don’t lose heart.

You may need more patience. We need an attitude of exploration but too often, we what we get is an attitude of accusation. How do you react when your partner is avoiding an important discussion? By telling him he’s cold and unfeeling and irresponsible? Then, he’ll never be able to open up and explore his relationship habits. Or maybe you turn the accusations on yourself. You think he’s not talking because there’s something wrong with you. If so, try to give yourself more patience. All that’s happening is your relationship is forcing you to grow and that’s the way it should be.

With loving patience, unpacking your baggage together can be richly rewarding and even fun. It’s the key to a relationship that not only lasts, but deepens and grows over the years.

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