



How Heavy Is Your Baggage?

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Imagine carrying a backpack filled with rocks everywhere you go. Now that's exhausting! It gives new meaning to the phrase "doing the heavy lifting."

If the weight of that backpack seems like too much to bear, just imagine the impact of the emotional baggage that we carry every day! Think about it . . . we *fear* getting fired, we *complain* about the service we receive, we express *disgust* over the politics of the nation, we *envy* the person "next door," we *worry* about meeting deadlines, and we *discredit* our colleague for "stealing" the promotion. Emotional baggage? You bet.

Now ask yourself: What do we gain by gossiping about a colleague, badmouthing politicians, or ranting about our frustrations on Facebook? Answer: We get upset, with little to show for our efforts. It's as though we believe that if we gossip, rant, and rave loud enough and often enough, people will accept our way of thinking. The truth is, besides being a colossal waste of time, nothing really changes — except that we're not much fun to be around. Who needs that?

Even when we don't overtly express our negative feelings of worry, prejudice, fear, criticism, guilt, anger, and envy, we play out these "dramas" in our heads like a chess master plotting his next few moves. These negative thoughts race through our minds like a whirlwind, making us more and more anxious each time we revisit them. In fact, some people get so overwhelmed and depressed that they worry themselves into a frenzy, making it tough to concentrate during the day and causing sleep issues at night. Taken to the extreme, emotional baggage can be absolutely debilitating if not controlled.

In days gone by in a labor-intensive society, hard work resulted in tired bones and sore muscles. In the Information Age, our bodies tell us that enough is enough by reacting with stress-related ailments ranging from headaches to backaches to anxiety attacks. And over time, these stresses add up.

The bottom line is that these "emotional tirades" are unproductive, unhealthy, and exhausting. They cause us to lose focus, snap at people we care about, and waste **precious**

time because we're stuck playing these ridiculous mind games. No wonder we're exhausted. (I'm even worn out writing this article.)

Take a Load Off Your Mind

Here are some simple suggestions to reduce your emotional baggage masquerading as worry, prejudice, fear, criticism, guilt, anger, and envy.

1. Food for thought. One of the first steps that people take when trying to lose weight is writing down the food they eat each day. It's surprising to see it in writing and represents an important motivator toward changing eating habits. By listing the negative thoughts that cross our minds each day, we can use the same technique to reduce our emotional baggage.

2. Keep it positive. Negative thinking isn't always bad. In fact, having some fear and worry keeps you on your toes, forces you to prepare *early*, and encourages you to anticipate future events by asking yourself, what if? That's positive. On the other hand, when emotional baggage makes you angry, increases your anxiety, or overwhelms you, it's a negative to avoid.

3. Is that a fact? It's very helpful to determine if the assumptions behind your fears, worries, prejudices, etc., are factual and realistic. When you're tired, emotional, or under stress, negative thoughts can spiral out of control and ruin your day, even if the premise behind your anxiety is far-fetched. That's a fact.

4. The sky is falling! How often do your fears and worries actually come true? If they rarely come to fruition, why are you getting all worked up? Odds are that you'd have a better chance of getting hit by lightning.

5. Make it happen. Many situations involve matters beyond our control. If you can't affect the outcome, you may as well enjoy your day — because even a Herculean effort won't make a difference. Therefore, if there's a problem that's waking you up at 3 a.m., and you can do something to make it better, even at that hour, DO IT. If not, it's better to *forgetaboutit* and get some sleep. Deal with it in the

morning. And if it's truly beyond your control, then all your worry and sleeplessness won't change the situation. It's time to put the worry behind you and move on.

6. Will it even matter? Some situations appear larger than life, yet in hindsight seem inconsequential. The key is to gauge the issue beforehand. As a simple test, ask yourself whether you'll remember the problem in a year or two. If not, it may be a trivial issue unworthy of your concern.

Break Free from Your Baggage

It's unfair to assume that it's easy to unpack the emotional baggage that we've accumulated over a lifetime. If Buddha's words are true, "What we think, we become," then it's vital to take control of our lives. But let's be realistic.

The anxiety that WE create in our minds is often worse than reality. We worry about impressing our friends, when the truth is that *real* friends remain good friends in good times and bad. We worry about being late for a meeting. If we are, it won't change mankind. We also get angry waiting home all day for a delivery person. And that too shall pass. Again, Buddha said it well, "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned."

The truth is, in most cases, life goes on. You have the power to make yourself happy or miserable during your life journey. There are very few times in life when we hit a wall so hard that we don't recover from it. We pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and move on. The difference is, if you take a pledge to be **positive**, and start reducing your emotional baggage, you're going to lead a happier, healthier, more fulfilling life. As Norman Vincent Peale once said, "Change your thoughts and you change your world."

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