

SELF-HELP

Discarding skeletons in our closets

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It's spring again, and with it comes the burdens and subsequent pleasure from a clean, fresh house. The burden of identifying old, worn, outdated, torn, and useless items in our closets and discarding them reaps the benefit of making room for new, more stylish or functional fashions



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with which to grace ourselves. Similarly, there is a burden and a benefit from looking inside our emotional closets to identify and discard the skeletons there: old resentments, hurts, fears, or even traumas of the past that consume emotional energy without providing us the fulfillment from relationships that we desire.

Discarding what I would call "emotional baggage" frees us up to be more open, spontaneous, and loving, reduces stress and related illness, and promotes a sense of inner peace.

Here are some suggestions for taking an inventory of emotions and determining which signify "skeletons in the closet":

**Frequently feeling the same emotion(s)**, even when not warranted by the situation. These emotions are likely to represent old wounds from the past. For example, several of my more astute clients have told me that they are frequently angry without sufficient cause, and they don't like themselves when they are angry.

**Overreacting to a situation.** Again, the emotions are in excess of what the situation warrants, suggesting that the reaction is coming from an old wound.

**Personalizing benign comments by others and feeling hurt.** While there certainly are some malevolent people in the world, most people I have met

intend no harm to others. When an offhand comment is perceived as hurtful (e.g., humiliating, attacking), it may be that the comment has been misinterpreted based upon emotional reasoning.

**Needing to be right, perfect, in control, the best, or safe virtually all of the time.** For example, people who frequently compare themselves with others, find fault with others, insist that others do what they want or do it their way, or avoid social situations or disclosure of personal information are displaying self-protective behaviors that suggest "skeletons in the closet."

Once the skeletons in the emotional closet are unearthed, they need to be understood. Putting a name to the emotion(s) or issue helps to separate the problem from the individual with the problem. To trace the source or underlying reason for the emotion or issue, we can ask ourselves when we first recall experiencing the issue or emotion(s). Allowing the emotions involved to float us back to the earli-

est time we felt those feelings can often be helpful in identifying the root cause of the issue/emotion. Once the source of the unhelpful feeling is understood, the feeling is often defused. The knowledge of how we could have responded differently to the early situation is also helpful in defusing the feelings. Finally, psychotherapy can be beneficial to those of us who are stuck and unable to clean out the skeletons without added help.

Fearlessly examining the demons or lesser hurts from the past frees our emotional energy to be more spontaneous, emotionally present, and loving to our friends and family members. This emotional work takes courage and faith in ourselves. Based on my experience with hundreds of individuals and couples over my years as a psychologist, I can truly say that the rewards are well worth the risk of delving into those emotional closets.  
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