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Unloading Your Emotional Baggage

An exclusive, two-part excerpt from the groundbreaking new book **Moving On: Dump Your Relationship Baggage and Make Room for the Love of Your Life.**

By Russell Friedman and John W. James

Part One: What is Emotional Baggage?

EXCESS baggage typically refers to luggage that exceeds the allowance you can check for free when you travel by air. The obvious reason for the limitation is to keep the weight of the aircraft less than a certain amount. If an airplane is overloaded, it may have difficulty getting off the ground. Even if it does take off, it may have trouble maintaining level flight. If we correlate those ideas to romantic relationships, we could use the phrase "excess emotional baggage" and draw the same conclusions. Emotional baggage is what people often carry into relationships. A relationship in which one of both of the partners is overloaded with baggage from prior relationships will have problems. If it manages to get off the ground safely, it still may have trouble maintaining level, loving flight. When those relationships crash, people will often say that one of both of the participants was carrying excess emotional baggage.



Emotional baggage is many things, including:

- the general misinformation we have all learned about how to deal with loss;
- the specific misinformation we acquire about our emotional reactions to romantic relationships that have ended;
the short-term habits we develop in reaction to romantic endings, which become long-term and get dragged into future relationships;
- the accumulation of undelivered emotional communications we store after romantic relationships end.

If you suspect you are carrying emotional baggage, then it makes sense to say that you haven't completed what was unfinished. While the idea of becoming emotionally complete makes sense, most people don't know what to do to achieve it. Completion takes work: it is the result of a series of actions that help you discover and communicate what was left emotionally unfinished at the time a relationship ended.

It is the shift from intellect to emotions that helps people discover and complete what is left unfinished when a relationship ends.

When you achieve emotional completion with prior relationships, you'll have the freedom to participate fully in a romantic relationship. An added bonus of completion is the ability to listen to and follow your intuition. This will enhance your ability to choose the person with whom you can develop a long-lasting relationship.

Looking back at past losses

To see what you've done, and how you've done it, it's essential that you identify the basic ideas you acquired for dealing with the emotions connected to losses of every kind. It's important to acquire this awareness so you can identify and dump the emotional baggage you have dragged with you.

There are many myths that limit our ability to deal with sad feelings. These myths contain the incorrect information that most of us use when a relationship ends. As you uncover what you were taught about dealing with sadness, you'll realize that much of what you learned might be called intellectual baggage. You'll become aware that you have never taken a close look at your beliefs to see if they are accurate or helpful for you. The repetitive use of unhelpful ideas is what creates the emotional baggage that has limited your ability to participate openly and fully in your relationships. Here are three examples that may ring true to you.

Myth 1: Don't feel bad

A child's early life is fine until the day he or she first hears three very unfortunate words with lifelong negative

impact – “Don't feel bad!” At first glance, they may not seem dangerous, but closer inspection reveals a serious problem. Up until the moment a child hears and understands those words, all of his or her feelings were accepted and allowed. Then something shifts, and from that point forward, only joy and laughter are encouraged. Sadness and tears are no longer part of the equation.

The classic example of this shift happens when a little girl returns from preschool with tears in her eyes. When asked what happened, she replies, "The other little girls were mean to me." The parent says, "Don't feel bad. Here, have a cookie; you'll feel better." When we look closely, we see that the message already has two parts, both with unfortunate potential consequences. First, it tells the child not to feel what she is already feeling. Second, it tells her to use a substance to distract herself from feeling bad. "Don't feel bad" is administered equally to both genders.

Myth 2: Replace the loss

You might think that more life- affecting events than hurt feelings at the playground would be dealt with differently, but you'd be wrong. When John was seven years old, his dog Peggy died. Peggy was his constant companion and best friend. John was overwhelmed with emotion when she died. Seeing his pain, his dad said, "Don't feel bad, on Saturday, we'll get you a new dog." The second part of that phrase translates into replace the loss. John's heart was broken, and the idea of getting a new dog added an illogical element to an already painful and confusing event. The message John received had two parts:

**Don't feel bad.
Replace the loss.**

John's parents kept their word and got John a new dog. But John was still reeling from the impact of Peggy's death and he was unable to connect with the new dog. Looking back, he realizes that his heart was broken. He couldn't allow himself to attach to another dog and get hurt again, so he gave the new dog to his younger brother.

As we see the idea of "replace the loss" when John's dog died, we can also reflect on the comment the little girl heard when the other children didn't want to be her friends. "Don't feel bad, you can make new friends" sends a clear message that she should somehow replace the friends. This establishes a belief that will be a real problem years later when she experiences her first romantic breakup.



And then came the fish...

When Russell was in the eighth grade, he fell in love with a girl named Karen. They talked about everything. They told each other their most important truths and secrets. They made plans for their future together. He trusted her more than he'd ever trusted anyone before. Life was good. Then one day, Karen decided she didn't want to be Russell's girlfriend anymore. He was crushed. He remembers the dark days and weeks that followed. He couldn't eat, he couldn't sleep, and didn't want to see or talk to anybody. After several days, his mom, trying to console him, said, "**Don't feel bad, there are plenty of fish in the sea.**"

That was the first time Russell knew he had been dating a fish. Sorry, we couldn't resist a little joke here, but almost everyone has heard some version of that line after a breakup. But the message Russell got from an important authority source – his own mother – was that he shouldn't feel bad and he should go right out and get another girlfriend. So he did. But he was not eager to tell the new girlfriend everything and get hurt again, so he held back. He did not feel he could ever trust her. Little did he realize that by holding back, he was going to ruin that relationship. When it ended a short time later, she said, "I don't want to be with you because you never let me know who you really are." By age 14, Russell had already tried to limit the pain of the first breakup by rushing into a new relationship. Not only did it fail to reduce the emotional pain, but it also made him more fearful, and he withheld even more the next time. Without realizing it, Russell was beginning to accumulate the emotional baggage he would drag into future relationships.

There is an interesting similarity in the three different scenarios. After the first breakup, Russell had been instructed, just like the little girl from the preschool and like John after his dog died, with exactly the same ideas.

**Don't feel bad.
Replace the loss.**

When we hear those messages, they become the default setting we will use when similar events happen later in our lives. When romantic relationships end, we will automatically believe we shouldn't feel bad and we should go right out and find another love. Why? Because those messages have been pounded into us since we were in preschool. Trying not to feel bad when we do inevitably compounds the problem, since it doesn't allow us to be honest with ourselves. Activating "replace the loss" by jumping into a new relationship when we are still raw from the end of the previous one makes no sense and almost guarantees failure.

Replace the loss doesn't work for a few simple and obvious reasons: **All relationships are unique; there are no exceptions. And relationships are neither replaceable nor interchangeable.**



John W. James, co-author of *Moving On: Dump Your Relationship Baggage and Make Room for the Love of Your Life*, explains what can happen – if you're willing to do the work. Here is his inspirational story:

TWENTY-SEVEN years ago, I found myself facing a familiar dilemma. I'd just experienced yet another relationship breakup. I was determined not to make the same mistake one more time. I hope my story makes it clear that it is possible to do something new and get a better result.

I am a great believer in putting pencil to paper to achieve clarity. The more I thought, the more it became obvious that the issues that had caused this breakup were the same as in most of my previous breakups. I can't really say where my new awareness eventually came from; I don't remember. But the idea was very clear: back up a step in the process. So I decided that rather than just looking at past relationships that had failed I'd now look at how I was picking the people I'd been in relationships with. My new idea was to try and pinpoint what criteria I was using to select the people I dated.

Across the top of the page I wrote, "Dating Criteria." Then I started to ask myself what it was about the last few women I had been involved with that attracted me to them. The first entry was easy:

1. Good looking

Then I wrote down the number 2.

So far I had the following:

1. Good looking

2. (And this is where I hit a snag.) There was no number 2. It was a "big-time revelation" moment. Where had I ever gotten the idea that good looks were enough to build a relationship around? I realized something very simple. There's nothing wrong with good looks, but alone they are certainly not enough. It was becoming very clear that the singular "looks good" criterion was at the root of the problem. But the unanswered question remained: "What criteria should I be using?"

First try – wrong turn – dead end

Next I made a wrong turn. Thank goodness I saw the error before I took action. I made a list of what I wanted in the other person. It was a very detailed list.

She had to be the following:

- Good looking
- Well-read
- Sexually compatible
- Interested in current events
- Funny
- Able to make me laugh
- Supportive

I sensed that something was wrong and it wouldn't work. I stared at the list until it hit me. This time I had one of those lightning-bolt flashes. I realized that my list was based entirely on the concept that someone else's attributes were 100 percent responsible for me finding the right person and making me happy. It was a set of criteria that was completely outside my control. It was also enormously arrogant of me. And in the final analysis, that list of criteria was completely intellectual.

Back to the drawing board

After careful consideration, it became clear to me that a better approach would be to start with me. What was important to me, about me? What were the things about me that I would not compromise? What were the things that were important enough to me that I should at least be aware of them in advance, so they wouldn't surprise me

later? What was the truth about me?

The "new" new criteria

1. Physically attractive (to me). What constitutes good looks? This is a personal issue for each of us. But there's always something about a person, usually visual or verbal, that causes us to want to meet them.

After writing that down, I found the first new piece to my personal puzzle. In 1975, my daughter was born. Several years later, my wife and I lost a son shortly after his birth. A huge percentage of marriages that experience child loss end in divorce; that is what happened to ours. After the dust of the separation and divorce settled, I made a solemn vow that my daughter would always be a part of my life. Now my new plan had two items:

1. Physically attractive (to me).
2. My daughter must be part of my life.

Another piece of truth about me is that I like to watch sports. I like to attend games. I like to coach kids. I could honestly say that I did not see myself ever changing that. So it went on the list:

1. Physically attractive (to me).
2. My daughter must be part of my life.
3. Sports are important to me.

By now I realized that I was on a very important search. It was getting easier. The search was about me and who I was.

Truth is very important to me. So I added it to the new list:

1. Physically attractive (to me).
2. My daughter must be part of my life.
3. Sports are important to me.
4. Truth is essential to me.

When I go to a party, I like the freedom to roam around and talk to a lot of people. I've been uncomfortable with women who make me responsible for them, kind of like a babysitter. I realized that any woman I might share my life with would have to be able to make conversation with others:

1. Physically attractive (to me).
2. My daughter must be part of my life.
3. Sports are important to me.
4. Truth is essential to me.
5. No babysitting.

I was on a roll. Then I thought that I'd better road test my new plan. I decided that when I saw someone that I was attracted to, I would ask her out to coffee. No date, just coffee. Obviously, before asking for the coffee date, I had already made my personal decision that she was good looking – to me. During that first meeting we would simply talk and see if we had anything in common. Then I would listen for my intuitive voice and try to be very honest with myself. This new plan was not without its frustrations. After about five first-coffee dates that didn't lead to a second one, I began to think it would not work. But fortunately, I also thought that five examples might not be enough. So I carried on.

The conversations that led to coffee number two were great. In fact, several of the women were interested in things that I also found interesting yet were new to me. This led to me visiting book stores and learning about topics with which I had no previous experience. It might seem like I was drinking an awful lot of coffee, and you might have begun to wonder if there were ever any first dates. Yes, there were quite a few. And every first date involved my daughter. If indeed she were number two on my list of truths about me, then there was no reason for my beautiful daughter to come as a later surprise to anyone.

I was amazed by the number of women who put themselves in competition with a four-year-old. In those cases, there was no second date. I called each of these women and told them that I thought they were truly nice people but that I didn't feel as if we were right for each other in a long term relationship. Many thanked me for that simple courtesy. I also made some new and very dear friends.

There were several second dates. These always involved a sports event of some kind. There were even some third dates that involved parties. I would always take my date around and introduce her to many people and then excuse myself to go and have a conversation with someone else. Some of these women would fall right into the theme of the evening's party and make new friends and carry on conversations throughout the night.

(It could seem as if everything that was happening was entirely based on me and what I wanted and needed. But many of the women I met were also trying to find out what was true for them and which of their own criteria were most important. It was not a one-way street.)

Were there any who were right? In fact there were two. In both cases I thought long and hard about formalizing a relationship. During this whole period of about two years I was also working hard on intuition. I tried to listen to it and not disregard the small messages that came to me. Several dramatic examples of following these intuitive pieces of information helped me begin to learn to trust my intuition again. Intuitively I knew the relationships were wrong for me. I had long and sad conversations with each of them as I did not want to lead them on. We're still friends to this day.

I took completion actions before starting over

There was heartache in each of those two breakups. But because I help others deal with the pain caused by endings, I know to take the actions I teach. It was essential that I complete my relationship with each woman before dating again. So I did. In spite of those near misses, I had a sense that something important was going to happen. I was changing in a very positive way. My dual quest for the discovery of my truth and someone to share my life with was actually working, although the latter had not yet been achieved. I was feeling hopeful.

I thought you'd never ask

Here's the rest of my story: One night I was standing in a parking lot talking with an old, dear friend. A woman friend of hers came walking up. We were introduced, and the three of us chatted for a while. And I knew! Yes, I heard an intuitive voice in my head saying, "This is the person who is right for you." That little meeting and conversation ended and we all went our separate ways. But I couldn't get her out of my mind. So I called up this beautiful woman and invited her to coffee. The conversation went really well. A couple of days later we had another coffee date. Again, I found that we had many things in common and at the same time we were delightfully different. Several days later I called and asked her if she would like to go on a triple date. I told her we would be going to a wildly exciting event with my daughter. We met for dinner and an amazing thing happened. After about five minutes she and my daughter could not have cared less whether I was with them. After dinner, we went to the circus. Throughout the evening, they were enthralled with each other and having the times of their lives.

Our next date was to a Dodger game. We talked and laughed, and I was busy praying that the game would go into extra innings. I was in heaven. And even though I was 100 percent certain that she was a person who was right for me, I still continued with my plan. On our next date, we went to a party in Westwood. Shortly after we got there, just as I was about to give her my little talk about introducing her to some people and then going our separate ways for a while, she turned to me and said, "I'm going to visit with some of my friends. Let's meet back here in an hour." I could have kissed her; I think I did. We continued to date for several months. My intuitive voice kept saying everything was okay. Everything felt right. Eight months later we were married.



So what happened? It's now 27 years later and we are closer and more considerate and we are more in love than ever before. Looks like the new plan worked very well.

Excerpted with permission from Moving On: Dump Your Relationship Baggage and Make Room for the Love of Your Life by John W. James and Russell Friedman. Using ideas and skills gleaned from their work with thousands of clients at the Grief Recovery Institute, the authors (Grief Recovery Handbook and When Children Grieve) show readers how to understand, complete, and ultimately move on from failed relationships so they can open themselves up to love. Written with honesty, wit, and humility, this book does more than examine loss: it provides a practical roadmap to a better life. Read & take action!