

# Unpacking Emotional Baggage

What is Emotional Baggage? “the feelings you have about your past and the things that have happened to you, which often have a negative effect on your behaviour and attitudes”.

*Getting your emotional baggage out in the open can support a healthy relationship in the long run.*

We all have emotional baggage going into a relationship. After all, you haven't been living in a bubble until you met your partner. Our emotional baggage can get heavy when we carry it alone, so it helps to share the load with a trusted partner. On the other hand, you don't want to disclose your entire past to someone on the very first date. So when do you start to unpack your baggage in a relationship and how do you get help with this intense task?

## *Where Does Emotional Baggage Come From?*

Emotional baggage is often known as past traumas, the deep shameful secrets, and past relationship pains. It can come from your childhood experiences, past relationships, or any trauma you have experienced. Often this stuff can weigh us down and prevent us from having healthy relationships. The most generic answer as to where emotional baggage comes from is “the past,” but let's get more specific. Your past obviously includes a childhood, but it also includes friendships and probably romantic relationships, maybe even serious ones. You may also have experienced some trauma that impacts the way you think or interact with others. Trauma can look differently to different people; it might be more apparent like abuse or physical injury. It could also be losing a job, a break-up, or the infamous “daddy issues” and “mommy issues.” Regardless of where it came from, the effects of trauma may be obvious or subtle but be sure that it'll crop up in the future if you have not processed it (and it can even show up if you have!). We'll circle back to this in a bit.

## *How Do I Start Dealing with Emotional Baggage Now?*

Past relationships leave us with relational habits that we may or may not recognize. These habits can crop up in good or bad ways, depending on the experience. Common areas include: how we show affection, how we handle conflict, how we feel about sex and sexuality, how we feel about money, how we feel about intimacy and vulnerability, how we feel about our parents and the parenting of our own children, etc. You may have heard people refer to “triggers” — what someone typically means when they use this word is a sensitive area that tends to trigger a reactive response. For example, let's say your family interrupted a lot and you did not feel you could get a word in edgewise growing up. If your partner interrupts you, it may trigger a reactive angry response that is not necessarily proportional to the situation at hand. Aside from relationship patterns, there are also incidents that can create emotional baggage even if it only occurred once; we often refer to this as trauma.

Processing trauma is anything but a “Band-Aid” fix (but seriously, wouldn’t you love if these or these could fix the problem?!).

Dealing with trauma often means looking not just at the root cause, but how symptoms are expressed (anger, withdraw, anxiety, etc.) and how to manage these symptoms as well as their effects on ourselves and our partners. Sometimes you can provide yourself with the compassion, validation, and emotional tools you need to deal with trauma, but you may find that a therapist can be incredibly insightful in helping to identify trouble spots and provide practical coping tools. Trauma is also known for triggering intense responses, especially by those close to us like our best friends or partners, but truly, any of the above could be triggered even in completely platonic relationships.

***Individual therapy and the right timing are key to unloading your emotional baggage the right way.***

It’s also important to recognize that efficiency and emotional baggage are terribly incompatible. When we deal with emotions, we have to be sensitive to triggers and create an environment of safety to deal with the root issues. This is why therapy can be so helpful. It also emphasizes that timing is crucial. You may know that you have certain issues and want to get them handled, but this process is often a layered experience to unravel baggage. Certainly, awareness is the first step and while the cycle to processing trauma can occasionally be simple, it’s often a circling path to confronting things until they have healed and are not as triggering anymore. It may always be a sensitive area, but with some awareness and practical tools, you can learn to manage your baggage, so it doesn’t hold back your relationships. One of the ways to process emotional baggage is by processing it with someone safe in your life, someone you can trust and create a safe space with.

***How to Unpack Emotional Baggage with a Partner***

***The Early Stages:***

During the beginning of a relationship, you’re just getting to know the basics about someone. You want to be yourself, but it’s scary and probably too soon to start unloading all of your baggage onto your new partner. The attachment is still building and not yet secure. In the early stages of a relationship, you might discuss past relationships and the generalities about your relationship with your family, without getting into the nitty gritty about traumas or deep emotional issues. It’s okay to be honest here but you don’t have to re-live experiences or go into deep detail.

***Secure Attachment:***

Once you are exclusive with your partner and start to feel a secure bond, you can start to delve deeper into your past and unload pieces of emotional baggage. Only you will know when the attachment is secure – there is no set timeline. For some people, it may take only a few months and for other people it might take longer. Ultimately, you want to be in a place of full trust where you’re ready to start sharing your past hurt and trigger points.

This person will have shown you that they are safe and trustworthy so you can begin by sharing one thing at a time and learning not only how to share, but if your partner can handle what you need to process.

### *Unpacking Emotional Baggage:*

When you start to unload your baggage, keep in mind that your partner will need to take in and process the information. Hearing about your past trauma or where your insecurities come from can be a lot for your partner to think about, so it's important not to flood him or her with too much emotion and information at the same time. In other words, unpack your baggage piece by piece, don't dump it over your partner's head at the same time. Keep in mind that your partner may also have trauma that gets triggered by your own so try to be sensitive to one another through this experience. It's a good idea to have a few phrases that indicate what's going on internally. For example, you might say "This is a sensitive area for me to talk about" so that they realize you are sharing something serious. A great way to respond to someone sharing their baggage is to let them know how it impacts you, "It breaks my heart that this was your experience. I hate that you hurt this way."

### *Understanding Trauma:*

Some people have massive trauma in their past and trying to deal with it in a relationship can wind up being chaotic. If you notice that you are highly reactive, individual counseling can help you understand why you respond as emotionally as you do to certain things. Counseling helps you figure out what presses your trauma buttons and to understand that your past trauma is what makes you act a bit crazy. The more you understand and can identify your triggers, the more you can turn to their partner and say "My stuff is coming up and I am scared. When you say [XYZ], it brings it all up for me." The more you can turn to their partner and say it, the more opportunities your partner has to understand and support you.

Most people try to use the excuse "The past is the past and I'm over it. I have moved on." But your body remembers. Your sub-conscious remembers. Our bodies respond to our experiences in ways that pure cognition cannot rationalize.

## *The How to Guide on Unpacking Emotional Baggage*

1. **Meditate.** Neurologically speaking, meditation connects the emotional and logical parts of your brain, so rather than getting carried away with your emotions you actually become an observer of them. That means that instead of spiraling into depression you can literally stop yourself and say 'hmm, I have some sadness today'.
2. **Explore inwards.** When an emotion comes up, acknowledge it, accept it and explore it to find out *why* it's coming up and *where* it's from. It could even be a seemingly insignificant event in your childhood that you didn't realize bothered you, or a recent event that wasn't fully dealt with.
3. **Help yourself.** Work to unpack every trigger, every self-limiting belief and seek the help you feel is right for you. If that's acupuncture then go get it. Beating up a pillow in your room? Do it. Counseling? Book it. Everyone needs help now and then, whether it's to talk something through with a friend or booking to see a professional, don't stop yourself from getting what you need because of societies stigmas.

4. **Be compassionate to yourself.** We are all human, and having emotions is perfectly normal – especially negative ones. Even if you have really difficult emotions like guilt and shame come up for how you acted in a certain situation, show yourself compassion and acknowledge that you acted in the best way you could with the tools you had at the time. Be compassionate like you would to a friend.
5. **Listen to yourself.** You're the best guide for you! So, tap into your feelings and let them steer you on your path. Even with these 5 steps – if they don't feel right for you, don't do them, just explore what *does* work for you right now and deal with what you can when you're ready. And if you're not ready that's ok too, just listen to your body and follow what feels good for now, as long as you feel like you're processing those emotions in some way, shape or form.

Like most things in life, unpacking emotions takes work. It can be uncomfortable at times and it can require persistence to get through the sticky parts but the rewards are worth it,