

Look Closely. Along shadow maybe

clouding your future. It's the shadow cast by the pain in your past—the parent who wasn't there, the ex who betrayed, the boss who humiliated you.

Or perhaps you're stuck in place by the unhappy residue of your own bad choices—the job you should have left earlier, the sexual secrets you keep, the doctor's visit you delayed.

It is heart-stoppingly easy to get stuck in the darkness of bad memories. They are emotional quicksand and exert a strong downward pull on the psyche.

Sometimes the past traps us through unexamined clutter spilling from every tabletop and corner, elbowing out the new and the possible. Or it commandeers your daydreams, obsessively replaying old losses, past injustices, nagging guilts about the sibling you tormented or friend you let down.

Perhaps it lives on in litigation of a marriage although the divorce is a decade old, or in rage against the parent who belittled you, or at yourself because you once fell for someone else's lies.

The strong urge to right wrongs that can never be erased, to revisit hurt from which you should have been protected, to cling to lost love, to brood, to avenge—these are natural inclinations, to a point and for a time.

feel—still angry, sad, or anxious, even though you wish you weren't—but holding out the possibility that someday you might feel better.

Is there anything you can't get over? Yes and no. You don't get over it, but you might find a different place to put it. You don't forget it, but the thought no longer intrudes.

**Acknowledge your secrets.
Nothing nails us to the
past more than the energy
it takes to keep them.**

You don't pretend it wasn't bad, but you have a sense that you can heal. We don't get over the past. We get past it.

An Opening Act

GETTING PAST YESTERDAY demands both thinking and doing. It's things we do as well as things we think that hold us unwittingly in a painful place. Arguably, it's easy to shift

Time's up.

IT'S AN AXIOM of psychology that we are some recombination of all of our yesterdays. To move forward wisely, we are therefore often urged to look back. But there's a point where appreciation and analysis of the past become gum on your psychological shoe. It sticks you in place, impedes forward motion, and, like gum, it doesn't just disappear on its own. You need to do some scraping.

The power to get past the past does not lie primarily with the nature of events themselves. They count a lot, sure. But so do the steps forward a person is willing to take and how much effort he or she is willing to expend to push some emotional rock up, up, and out of the way.

Getting unstuck involves remembering an injury, but reconsidering it from a different, more empathetic perspective. Moving forward may mean reconfiguring a relationship so that you are less giving, more realistic.

But it rarely means cutting off those ties. Think alteration, not amputation. Getting unstuck requires being truthful with yourself about how you

behaviors—that is, once you pause to consider them. More intricately, getting beyond yesterday is a psychological high-wire act of letting go, of reevaluating experience and relinquishing old perspectives, of discarding cherished but mistaken beliefs (often about what it takes to be happy), of delicately but deeply recalibrating thoughts and feelings.

Letting go means something has to open in your head and in your heart, but that shift, that easing, comes up against our own invisible, often implacable resistance. A great deal of that resistance comes from nothing more pedestrian than the great human reluctance to change. Even change for the better is still change, often initially dreaded and avoided. We are creatures of habit and of inertia.

A great deal of psychological research attests to resistance even to positive change. It is one of the great marvels of clinical observation how much discomfort people can tolerate before they acknowledge the need for change. And change is always uncomfortable, at least at first.

Letting go fights more than the powerful magnet of the status quo. It also comes into conflict with compelling, distorted thoughts that make holding on appear reasonable and right. We are given to magical thinking (“If I make more money, she will come back to me”), to delusions (“I must keep gathering this evidence. Somehow, I can be proven right if I stick with it”), to sheer errors of logic (“My kids have never appreciated or admired my

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collections, but they will someday. That’s why I have to hold on to them”). Each thought pattern is a cunning argument against letting go. Each needs to be directly challenged and rescripted before your heart and mind really open to a new state.

At its deepest level, the prospect of letting go forces us up against our three strongest emotional drivers: love, fear, and rage.

The tentacles of rage are easiest to understand, although difficult to escape. To let go of a past injustice that preoccupies us, we must relinquish our natural burning hope for equity, or at least for exposing to the world the wrongdoer—your brother, your crooked business partner, your vicious former friend—for who and what he is. Dimming that eternal flame of rage is effortful. The bad guy won. It happens.

Love itself is a powerful counterweight to letting go. Even when a relationship is out of your life—long after the breakup, the divorce, even the death—it may occupy your heart and your head. Letting go means loosening that internal attachment, and therefore losing that love—again.

What makes the fresh loss worthwhile, of course, is that letting go of the old attachment opens up the real possibility of a new one in your life. That would be sufficient, even inspiring motivation, except that it leaves a blank spot where the future lives, and we mostly fill such blank spots with fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of failure. Fear of future loss and additional pain. Fear makes us cling to what we know, however bad it makes us feel.

Letting go means confronting these invisible emotional barriers: bringing them into your awareness and then struggling against them. It means challenging irrational, unproductive thinking until you get your head on straight; it means facing up to your fear and then calling on your courage and your character to face it down; and it means confronting your passionate attachment to a past love and reducing it from a boulder to a pebble. Put the pebble in your pocket as a cherished reminder, and leave room in your heart for something new.

Sticking Points

THERE’S AN ARRAY of specific behaviors that tend to mire us in the past. Many of us keep our homes crammed with under-used, outgrown, or unlovely objects. Whether we’re reluctant to face the emotional twinge of letting go or unwilling to invest the sheer time or effort it takes to divest, the mess clutters more than our closets. It clouds our vision and blocks positive change.

If those drawers are crammed with unpaid bills, take special notice. Crushing debt casts a long shadow. Debt kills your spirit and your possibilities. Face the problem, see a financial counselor, make a plan, and get out!

Receiving alimony or the like is less obvious, but it’s still potentially subversive enough to merit attention. There’s no free lunch. It’s good to get the money, but it often comes with high emotional interest. You may keep paying and paying in old anger and resentment.

Like alimony, holidays can be a double-edged sword. Tradition is beautiful, meaningful, and way overdone. If you are still enjoying the ritual, great. If you have a secret yearning to break free but feel you “wouldn’t be allowed,” maybe you don’t have to be that stuck? Break the rule of Christmas morning and many other required behaviors change too.

Finally, fearsomely, there is that thing we do behind our own backs because we know we shouldn’t do it: We continue contact—with the very person, the very situation, that was destructive in the first place. We often don’t get better until we stop going there. You know that; you just don’t want to face it.

Starting at the deep end, acknowledge your secrets. Nothing nails us to the past more than the energy it takes to keep them. Then move forward by making a frank assessment of your character traits. Do you have a taste for blame? Pointing the finger feels so good, it’s habit forming. But it makes you powerless.

Now take a hard look at your habits of thinking. Have you allowed yourself to develop a rigid mind? If so, know that

you are trading the pleasure of certainty for the possibility of change. And you might want to pause to examine your most cherished memories—namely, those of past happiness. From a distance, flaws disappear and good shimmers through. That’s a joy, but it might make current reality dim by contrast.

To the degree that you stop any of the above, you will come unstuck. But to move forward requires positive action. As we know all too well, without effort yesterday hangs around on its own. There are six action steps to take.

1 Anchor Yourself in the Future

IT’S HARD TO let go of the past in the absence of a positive view of tomorrow. You need a vision of the future.

An investment in, a distraction through, or an excitement about something ahead will supply the energy and the will to push you beyond the past. Creating it requires deliberate mental focus.

Force yourself to take an online class with an eye toward getting a different degree. Hire a trainer and keep detailed records of your body’s improvements. Create a new sales target or envision a better job. Giving yourself a goal to work toward will help to tow you out of the quicksand of yesterday.

Sure, finding your way forward can be a fight. The new cozy nest will take the edge off the painful loss of an old family setting. But you’ve got to look at a lot of real estate. The job that is a better fit may make the last humiliating failure appear as a blessing. But you’ve got to endure a hell of a lot of interviews. Still, your emotional burden will be lighter.

2 Discard

PUSHING ACTIVELY PAST the past starts with discarding. Some years ago I dated a very fine man, a widower of three years who wholeheartedly believed he wanted a new partner and that new partner was possibly me. But his home was frozen at the moment of his wife’s death—her makeup sprawled on the bureau, her medical bills cluttering the kitchen table, her clothes spilling out of closets and drawers. His own life was layered over this—papers, books, new shirts, and old jackets everywhere. Thinking I could help, and tired of his constant complaints about disorganization, I spent a weekend with him trying to declutter, to freshen—trying, really, to make room for myself.

At the end of the weekend, a large photo of his wife, propped in a new corner, suddenly fell over. “Look what you did,” he said, rushing to right it. “You knocked over Marilyn.” Marilyn stayed put. I left.

Look around at your own space. It sends a message about how open you are to change and rebuilding.

Ruthless discard is a necessary path forward under special life circumstances—when you are merging with a new partner, into a new life. Nobody needs two brown couches. Or, more commonly, discard when you are downsizing. At any point in life, you might find it useful to move forward by simplifying. If you are sinking under past acquisitions—broken toys, oversized mortgages, messy basements, stuffed closets—discard whether

by donating, selling, or simply trashing) is your only way forward. Buried somewhere under everything you’ve bought you will likely find your real values.

Poignantly, discard when you are suffering. Slip the memorabilia of your broken heart or botched start-up into what’s been described as “Satan’s Suitcase.” If you are still not able to toss it, stick it in the dark corner of a closet. Someday it will mean nothing. Toss it then.

Begin small—your nightstand drawer? Sort smart: Keep, toss, or transfer ownership. As you get into the spirit, the “keep” pile will shrink. Prepare to feel anxious, energized, sad, overwhelmed, regretful, and nostalgic. It doesn’t matter how you feel, as long as you keep discarding.

3 Repair

IT WAS AN anonymous letter, in an envelope with no return address. It contained five \$100 bills, and a simple explanation: “Dear Richard, I worked for you 22 years ago, when you had that small bookstore. You were a fine boss, fair and decent. Over time, I stole from you; you never knew it. I don’t think you even suspected. Here is the money back. It comes with my deep apologies.”

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Richard read the letter to many of his friends, asking each of us if there were someone in our past, in our heads or hearts, to whom we might owe a similar letter. I am asking you the same thing.

One solid way to get past the past is to restore to a better whole those relationships that have frayed—whether from disuse, misunderstanding, or a reluctance to see your part in a past conflict. You didn’t steal, but you’ve come to see that you’ve done damage—and who has not? You were consistently mean to a sibling, harsh with a parent, abusive to an ex, or unsupportive to a friend in need.

Make amends. Making amends rarely means anything as concrete as sending cash. It generally involves reaching out to someone, face to face or in writing, and expressing your remorse.

A statement of remorse includes three essential pieces—a clear articulation of the harm you feel you did (“When we were little, I teased you so meanly”); a chance for the other person to express his or her point of view, old fury, or past pain, which will be uncomfortable to hear but requires validation from you (“I can see that I let you down... treated you terribly... was unfair. You have every right to be angry”); and an authentic expression of remorse, from the heart (“I want you to know that I understand how I hurt you, and I’m so very sorry”).

The repair steps may or may not restore the relationship. Many other factors will determine that outcome. But it is a way to put that part of the past that has been plaguing you firmly behind you.

4 Transform Your Narrative
SIMPLY PUT, WE are our story. Not so much the story of the events in our lives but the story we tell ourselves about the role we played in the events—hero or victim, beloved or unworthy, competent or careless.

One powerful strategy for easing the pain of the past is to rewrite key aspects of the story from a more balanced, empathetic perspective. A healthy rewrite makes you less victimized, less devastated, less lost than the one you told yourself at the time of the original injury. It reduces the deep rage, loss, and fear that have been holding you back. “I was bitter for a long time because my

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husband had an affair that ended our marriage. I was unhappy in the marriage, but at least I didn’t betray him! I stopped being angry when I saw that his affair unlocked the door for both of us. I got to leave and still be the good guy. That was a gift.”

“My brother-in-law walked away from our family business when we were nearing bankruptcy. I thought he was a selfish bastard who took advantage of me. My bitterness split our family for a decade. Eventually, though, I came to see that we were two men who each had a choice to make at a fork in the road. We chose differently. He wasn’t putting one over on me; it had nothing to do with me. Once I truly accepted this, the family could sit down to a real Thanksgiving dinner.”

Rewrites do not attempt to change the facts of the narrative. They simply see those facts through more mature, more empathetic, less injured eyes. Those eyes help you let go.

5 Forgive
THE TRANSFORMED NARRATIVE is a step along that rockiest of paths, toward forgiveness. Is it really possible to be deeply hurt, unjustly treated, grievously wronged, and forgive the perpetrator? It is; I’ve seen it. And it is the most profound way to free yourself from the emotional intrusions of the past.

It helps to understand what parts of yourself you are up against. When we are deeply wronged, there are powerful rewards to staying angry. Rage is like a giant billboard advertising the evils of our assailant. Forgiveness, on the other hand, can feel as if you are letting the bad guy off, endorsing him even. That feels intolerable.

erable. Too, anger can be very motivating; it gives us courage to confront the unfair boss, energy to get through the painful trial.

That’s a lot to give up, for the sake of forgiveness. You will have to come to believe that there is more to be gained by forgiving than by staying angry. Usually, and eventually, there is. When there is no longer a constructive action step to be taken that requires your anger as its fuel, the cost to you of the rage you are carrying exceeds the rewards of punishing the offender. At that moment, forgiveness is possible.

Forgiveness is a decision, not a capitulation. It says, “You wronged me. I didn’t deserve it. I’ve been angry long enough. I am laying down my anger because I don’t need to carry it anymore.”

Record your decision to forgive, or tell a significant person in your life. Write a letter to the person who hurt you and tell him or her exactly how you were wronged. Include your new narrative that tells your transformed story. (“Dad, your rages were terrifying, but I am now able forgive you for being an alcoholic.

You would never have chosen that struggle.”)

Forgiveness also applies to the ruthless self-injury some of us inflict for the shortcomings of our own imperfect selves. For the hurtful lie you told, the opportunity you blew, the money mis-spent, the taxes unfiled; for the time you called your child stupid or lazy—for any and all those things for which you are beating yourself up, take one or all of these steps to forgive yourself.

REMEDiate: Pay the taxes, face the fine. Make things right where you can.

Apologize: Acknowledge the harm you’ve

caused. That does more than ease the other person’s distress. It is heart medicine for yourself.

CONFESS: Tell a friend about your moment of bad mothering. Tell your spouse about your stupid office screw up.

IMPOSE A PENALTY: Feeling guilty about your rudeness to your mate? After the apology, offer to do his or her least-liked chore for a week.

WRITE ONE HUNDRED TIMES: “Good judgment comes from experience; experience comes from bad judgment.”

6 Learn to Be Present
NOTHING—NOT ONE single technique or inner evolution—is as powerful an antidote to the past as the capacity to be present in the here and now. Unfortunately, our natural capacity for that focus is severely limited by those great emotional magnets of past and future — fear, love, rage, anxiety, shame, regret, fantasy.

The ability to focus on the present is amenable to improvement. The technique through which you better that capacity is mindfulness, a practice in which you note in a nonjudgmental way the thoughts and sensations occurring at this very moment.

Mindfulness is an acquired skill. Its stress-reduction benefits are well documented and there are many positive emotional and spiritual side effects. And it still has a bonus: As your skill at mindfulness increases, you will, by definition, get past the past. ■

JUDITH SILLS, PH.D., is a psychologist and writer in Philadelphia.