

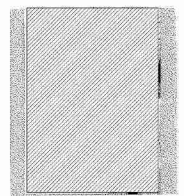
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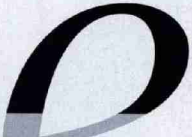
Unload Your Romantic Baggage

Learn how to stop dragging old
love issues into a new relationship.

By Sheila Monaghan /
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Sex & Love *Unload Your Romantic Baggage*



➔ Even if you're over your ex, your romantic history has a funny (in a sick sort of way) tendency of creeping into life with your new partner. "The relationships we invest in the most, regardless of how long we were in them or how long ago they happened, are the ones that have the biggest impact on us," says Terri Orbuch, Ph.D., a research professor at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and author of *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*. "And if things went awry in those relationships, we often carry the anger or insecurity into our subsequent romances."

So how do you prevent the past from coming back to haunt you? Claim your baggage by coming clean to your current mate (sparing him the dirty details, of course). According to a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, people experienced a heightened sense of intimacy after revealing personal info, such as their ex-related issues, and felt more valued and supported. Forge ahead by following this advice.

Check yourself before you wreck yourself.

BAGGAGE
Your Partner Cheated on You

Almost anything your guy does that's not completely straightforward will evoke feelings of distrust, explains JoAnn Magdoff, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in New York

City. People who were cheated on in the past may find themselves setting traps and checking on their new partner, asking them questions they know the answers to, and assuming their partner is lying. You may end up jumping down

his throat and accusing him of things he didn't do, which may understandably infuriate him and ultimately threaten your union, says psychologist Christie Hartman, Ph.D., author of *It's Not Him, It's You: The Truth You May Not Want but Need to Hear*.



> Unload it: Make it clear that while your trust issues have nothing to do with him, you equate his vagueness with being lied to. "Tell him that because of your past, you assume the worst when he's unclear," says Magdoff, and that keeping you in the loop and being specific will go a long way toward helping you feel more connected and secure. This will translate into more happiness for you both.

BAGGAGE

Your Last Guy Had a Bad Temper

Anyone who's dated a yeller and screamer is going to want to avoid confrontation in a subsequent relationship because they're scared of a nasty fight breaking out. But anger is a necessary emotion, and both parties need to be able to express it appropriately. "Instead of understanding that conflict is an important part of all relationships, someone who had an angry partner might see disagreements as a sign the relationship is headed for trouble," says Orbuch.

> Unload it: Accept your anger—and his. "What's important is how you disagree, not whether you disagree," says Orbuch. Rather than recoiling or biting your tongue during a disagreement, step back and take a break. Sweat away the anger (and clear your head) on a run, or agree to take a 10-minute walk around the block and then regroup. This will defuse some of the hostility, giving you a more comfortable environment to air your grievances.

BAGGAGE

Your Ex Criticized Your Looks

It's easy to understand how someone who was called ugly or fat-assed by an ex might have trouble accepting a new dude's compliments. Because romantic relationships carry such powerful meaning and weight—and because a

romantic partner sees you without your clothes on—criticism within the context of intimacy can be particularly damaging, explains Thomas Bradbury, Ph.D., codirector of the Relationship Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles. "Even the most confident people can feel a painful twinge if an intimate partner criticizes their appearance. These comments can cut you to the core," he says. If a past partner made disparaging remarks about your weight, you may feel uncomfortable eating in front of your new man or showing off your body, which may cause you to avoid sex and intimacy altogether, says Orbuch.

TAKE A LOAD OFF

Dumping your baggage can actually improve your health too. "A stressful relationship can have harmful consequences such as sleep problems, depression, high blood pressure, ulcers, anxiety, difficulty with memory, and trouble focusing," says neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine, M.D., author of *The Female Brain* and *The Male Brain*. (High levels of the stress hormone cortisol and the fight-or-flight hormone epinephrine contribute to the symptoms.)

Severing your ties with a toxic ex is the first step toward reducing your body's stress reaction, but it's also critical not to carry these stressors into your next romance. The good news is that once you've ditched the guy and unloaded the baggage, all the medical issues stemming from the experience will likely subside, says Brizendine. However, they could come right back if you get into another unhealthy union, so recognize your relationship patterns to prevent a relapse. Doctor's orders!

> Unload it: Know that your ex's slams were much more about him than you. "Anyone who insults or criticizes a partner in this way is massively insecure and is making a desperate attempt to cover up a deep sense of inferiority," says Hartman. Translation: He may not have thought those things about you but felt compelled to cut you down to prop himself up. To make sure you take your new guy's loving words to heart, stop yourself from dismissing his praise and affection. "There's only one way to handle a compliment: Say thank you, and mean it," says Hartman. "After a while, the kind words will sink in."

BAGGAGE

You Dated a Partyer

Because your last boyfriend left you high and dry to booze it up with his buddies, you may become clingy, bossy, or prone to nagging your new guy—in other words, a pretty big buzzkill. You could even become a teetotaler, choosing to avoid parties and any social scenario where alcohol is involved because of your ex and his habits, says Orbuch.

> Unload it: Before you bust out the at-home Breathalyzer, take a moment to analyze the situation rationally. How many times did he go out this week? Two? And where was he the other nights? With you? Sounds like a guy who has his priorities straight.

And remind yourself that a person who likes to go out and party with his friends doesn't necessarily have a problem, says Magdoff. In fact, it's totally normal behavior, provided it doesn't happen all the time and he's not coming home and passing out on the bathroom floor on a regular basis. ■

How Did You Shed Your Baggage?

> Share how you kicked your ex issues to the curb at WomensHealthMag.com/TellUs.

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