

# Your First Step in Breaking the Hold Your Past Has on You

We are often told to just let it go. How do we get past the hurt? Is there a release valve? The truth is we store up our experiences (good and bad) in our memories. On a recent night, I woke up angry from a dream at 3 a.m. In my dream, I was yelling at my dad about something petty and ridiculous that occurred long ago (if ever). I lay there awake next to my wife wondering, *Where in the world did that come from? Why am I holding onto that?*

We all have pain in our past in some form, big or small. Who among us has not experienced rough stretches, devastating moments or emotional heartbreak? Pain is an inevitable ingredient of life. What we do with our pain determines how much we grow as a person. To wallow in pain is to remain stagnant.

How do we confront our past? Here are four steps.

## 1. Accept That It Happened

Acceptance of a traumatic event is the first step to recovery. Depending on the severity this may require professional therapy. However, reflective acceptance serves to process it and move forward. For instance, I was bullied severely for a spell when I was in seventh grade. The bully's actions hit the worst spot for a boy in puberty—manly pride. I hid this from my parents because I was ashamed, and that denial had negative consequences. It led me to overcompensate, trying to prove my manliness. Eventually, I accepted the fact that I was just a scrawny seventh grader not prepared to deal with the fear and shame I felt.

## 2. Explore the Effect It Had

For every hurt, there is a reaction. We gain valuable wisdom through experience if we use that pain to better react to future hurts. For instance, the bullying incident caused a major negative behavior reaction in me. I was afraid to physically confront the bully, so I acted out in other reckless ways, attempting to regain confidence that had been taken from me. I drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes because I thought it made me cool. I developed a persona of what I thought was a cool kid but was really a kid destroying his future. Before the bully, I did none of those things. Thirty years later, I finally shook the cigarette addiction that followed.

### **3. Take Action to Make Peace With the Past**

When advised to “let it go” how about instead, “let it out?” Beyond professional therapy, there are many ways to practice confronting pain. Writing your experiences in a personal journal is highly therapeutic to the soul. In specialized cases, such as abuse and addiction, joining a supportive community will help draw out the buried trauma and start healing.

### **4. Forgiveness and Behavior Change**

To confront a painful experience is to have the ultimate desire of forgiveness of both the person/act and yourself. Wherever my seventh-grade bully is, I forgave him long ago. When I looked at the world from his perspective and not just my own, I was able to reconcile how it came to be and feel something different than fear or shame. I felt compassion. If we confront and forgive the things festering inside, our pain can be turned into compassion and empathy for another hurting soul.

What's the hardest thing about confronting your past? {eoa}

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