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learning to let go

Make 2011 the
year you get rid of all of
the emotional baggage
that's holding you back.

Say goodbye and
move on—we'll show
you how!

BY KATE KELLY

► YOU CAN'T GET
OVER YOUR EX,

you wish you'd spent
less time on the job and
more time with the kids,
you have a closet full of
expensive clothes that don't fit
anymore—but you can't bear to
part with. What do these scenarios have in
common? "They all weigh you down, leaving you
stuck in the past," says Ryan Howes, Ph.D., a
psychologist in Pasadena, California. Some of the
biggest culprits that immobilize you are anger,
regret, and longing—whether for a relationship
that's over or a body that you no longer have.
We turned to experts for tips on getting past
unproductive emotions. The process isn't easy,
but it's surprisingly satisfying, leaving you with
room in your life for something even better.

Saying
goodbye to
the past is
scary but
doable"

STOP HOLDING ON TO anger

While it's completely normal to get upset when someone does you wrong, it becomes unhealthy when you can't stop stewing over it. "Mentally replaying the transgression over and over is a never-ending cycle that just intensifies your outrage and saps you of energy," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of California, Riverside. That feeling is all too familiar for Sandra Lamb, a writer in Denver. "Several years ago, a friend took credit for a huge volunteer project that I did," Lamb says. "The same questions kept running through my mind nonstop: How could she do this to me? Weren't we friends? I'd find myself obsessing about it when I was supposed to be working or relaxing."

What finally helped Lamb make peace with the situation was writing down everything that happened and how she felt about it, a strategy that researchers endorse. "The very act of putting words on paper forces you to take a step back, be more objective, and label your emotions," says Lyubomirsky. "Getting into the analytical mode makes the incident less personal and lets you understand the reasons

behind it." Lamb says she felt a sense of release once her pen started flying: "My inner turmoil went away. I didn't have this awful feeling in my stomach anymore, and I stopped dwelling." In fact, the process was so cathartic that she ended up writing a book about the technique, *How to Write It: A Complete Guide to Everything You'll Ever Write*.

STOP HOLDING ON TO regret

Few people go through life without wondering about the path not taken or wishing they'd made a different decision at a crucial crossroad. "That's part of being human," says Caroline Adams Miller, author of *Creating Your Best Life*. "The second-guessing typically starts in your 20s over things like not pursuing a relationship or choosing the wrong major in college. And in midlife, your doubts are more likely to be about past choices—that you didn't quit an unsatisfying job years earlier or have children when you were younger."

If you find yourself constantly asking, "What if?" that's a sign there's something missing from your life, and you should consider listening to those daydreams, says

Miller. For example, if you're kicking yourself that you settled for a stable job instead of pursuing your love of acting, try out for a play put on by a community theater on the weekend. "I work with a lot of people who find enormous satisfaction in finding an outlet for their passions," Miller says. "Even if it's just as a hobby."

But not all remorse can be so easily overcome. Seven years ago, Mary Lou Burkhardt, then 25,

If you find yourself asking, "What if?" that's a sign there's something missing from your life.

decided to move to New York City to pursue a career in public relations. At the time, she was living in Rhode Island and helping her sister take care of their mother, who was sick. So when she moved to New York, all of the caregiving tasks fell on her sister. "I feel really sorry about the way I handled things back then," she says. "It was unfair to leave my sister with such

a heavy burden, and I regretted putting it all on her shoulders."

Miller says that in situations like that, when you can't go back in time and make everything right, you have to recognize that you did the best you could in any given moment. But don't let yourself off the hook entirely. "It's those little pangs of guilt that help us become a better person," says Miller. "Maybe there's some sort of action you can take now to make amends." Burkhardt is doing just that: She's come up with a schedule where she uses her vacation time to go home for long weekends and help out with her mother's care.

STOP HOLDING ON TO feelings for your ex

When Ramona McKenzie, 25, of Los Angeles ended her three-year relationship, she found it almost impossible to recover. "It felt like a death," she says. That's not surprising to Terri Orbuch, author of *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage From Good to Great*. "One of the hardest things to accept is the end of a romantic relationship," she says. The problem is that, with your heart and mind consumed by your ex, there's absolutely no

chance of you finding the next amazing guy.

If you're still in love with your old boyfriend, purge him from your life. First, get rid of all the stuff you have that reminds you of him. "You'd be surprised

how many women hold on to old T-shirts, pictures, and other mementos," says Orbach. Make a point of avoiding your old haunts and try to replace rituals you did as a couple with new ones. If you always

had coffee on Sundays at a local café, start up a weekly brunch date with friends at a different place.

Next, Orbach says, **ask yourself whether you truly miss him or if you're just lonely.** Test it out: Write down five qualities that are

me focus on myself and start having fun again."

STOP HOLDING ON TO clothes that don't fit

You might think that a wardrobe full of clothes that are too small is motivation to lose 10 pounds—but it's actually the opposite. "Those size 6 pants that will look perfect when you lose weight are about an imagined future where you're a thinner version of you," says Peter Walsh, author of *Lighten Up: Love What You Have, Have What You Need, Be Happier With Less*. "But they lead you to feel like a failure." Keeping a set of "fat clothes" is equally demoralizing, suggesting that you may gain weight at any point.

The solution isn't rocket science. "Go through every piece," Walsh says. **"Ask yourself, 'Is this adding value to my life right now?'"** Be brutal. If the answer is no, donate it. By clearing out aspirational clothes, you free up space for pieces that make your current body look amazing.

That's just what Regina Barr, 45, of Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, did. "I had clothes that were too big, too small, and out-of-date," she says. "I pruned in stages, but I now have a closet that makes me happy. It's emptier than ever before, but I feel as if there's room for new things to come my way."

KATE KELLY, a writer in Pelham, New York, is letting go of the pink suede pants in her closet.

By clearing out aspirational clothes, you free up space for pieces that make your current body look amazing.

important to you and see if they match what he had to offer. "The majority of the time, your ex didn't have what you need and want," says Orbach. Still not convinced? Ask your friends and family for their view. "We tend to forget the negative and focus on the positive," says Orbach. "But other people in our life don't."

For McKenzie, it took time, but she was finally able to get over her ex. "I missed him so much, but I got to the point where enough was enough," she says. She got closure by writing him a long email in which she listed the problems they had but also thanked him for all the good times. "I felt much better after I sent it," she says. "Beyond that, spending time with friends and self-reflection helped

