



Don't Take It Personally

by Julie Mehta

Illustrations by Lou Beach

Want to stop worrying about what other people think and start getting more out of your life? Develop a thicker skin! We'll tell you how

I'd had it with my friend—I'll call her Samantha. We'd made plans to meet for dinner but at the last minute, she'd backed out. And this wasn't the first time either. More like the seventh. (Not that I was keeping track.) I was hurt. *If Samantha really cared about me and valued our friendship, she wouldn't keep flaking out on me*, I fumed. Then I got an Evite to her birthday party. She had some nerve! Still, I decided to go. At the party several other friends mentioned she'd blown off plans with them

too. That's when it hit me: Samantha's behavior wasn't a reflection of how she felt about me. It had nothing to do with me at all. It was about *her*.

So why had I taken it so personally? "We tend to think that whatever a person said or did is about us," says Ray Dodd, author of *BeliefWorks: The Art of Living Your Dreams* and founder of *everydayWisdom*, a mentoring service based in Longmont, Colorado. "Then we get offended and



we feel the need to defend ourselves."

We often do that automatically when someone criticizes us or rejects us or even disagrees with us. You might obsess over why the boss didn't return your hello. Or get angry when your spouse forgets to pick something up at the store. Or burst into tears when a friend teases you about a new hairstyle. But says Mike Robbins, a life coach and motivational speaker in Concord, California, "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the stuff people take personally isn't intended to be. You wouldn't worry so much what other people think about you if you realized how little they did."

And the way they do think of you may bear no resemblance to how you think of yourself.

Don Miguel Ruiz, the best-selling author of *The Four Agreements*, explains it this way: "Imagine you are in a big mall with hundreds and hundreds of different theaters. You go inside one and see a person watching a movie and recognize that person is you. In that movie you see yourself the way you project yourself into the world. Then you go to the theater for your father, your grandfather, your cousin, your beloved, and you see yourself in their movies—and they all





look completely different from yours.”

To free yourself from needless suffering, Ruiz suggests adopting an agreement with yourself to not take things personally. But for most of us, that’s a lot easier said than done. Becoming aware that others are acting according to a personal movie that has little to do with yours helps put things in perspective. Still, the other part of the equation is figuring out what pushes your buttons and why.

“No one can make you angry. Let’s say we’re at a party and I act very badly. One person may think it’s funny, one may forget it in two minutes, and four may be angry at me for days,” Dodd says. “What triggers us is not usually about a specific thing but about our core beliefs about the world. You have to deal with limiting beliefs that are based on fear.”

These beliefs are generally formed in

childhood, according to psychotherapist Elayne Savage of Berkeley, California, author of *Don’t Take it Personally! The Art of Dealing With Rejection*. She says they stem from rejection experiences that can take many forms—anything from not feeling supported by a parent to being the target of bullies. “The hurts stockpile and when we’re older, we feel something is unfair and it triggers all the same feelings,” says Savage.

You can’t undo those long-held beliefs overnight. But you can learn to be more objective about situations and slowly stop taking things so much to heart. This doesn’t mean repressing emotions or avoiding personal responsibility; rather, it’s about owning your actions and reactions and gaining insight into yourself and those close to you.

Yasmin, a college student in Seattle, Washington, says her habit of taking things personally nearly took over her life. “It began with a few small overreactions here and there, but gradually

built up until I could not take even the slightest of jokes without having to sit down and analyze it for possible ‘undertones.’” Yasmin began to consider the reasons for her oversensitivity and address her insecurities.

“The other day, this guy I once had a crush on randomly asked me if I had a boyfriend, and I found myself getting really offended and ashamed,” she says. “I was stunned by my own anger, and decided that it wasn’t right. I told him the truth: Yes, I was single. It felt like a huge step forward, just learning to be myself and be honest.”

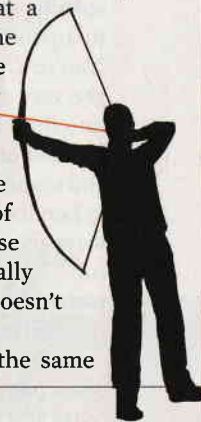
Experts say it’s vital to dig for the deeper reasons that something upsets you. “Most of us have a need to be liked, to be recognized, to be accepted or to be right,” says Jean Charles, who runs JustRight, a New Jersey-based coaching service for entrepreneurs.

Massimo Perucchini of Vail, Colorado, found this to be especially true in the context of romantic relationships.

“In past relationships, when someone accused me of anything I defended my point of view ferociously,” he says. “Now in the same situation I would rather be happy than be right. Dropping the need to be right really changed my relationships for the better and has allowed me to be myself without worrying what others might think.”

Charles suggests a cooling-off period when an argument with a significant other gets too heated. Partners should discuss one issue at a time and repeat what the other has said to make sure they are hearing each other correctly. “Behind every complaint is a request,” says Charles. For example, a wife who accuses her husband of not caring about her because he comes home late may really want him to call her so she doesn’t worry about him.

Savage advocates using the same



5 ways to react positively

Take a time out. Breathe deeply and slowly count to 10. Imagine that you’re surrounded by a protective bubble. If you’re still in danger of losing it, excuse yourself from the room. You can always continue the conversation later, after

you’ve calmed down. **Put yourself inside the other person’s head.** Maybe you won’t be able to figure out where he’s coming from, but just trying to understand the intent behind his actions will give you some distance from

(even to negative people)

your own emotions. Remind yourself that you can’t always change how people perceive you, only how you react.

Picture yourself as being on a stage, a character in your very own play. What are your character’s motivations

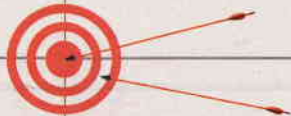
and beliefs? Do they make sense for this particular scene? Or could they use a little rewriting?

Stay in the present. Be aware of the emotions you’re feeling. Make sure they relate to the moment and are not tied

up in some experience from your past.

Communicate your feelings without blaming the other person for them. Don’t be afraid to set clear boundaries regarding what behavior you will and won’t accept.





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type of straightforward communication at work. For instance, if you're stressing about the boss ignoring your morning greeting, just go to him or her and check if things are okay.

Workplaces are loaded with situations that people frequently take personally, from an unanswered e-mail to a poor review. "Someone might say 'You're a bad presenter' and people will get very defensive and translate that into their identity," says Mike Leibling, founder of Strategy Strategy, a personal and organizational consulting business in London, England. "Remember, it's always about a behavior, not you as a person." The other thing to keep in mind is that the critics may be trying to puff themselves up by putting you down.

Leibling believes that people too often put past failures into the present tense and develop what he calls "saggy shoulders syndrome"—a defeatist attitude that leads to blanket statements like "I'm not a good leader" or "I'll never get a job."

"When someone says something about you, take it as information, not advice," says Leibling. "All they can notice about you is what you say or do, not whether you're a good or bad person."

This is not to say that taking things less personally means turning a deaf ear to all criticism. Nor does it mean you should ignore any action that bothers you. But it does involve seeing things from a different point of view from your own. "Usually we take things personally when we make certain assumptions and many times those assumptions aren't even true," Robbins says. "Take a step back, put yourself in the other person's shoes, and try to assume the best."

Keep in mind that it's a process. "Taking things personally is like a trick birthday candle—it will pop up again and you don't know when—but it can become less frequent and easier to put out," says Savage.

Next time you feel criticized, blamed, offended or rejected, give it a try. Remind yourself it's not all about you. Ask yourself why you're feeling as you do. Think about what the other person's perception might be. As Perucchini puts it, "There are six billion people on this planet with six billion points of view. Not taking things personally in your professional and personal relationships gives you more time to live your life."

And take joy in it too!

