

Taking Out Your **Emotional** Trash

Georgia Shaffer



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Are You in the Danger Zone?

While discussing this book, a friend suggested I visit a landfill to observe how garbage is handled. That sounded like a good way to pick up some ideas so I followed her advice. As I approached the main gate of the facility, I noticed high netting surrounding the multi-acre landfill. The netting was firmly secured to huge 40-foot poles. In one section the poles were broken and the netting lay sprawled across the ground.

“What happened there?” I asked the landfill manager as I pointed to the problem area.

He replied, “The other day strong winds swept up the lighter paper garbage as it was being unloaded from the trucks. Before we could stop it, the winds plastered the paper trash against the netting. It created such a force that it broke those poles in two.”

He didn’t look too happy as he continued. “The accumulation of that paper created the effect of wind pushing against the sail of a boat. Instead of the wind blowing *through* the netting, it blew against the wall of debris and snapped those wooden poles like they were toothpicks.” He shook his head. “It made quite a mess. Paper trash was everywhere.”

As I looked at the fallen poles I thought, *What a great image of the damage that results from the accumulation of negative thoughts and feelings in us. A simple or single emotional reaction may seem as harmless as a single sheet of paper floating around a landfill. But when we allow our annoyances, anger, and frustrations to collect, these feelings become a force so powerful it can cause severe damage.*

I knew what that felt like. Recently my self-control snapped much like those fallen poles. Maybe you've had one of these weeks too. First, the red light on my printer kept flashing. No matter how many times I unplugged, replugged, and rebooted the printer and computer, the light kept flashing. On...off...on...off. I tried to ignore it, but my irritation kept building.

Next, my broadband telephone service failed. No dial tone. No incoming calls. After many hours and eight cell phone calls to customer service, I exploded when one of the techies announced, "I'm sure this is a very simple matter."

"Simple!" I blurted. "I have four college degrees, and one of them is in computer science. This problem is *not* simple or it would have been corrected hours ago." I threatened to drop my service and hung up. But my trials weren't over.

TRASH TALK

Many people are like garbage trucks. They run around full of garbage, full of frustrations, full of anger, and full of disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they need a place to dump it, and sometimes they'll dump it on you.

HANK MERGES

The following morning I headed to an electronics store to have a CD player installed in my car. I'd been told on the phone a few days earlier that they didn't take appointments, but if I arrived before eight o'clock I would have the shortest waiting time. I made sure I got there early. Twenty minutes after eight I discovered the

installation service person hadn't yet arrived. An hour later he still hadn't shown up.

I strode up to the counter and said, "You mean I got up early on a Saturday morning just to stand around and wait for an installer to arrive?" I knew my anger wasn't going to change things, but I kept fuming while I waited. It was eleven-thirty before a tech person arrived. With an indignant huff, I marched off to the bookstore next door, bought a cup of tea, sat down in a comfy chair, and took a deep breath. Forced to sit still, I pondered my mini-meltdowns over the last few days. In addition to the printer, phone, and installation hassles, there also had been glitches in some human connections. I recalled my conversation with a good friend the day before. Although we usually chat for at least an hour, after I dumped all my woes on her, she quickly said, "I'm sorry but I need to run."

And then there was the time when my son and I exchanged ugly words. My mother and I also had a bit of a misunderstanding, and I was still seething about an issue at church. As I took in the big picture, it hit me. Each of those seemingly insignificant feelings were like individual pieces of trash paper. When blown around by frustrating circumstances, they had accumulated to the point that they pushed against the limits of my control and finally broke through. As a result, I was spreading emotional and relational litter all over those around me. I realized that if I wanted to avoid reaching that breaking point and expressing my emotions destructively, I needed to be intentional about preventing the pileup.

Years ago I attended a seminar led by Psychologist W. Robert Nay on the topic of anger management. Many of the clients in his private practice were referred to him by the judicial system because their anger had gotten out of control. Dr. Nay said that when he speaks to these offenders about their feelings and what they noticed was going on *before* they "lost it," they often said, "I was fine until that guy cut me off in traffic. I lost it [*they snapped their fingers*] just like that."

Dr. Nay discovered that no one loses it "just like that." He

says that what we fail to understand is that our level of stress, if unchecked, continues rising. The emotional pressure keeps building.¹ The cumulative force becomes so strong that when we experience one additional thing, even if it's something small such as our children refusing to follow directions or a fast-food worker getting our order wrong, we snap. We've let our emotions pile up to a dangerous level. And we augment our feelings by bringing in a sense of entitlement. For instance, if we believe life is supposed to be stress-free, that we deserve a stress-free life, and people don't meet our expectations, defy us, or displease us, we get enraged.

But we can handle emotions in a productive and healthy manner. It's the *awareness* of where we are emotionally right now and a *commitment* to change that can begin to release the pressure.

Where Are You Emotionally?

Even if you don't see yourself as an emotional person, the fact is that "emotions are a gift of God, who created each of us with a capacity to feel and express our emotions."² It's not that your emotions are unhealthy or dangerous. It's what you do or don't do with them that can be the problem. Your feelings have the potential to become especially harmful when you stuff them, deny them, or allow them to accumulate. When that happens, you may become controlled by them.

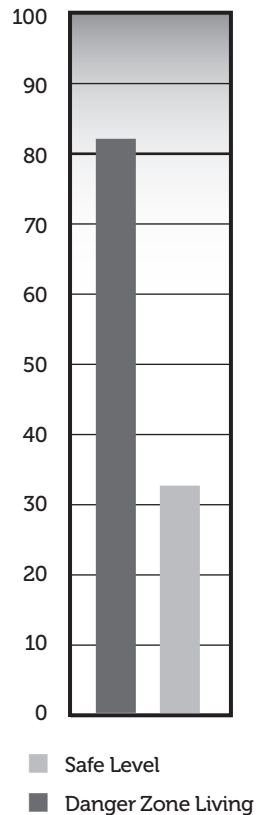
The following graph was adapted from an example shown at the seminar given by Dr. Nay. Zero represents no emotional pressure, no buildup of irritations, resentments, insecurities, bitterness, or negative emotions (a place where we never are). For this example, let's assume 30 is an acceptable level of stress and 80 is the point where we snap because feelings have piled up and we've failed to deal with them constructively. Like the snapped telephone poles at the landfill, we each have a point where we can't handle one more piece of trash. That is when we lose control. We cross a line, so to speak, and move into the danger zone of being controlled by our emotions. We *react* rather than *respond* to life. Because emotions have piled up

and up and up, we say or do things that are unhealthy for us, hurtful for others, and harmful to our relationships.

Let's hypothetically say the pressure of your negative feelings has built up to a level of 79. You are irritated, your jaw is clenched, and your head is throbbing. But you are handling the circumstances around you without losing control. Your daughter says, "No duh, Mom," when you make a comment, and you take it in without saying or doing anything hurtful. But now you're at 79.9. One more comment, one more roll of her eyes moves you into reaction mode. You make negative comments, you stomp off, and you explode. Your daughter's action didn't cause you to snap. Since you were already at a heightened emotional level, her action put you over the edge.

If we want to maintain control and stay healthy in our emotions, we need to first understand that we don't go from a 30 to a 79 "just like that." According to Dr. Nay, people often assume they start the morning at an emotional level of 0, when in fact they may have awakened at an emotional level of 79. If we don't realize we are already at the I-can't-handle-one-more-thing-without-losing-it point, we won't do anything to relieve the emotional pressure. So when "one more thing" happens, we'll probably do or say something we regret and make our situation worse.

Emotional awareness is realizing "there is an emotional impact from almost every stimulus received and every response you give. You may not feel them all consciously, but all of these tiny



subconscious emotional stimuli are adding pressure and intensity to the way you respond all throughout the day.”³ This accumulation of emotional pressure from annoyances, frustrations, and feelings of entitlement are like the papers that piled against the netting at the landfill. The force of the wind plastered the papers against the net and then snapped the poles. In the same way, it usually isn’t just one emotion that puts us in an emotional danger zone. Instead it’s the sadness + frustration + embarrassment + disappointment + jealousy + anger that we ignore or stuff or allow to accumulate. The cumulative effect can be disastrous.

Looking back at the graph, the shorter bar could represent my emotional buildup at the beginning of that difficult week. The taller bar could symbolize that Saturday morning when I raised my voice at the person behind the electronics counter just before I turned around with a huff and stomped out the door.

For many of us, the daily minor irritations, frustrations, and emotional upsets can accumulate and sneak up on us. We may realize the emotional ramifications of something major, such as a death in the family and the overwhelming sadness and anger that brings. But the tiny upsets sidle by us unnoticed until suddenly, “just like that,” we’re at the breaking point. And then we pay the price relationally. The cost may be something as simple as everyone thinking we have a lousy attitude and would we please go somewhere else or as permanent as a ruptured relationship.

TRASH TALK

Practice the art of identifying emotional garbage.

RANDY SCHUTT

Kayla ignored her emotions for weeks. Then one day she was late for work because she overslept and couldn’t find her keys. Next she got stuck in traffic and realized she’d forgotten her lunch. By the time Kayla got to work, she’d crossed into the danger zone without

realizing it. She snapped at the office manager and treated her boss disrespectfully because she hadn't paid attention to the state of her emotions and dealt with the overload.

Garrison, on the other hand, told me he stuffs minor annoyances. "Right now I'm dating someone. She might make a comment unintentionally that hurts me. Instead of saying anything, I think, *It's not that big of a deal so why create conflict?* But after weeks and weeks of stuffing these little hurts and annoyances, I blow up and say all kinds of nasty things to her. This type of behavior ended my last relationship."

We don't all react like Kayla, who became snappish, or Garrison, who became verbally aggressive, when we're living in the danger zone. Meltdown moments and reactions will be different from person to person. Some of us tend to be forceful verbally or even physically. Others become sarcastic, making cutting comments that hurt others deeply. Some withdraw, become numb, or cry. Perhaps you've recently lost your cool and made a snide remark to that tech person who spoke limited English. Maybe you snapped at that clerk you thought incompetent. Or perhaps you found yourself saying things as a parent you vowed you'd never say, such as, "Won't you ever get it right? How stupid can you get?"

For most of us who cross the line and find ourselves reacting badly, our behaviors are hard to recognize because they're so subtle. Maybe when you are ticked off with your spouse, you walk away and for the next couple of days give him or her the silent treatment. You isolate yourself and refuse to discuss the problem at hand. Or maybe you're the kind of person who remains polite, but you withhold the very thing you know someone wants, such as quality time, affection, or appreciation.

Recognizing when we aren't handling things well and how we react negatively are key factors in managing our emotions.

Commitment to Change

I mentioned earlier that it's the *awareness of where we are emotionally* and *the commitment to change* that enables us to reverse our

tendency to react rather than respond to our emotions. Perhaps you're reading this book because your relationships are falling apart. Or maybe you're unhappy with your life and are desperate to change it, but you don't know where to start. Do you know you'll be much more likely to make and keep a commitment to handle your feelings differently if you are emotionally invested in the process? Make a change decision from your heart. You can explore where you are by asking:

- What will motivate me to pay attention to how my behavior affects others?
- What will inspire me to get serious about dealing with my emotional stuff?

The best way to succeed in altering behavior is to find some meaningful, lasting reasons for implementing the changes. Here are some reasons you may identify with. After reading through them, why not checkmark the ones that you can relate to? After you read these, feel free to add more reasons that apply to your situation in the margins so you can refer back to them when you need encouragement.

- You want to be a good role model for your children and grandchildren. Maybe you've noticed lately how your children are displaying the same out-of-control behaviors you are. Instead of feeling guilty, choose to learn the skills needed to minimize the time you live in the danger zone.
- Growing emotionally and spiritually is extremely important to you. You aren't having serious relationship problems, but you are feeling stuck. You want to do something differently, but you're not sure what to do or how to do it.
- Your closest relationships are deteriorating because of your insecurities, jealousies, and anxiety. Your spouse

has given you an ultimatum, “You need to do something about this or else.”

- You’ve become aware that your anger, frustrations, and resentment are affecting your performance at work. Your supervisor has suggested you get help. You want to control your emotions instead of allowing them to control you.
- Your friends are distancing themselves. Instead of having fun with them you’ve been bogged down trying to clean up the emotional messes you’ve created in your relationships.
- You’ve procrastinated in dealing with some of your emotional reactions because you figured everything would work out on its own. You now realize that’s not going to happen. You don’t want to pretend any longer. You know that life will be easier if you deal with your problems now.
- You yearn for deep, meaningful relationships but your constant moodiness has fractured friendships at church, work, and socially.
- You’re eating or drinking too much because you don’t know how to deal with the stuff in your heart and life.
- You always thought your junk was your junk and nobody else needed to know about it until a close friend helped you realize your “private” stuff was impacting people around you. You want to cultivate desirable qualities that attract people.
- Your poor physical health is motivating you to get serious about improving your emotional health. Your habit of not talking about feelings has created all sorts of health-related problems, such as insomnia, high blood

pressure, and headaches. You want to change so you're not as easily fatigued, you can think more clearly, and you're healthier overall.

Even when we are inspired to change, change is hard. In the short-term, it seems much easier and more comfortable to just stay the same. But avoiding change creates more pain in the long term. So whether your motivation is to have better health, richer relationships, or to stop contaminating your current ones, take a moment to clarify, write down, and tell at least one person why you are going to change the way you've been handling your emotions.

- I'm tired of reacting negatively because...
- When I change reacting to responding, I should notice...
- This week I'm going to tell [*person's name*] about my plans to change how I handle my emotions.

Routine Trips to the Dumpster

Did you know that even on the most basic, cellular level of our bodies there is an intricate system for managing waste? According to medical research, our "cells have developed complex systems for recycling, reusing, and disposing of damaged, nonfunctional waste proteins." Inside of us we have little "garbage collectors." When working properly, they remove the trash from each cell and prevent disease. If these collectors fail to operate correctly, proteins can accumulate in the cell, become toxic, and cause disease.⁴

Now that you've made the commitment to become healthier when it comes to your emotions, your first step is to establish the habit of routinely taking your emotional trash to the dumpster. Just as our healthy cells process waste regularly, we want to routinely deal with our emotions to keep us in a safe zone. We need to monitor ourselves, recognize when our emotions are piling up, and take action to prevent hazardous situations.

One way to "check in" with ourselves is to set aside time to reflect and pray on what we're saying and doing. Until that Saturday morning in the bookstore after my meltdown at the electronics store, I hadn't been paying attention to how my trash was accumulating. I hadn't noticed because for weeks I'd been caught up in the busyness of meeting various deadlines. I'd let my normal routines slide and omitted time for spiritual self-examination, prayer, journaling, and addressing my emotions. The result was extra stress and not being gracious to the people around me.

Perhaps if I hadn't been so driven to complete my to-do list I would have noticed the signals that would have alerted me that I was fast approaching overload. I was feeling dissatisfied with everyone and everything. I was focused solely on *my* problems and not considering the concerns of others. I'd neglected my basic needs, such as eating healthy foods and getting enough rest. The muscles in my shoulders were hard and tight, and I'd been experiencing headaches.

We all have times when we break our routines to deal with the urgent. And that's okay. But unless we're also attentive to how our emotions are building to critical mass, we'll find ourselves in trouble before we know it. But if we make the adjustments necessary to deal with our grudges, hurts, and irritations as we go along, we'll cut down on how often our negative emotions control us.

The list on the next page will help you know what to look for and be sensitive to so you will know if you're approaching the danger zone. Use it as you would a mirror or scale to check out how you're doing. And if you can identify other behaviors that may indicate

I AM...

- feeling like I'm always on edge.
- becoming driven and anxious.
- suffering from tight muscles and tension headaches.
- looking to others to make me happy.
- needing a break but can't take time off work.
- losing sight of the big picture.
- becoming too protective of my time and energy.
- blowing issues out of proportion.
- beating myself up by thinking *How stupid can I be?* and *Can't I do anything right?*
- neglecting basic needs, such as eating well and sleeping enough.
- not thinking about the needs of others.
- becoming easily hurt and offended.
- focusing solely on my problems and my world.
- feeling dissatisfied with everything and everyone.
- hungering for approval and affirmation.
-
-
-



you're about to be carried away by your emotions, add them to the list. Feel free to make a copy of this list and post it where you'll see it so you can regularly check on your progress.

While everyone has bad days, you'll want to pay attention to anything that is becoming a *pattern* in your life. The goal is to stop the accumulation of emotional trash *before* the bin overflows and *reduce* the amount of emotional garbage generated. When you set aside time for maintenance and remember to take the emotional junk to the dumpster, you'll experience less stress, a healthier body, stronger relationships, and better attitudes.

TAKING OUT THE TRASH

1. Trash that we allow to pile up creates harmful conditions. Dealing with or emptying emotional trash reduces our stress and creates healthier conditions emotionally, physically, and mentally. Do you tend to allow your emotions to pile up? Do you know why?

- Do you usually *react* to situations or *respond* to them? Explain.
- What does that tell you about how you handle your emotions? Do you need to make some changes? What is the next step God is showing you?

2. Describe how emotions were handled in your home when you were growing up.

- Did your parents discuss their feelings? Did your parents discuss and accept your feelings?

- Did your family wait for a crisis before they dealt with feelings?
- Did you grow up thinking you were the only person who ever felt angry or sad or frustrated?

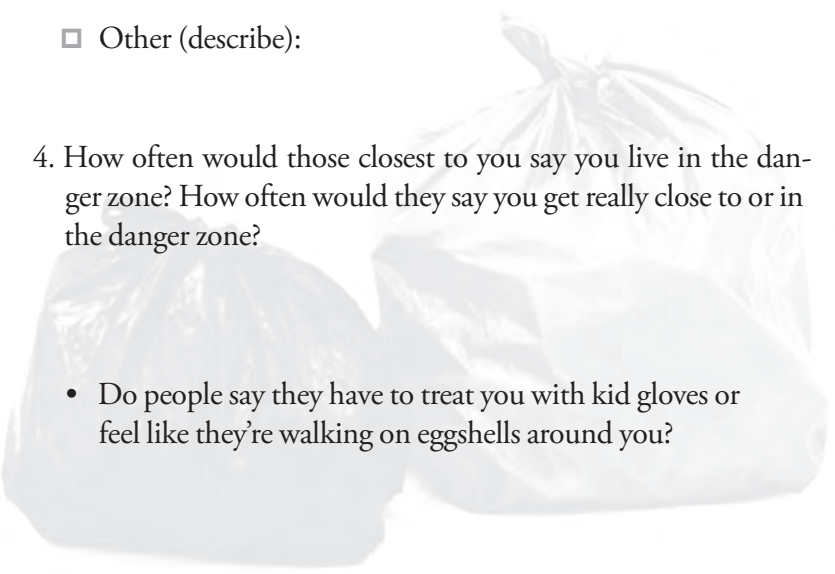
3. What do your meltdown moments usually look like?

- ☐ Do you get snappy with others?
- ☐ Do you withdraw and give the silent treatment?
- ☐ Do you yell or curse?
- ☐ Do you remain polite but watch for an opportunity to get even?
- ☐ Do you punch things or hit people or animals?
- ☐ Other (describe):

- ☐ Other (describe):

4. How often would those closest to you say you live in the danger zone? How often would they say you get really close to or in the danger zone?

- Do people say they have to treat you with kid gloves or feel like they're walking on eggshells around you?



- How often do you say or do something you later regret?
- How frequently do you *fail* to say or do something and regret it later?

