

David J. Pollay ■ The Momentum Project, LLC

## THE LAW OF THE GARBAGE TRUCK

### What to Do When People Dump on You

**W**e encounter angry, rude and thoughtless people almost every day. Another driver cuts us off in traffic...our boss grumbles criticism even as we work late.

These unpleasant incidents likely have little or nothing to do with us—we have simply wandered into someone else's bad manners, bad moods or bad habits. Yet like emotional garbage trucks, we tend to pick up the negative feelings put out by others and carry them around with us, becoming less happy, productive and likable as a result. Psychologists have found that the cumulative effects of these seemingly minor annoyances can adversely affect our health and outlook on life as much as a major setback such as divorce.

It isn't just other people who dump emotional garbage on us, either. We dump it on ourselves, too, when we let memories of past failures and unrealistic worries about potential future problems ruin our present.

The smart way to respond when "garbage" is dumped on you...

#### TAKE YOUR GARBAGE TRUCK OFF CRUISE CONTROL

When other people dump on us, our feelings of anger or unhappiness can seem instant and unavoidable. However, with a little effort, we can learn to control our emotional responses in these difficult situations.

Start by making a personal resolution to no longer let other people's

negativity ruin your mood and waste your time. Remind yourself that their negativity has little to do with you. Make this resolution now, while you're calm and rational. If you wait until you feel dumped upon, you might be too caught up in the emotions of the moment to see that even if your anger and unhappiness are justified, they're not helpful.

Remind yourself of this resolution before you enter situations where you're particularly likely to feel dumped on, such as driving on busy roads or walking into a very crowded store.

A three-step plan of action when someone does dump on you...

**1. Immediately remind yourself of your earlier resolution.** Just this reminder can interrupt your stream of negative feelings before it becomes an unstoppable flood.

**2. Think *I forgive the person who just dumped on me.*** Believe it or not, offering silent forgiveness when you're wronged instantly lightens your mood and lifts a weight from your shoulders. To the human mind, forgiveness feels just like finding a solution to a troubling problem. Stanford University psychologist Fred Luskin, PhD, even has discovered that people who make a habit of forgiveness tend to be physically healthier than those who hold grudges, suffering fewer cardiovascular problems and lower incidence of cancer. The benefits of

offering forgiveness tend to be greatest when it is done quickly, not after a period of placing blame.

**3. Visualize the negative event passing you by.** Picture it disappearing into the distance, and smile as you see it go. The physical act of smiling actually triggers the release of mood-boosting endorphins into our bodies.

#### COPE WITH CHRONIC DUMPERS

It may feel easier to deal with a rude stranger than with a rude acquaintance or relative. After all, if we say nothing to someone who repeatedly dumps bad stuff on us, the misbehavior is unlikely to change...and if we confront the dumper, he/she is likely to become even less pleasant—most chronic dumpers are spoiling for a fight and love to hold a grudge.

The best way to alter a chronic dumper's misbehavior is to provide positive reinforcement when the chronic dumper exhibits a rare moment of helpfulness. Acknowledge the help, provide heartfelt thanks, then add, "When there is this helpfulness between us, it makes it easier for us to have a close relationship" (replace "have a close relationship" with "work productively together" in a professional relationship).

Until this opportunity presents itself—or if several attempts at positive reinforcement do not lead to

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change—select from among the following responses when the chronic dumper dumps on you...

**1. Redirect the negative conversation rather than get drawn in.** You might say to the dumper, “Yes, I can imagine that that must be annoying. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you about something else...”

**2. Respond to the dumper’s negativity with, “Do you need to vent about this for a minute?”** This forces the dumper to consider the possibility that he/she is venting—being excessively negative—which might take some wind out of his sails. It also can subtly shift your role in the dumper’s life from that of a garbage truck endlessly picking up his emotional garbage to that of a friend who is willing to help out by listening—but only for a minute. Politely cut the venting off when the one-minute mark is reached.

**3. Offer a strategy that allows the dumper to address the root cause of his recurring problem.** Example: A coworker often moans about your employer’s policies. Say, “It seems to me that you’re not happy with the way our company is run. Maybe

you should put together some suggestions and take them to the boss.”

#### **STOP DUMPING ON YOURSELF**

Memories of past failures can be very powerful, almost like reliving the painful incidents. These memories can ruin our mood and distract us—even if the situation that we’re recalling was resolved long ago or is irrelevant to our current life.

When memories of old failures pop into your mind, remind yourself that you found a solution to this old problem—or at least you survived it—and decide to let the memory pass so that you can focus on today. Visualize the memory passing by and disappearing into the distance, and smile at its passing.

Our minds sometimes dump worries about potential future problems on us, too. Time spent thinking about potential problems can be time well-spent if we’re thinking up contingency plans for realistic problems. In reality, most of the time we spend thinking about future problems is wasted agonizing over things that we can’t change or fixating on very unlikely worst-case scenarios.

Psychologists Karen Reivich, PhD, and Andrew Shatté, PhD, developed a five-step strategy for preventing our minds from dumping worries about catastrophic but unlikely future events upon us...

**1. Identify the situation that has you worried** and its potential worst-case outcomes.

**2. Realistically estimate the odds of each of these worst-case outcomes.** Chances are, they are unlikely.

**3. Think of the best-case outcomes that could result from this situation.** Include best-case outcomes so far-fetched that they make you chuckle. What you will notice is that often these laughable best-case outcomes are just as likely as the worst-case scenarios that you have been wasting time worrying about.

**4. Think through the situation’s more likely middle-ground outcomes.**

**5. Calmly think through a plan with your new perspective on the likelihood of various outcomes,** then take action as appropriate.

If your mind dumps worries about this future situation on you again, remind yourself, *I’ve already thought that through. Today my time is better spent dealing with other things.* ■■