

Do you cling to things? Whether it's the Doctor Martens you lived in as a student, a partner you can't leave or a mental image of your old self, Oliver James explains why letting go is hard to do

How to live and let go



biography
Psychologist, writer and documentary producer Oliver James' new book, *Affluenza – How To Be Successful and Stay Sane*, will be published in January

Janice, 32, can't let go of her boyfriend, even though he's four years younger than her and unpromising mating material, which she's now looking for in a man. Simon, 36, has two small children and knows it's time to let go of his beloved sports car to make way for the people carrier his family now needs. Julia, 34, has a small baby and can't let go of the figure she used to have when she was 25. She still carries a photo of her old self wearing a bikini to contrast with her more motherly present self.

Letting go of people, things or ideas is only hard if we've become irrationally attached to them. Most of the time, in most respects, we can get over the house we were gazumped out of, being sacked or the friend from whom we have grown apart. When we can't let go, it's because these people or possessions have come to represent self-esteem, security or status that we're afraid we can't get from new sources.

Many of us have a friend who's become a lazy habit or security blanket—say someone we were close to at university but who we now have little in common with because we no longer share what united us. The fear that we might not be able to find new friends can make it hard to acknowledge that we should even consider letting old ones go.

It's the same with jobs. We may endlessly moan about how tedious our work is, or how little our boss appreciates us, yet fear stops us resigning. We dress this up as being about the difficulty of getting the same pay or status elsewhere, but because of our low self-esteem, our

real fear is of being exposed as useless and unemployable.

Not being able to let go of lovers is the most common problem. In my twenties, it took me four years of listening to Bryan Ferry's mournful dirges ('Dance away the tears') to let go of a girlfriend I'd previously believed was the only one for me. I didn't realise, but the difficulty had nothing to do with her, and everything to do with my relationship with my mother when I was small.

At one point, there were four of us kids under the age of five and, as a result, my mum could get quite snappy. I felt rejected and abandoned and it left me prone to over-needy tendencies in relation to women. Having a mildly depressed, tetchy mum made me rejecting and clingy at the same time. As an adult, I was reluctant to share feelings with partners, pushing them away if they wanted me to open up. Yet I was also desperate to be loved and cared for.

If this sounds like you, it's vital you do something about it. Understanding the psychological roots to your neediness is the first step, and today there are some excellent therapies that can address the past in your present. The Hoffman Process, Cognitive Analytic Therapy or the Centre for Attachment-Based Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy will all do the job (Google will find them for you).

A tendency to cling to relationships or friendships is not the only way we bolster ourselves against insecurity. We also hang on to material possessions, clothes and clutter that represent aspects of ourselves we don't want to let go. We accumulate so much clobber that we run out of places to put it: self-storage facilities have grown by one third a year for a decade.

A friend of mine who moved to the US put his stuff in storage and



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recently came back to sort it out. He reported tremendous relief on realising the vast majority was no longer of use. The desk he'd had since he was a student, the piles of newspaper cuttings and the bric-à-brac he'd imagined conferred identity upon him were all simply disposed of.

Our trouble is, we're coached to put having before being; wants ahead of needs. If you feel overwhelmed by your current possessions, and the need to acquire more, interrogate what they represent to you. Your photo album is one thing, clothes you wore 20 years ago are another. On the one hand, it's good to be grateful for what you've got and to let go of your desire for something new. On the other, like my friend, you almost certainly have cupboards full of rubbish that needs to go.

In many cases, our parents' values and the degree of maltreatment we suffered as children predict which of us becomes incapable of letting go. But if I had to single out one way to prevent the accumulation of unnecessary clutter, it would be to ask yourself, 'Do I need this, or do I want it?'

For more than a century, wise folk have been exhorting us to put relationships and being

(rather than having) first. Oscar Wilde put it that, 'The true perfection of man lies not in what man has, but what man is', in accord with Karl Marx's 'The less you are, the more you have'.

These observations are even truer today.

*Oliver James is the author of 'They F*** You Up – How To Survive Family Life' (£7.99, Bloomsbury).*

When we can't let go, it's because these people represent security