FOREWORD BY JEFFERSON BETHKE

BAGGAGE

HOW YOUR DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD PREPARED YOU FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

IKE MILLER

GOOD BAGGAGE

HOW YOUR DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD PREPARED YOU FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

IKE MILLER

BakerBooks
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Miller, Ike, 1985– author.
Title: Good baggage : how your difficult childhood prepared you for healthy relationships / Ike Miller.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023]
Identifiers: LCCN 2022051405 | ISBN 9781540902863 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540903624 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493443307 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Interpersonal relations.
Classification: LCC HM1106 .M53 2023 | DDC 302—dc23/eng/20221222
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022051405

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Published in association with the Bindery Agency, www.TheBinderyAgency.com.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TO ISAAC, COEN, AND SADIE.
THIS WORK, I DO FOR YOU.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

When I was seventeen years old, I played on my high school's baseball team. We were ranked nationally and had a chance to win the state championship (spoiler alert: we lost in the championship).

But during a routine scrimmage practice that year, when I was playing center field, my buddy hit a deep fly ball in the gap. I began running as fast as I could, tracking it down. I remember it looking like it was going to be just out of reach, and I might need to dive.

And so I did.

For about three seconds I felt like superman as I leapt through the sky—and caught the ball! It was incredible. Then I crash-landed on the grass.

And I heard one of the loudest cracks I've ever heard.

I didn't feel pain right away, but when I stood up and tried to lift my right arm, I physically wasn't able to. Long story short, I completely shattered my collarbone and dislocated my shoulder—and worst of all, my bone was sticking out of my right shoulder.

Then the pain came. Searing and sharp. I remember almost passing out from how painful it was. And for weeks it was like that. So tender, sensitive, and sharp.

Because that's what a wound is. A present injury that hasn't healed yet. And a *present wound* has very specific characteristics.

1. It can become infected and continue to get worse.
2. It is usually covered or hidden by a bandage or clothing.
3. It is highly sensitive to pain, and we usually cringe or retract if someone gets close to it.

Now, think about how fundamentally different a scar is from a wound. If a wound is *properly* healed, it becomes a scar. And scars are very, very different.

Scars have their own specific characteristics too.

1. They are no longer vulnerable to further festering or infection.
2. We don't cover the scar under a bandage (in fact, we usually "show" people!).
3. It is no longer painful and tells a specific story.

When I hurt my collarbone and shoulder, after a few months and two metal plates and eleven screws, it became a scar. And instead of hiding the wound, I went around in a classic high school bro way saying, "Dude, look what happened!"

The scar/wound metaphor is one I couldn't stop thinking about when I was reading Ike's words in this book. He so brilliantly and thoughtfully lays out a road map to show

how a difficult circumstance can, if healed properly, actually become a superpower.

Think about Jesus. What did he still show in his resurrected body? His perfect body? He showed scars. Meaning Jesus forever will have those scars when he easily could've had them removed in the resurrection as signs of "blemish." But I think they are there forever in Jesus's body because that's who he is. A God who is in the business of making wounds scars, and one who wants to get glory from our stories forever.

Be the one who wants to get glory from our stories forever.

—Jefferson Bethke

INTRODUCTION

GOOD BAGGAGE?

As a single guy in my early twenties, I had a thought many of us share: "I hope the person I marry doesn't have a ton of baggage."

Just a couple of years later, I'd eat my words. I wasn't married long before discovering I had plenty of baggage for the both of us. But in working through my baggage, I learned a crucial truth—the truth at the heart of this book.

My own story involves a family whose dysfunction centered around my father's disease. In his case, the condition was alcoholism. It drove brokenness in every relationship in our family and ultimately ended my parents' marriage. It would take my becoming a husband, having children, and years of processing to fully grasp the dysfunction's repercussions.

Maybe like me, you grew up amid a painful reality that entailed traumatic experiences. This book is for all of us who

experienced dysfunction in our family of origin or difficulty in our childhood.

Dysfunctional families and difficult childhoods come in many forms. Dysfunctional families are marked by the pervasive presence of conflict and instability. Some form of abuse or neglect is often present, and the dysfunction can be due to addiction, codependency, or untreated mental illness. The defining traits of dysfunctional families are poor communication, perfectionism, absence of empathy, controlling tendencies, and excessive criticism.[1]

A difficult childhood may not be due to conflict or substance use. It could be due to an emotionally immature, distant, or physically ill parent. Maybe the illness of a family member consumed the family and shaped how you saw yourself and the world. Difficult childhoods can also be the result of "secondhand" dysfunction. Maybe one or both of your parents grew up in a dysfunctional context, and though they were not abusive, controlling, or caught in addiction themselves, the impact of growing up in that context affected how they related to you, your siblings, and your other parent.

Although our difficult childhoods share much in common, each of our stories is deeply personal and unique to us. To honor this diversity in our stories, I'll use various terms to speak to our shared experience: childhoods in which things were not as they should be.

Whether we call it a dysfunctional family or a difficult childhood, it was an environment that would be toxic for anyone, much less a child moving through the critical stages of development. So it's important to acknowledge up front that the baggage we carry served a crucial purpose in our early lives—it helped us survive. We need to honor the work

that our younger selves did. We must acknowledge that even if these coping mechanisms were unhealthy, they served a purpose—they kept us alive.

So instead, don't shame yourself or others for having created critical techniques to survive. Our work now is to understand why these skills no longer serve us as adults and what we need to do about them.

The Good News

In my experience, all we hear about are the ways our difficult childhood makes us bad at relationships. But the truth is, bad relationships in childhood do not predestine us to be bad at relationships ourselves. In fact, we came out of our difficult childhood with relational wisdom, emotional intelligence, and a hard-won level of awareness that comes only from having seen some things. Your difficult childhood prepared you for healthy relationships.

This may sound counterintuitive, illogical, or even absurd. But it's true. You may not have seen or experienced it yet, but it's in you, and that's what this book is about. There's a difference between *preparation* and *realization*. This book is about the process we must undergo to move from preparing for healthy relationships to realizing those relationships.

What matters most, however, isn't that we achieve complete healing—as if that were possible—but that we begin the process right now. Our relationships depend on it. Our difficult childhood has given us tools and raw materials. But now we need to learn how to leverage them.

Until we do that, we can perpetuate the harm we experienced in childhood. We will use the tools and materials

we were given in all the wrong ways and with all the wrong people. We will hurt ourselves rather than heal. We will inflict greater wounds and cast blame where we ought to take responsibility.

The good news about baggage, the truth at the center of this book, is this: *it's not all bad*.

Baggage isn't just what makes us bad at relationships. Baggage is the pain we carry along with the lessons it's taught us. Nobody wants it, but the truth is, we've all got it. We've all experienced the pain of betrayal, dishonesty, rejection, and shame from relationships. But the pain we carry carries its own promises.

Our difficult childhood helped us pack some really good stuff into those bags. This book is about finding those good things and leveraging them to help our relationships flourish now.

How I Began to Discover the *Good* Baggage

About three months into married life, Sharon and I took a trip to Disney World. For context, Sharon grew up celebrating birthdays and significant milestones throughout her life there. She lives as though Disney is her birthright. I, however, had never been. Sharon put it to me this way: "If you're going to be married to me, you need to understand my love for Disney."

As we boarded the plane for Orlando, she was grinning from ear to ear. I said, "You're more excited about this than you were for our honeymoon!"

I expected her to at least feign denial. Instead, she simply replied, "It's a different kind of excited."

This told me everything I needed to know about her love for Disney.

We were a few days into our trip when I realized that in "the happiest place on earth," I wasn't very happy. I was miserable. I was putting on a show for Sharon, but I was lifeless on the inside. When we returned home from the trip, I shared with her what I'd experienced and wondered if I was dealing with some depression.

After my official diagnosis of depression, my "baggage-free" image began to crumble. I discovered I was bringing a lot to the relationship that hadn't been addressed.

I threw myself into books on adult children of dysfunctional families and how that had shaped me. I sought counseling and inner-healing prayer experiences, and I read extensively about spiritual, mental, and emotional health. I pursued graduate-level counseling studies and regularly participated in a twelve-step program for adult children of alcoholic/dysfunctional families.

I also studied ancient Christian practices in spirituality and their intersection with theology. In this process, I developed tools for investigating my inner world with the guidance of God's Spirit—tools I'm excited to share with you.

Out of this passion for pursuing a healthy relationship, my instinct was to address my depressive disorder head-on. I'd seen where things go when mental health struggles go unaddressed. I knew firsthand such things don't go away; they only grow. Pain doesn't die just because we bury it.

At that point, Sharon and I began meeting with a counselor regularly. It's one of the best decisions we've ever made for our relationship, and we've continued this discipline

throughout our marriage. We kept going not because we had big problems, but because we didn't *want* big problems.

I often wonder if I would be as motivated to pursue healthy relationships if I hadn't experienced the pain of unhealthy ones in my childhood.

Redeeming Childhood

The heart of this book is the desire to see the pain of your difficult childhood redeemed. The things you went through, yes, they harmed you. But that doesn't have to be the end of your story. I want to identify the gifts those hard things gave you and help you learn to leverage them for the kind of relationships you've always wanted.

We'll begin by looking at some big questions you may never have asked out loud but that have been an ache in your soul all your life: Why does it feel like nothing is ever *really* okay? What's a normal relationship anyway? And most importantly, can anything good come of this baggage I'm carrying?

Once you've discovered there is good news, we'll begin by addressing the bad news, meaning the ruthless cycle sabotaging our relationships: codependency, approval seeking, deception, and boundary issues. In codependency, we lose our sense of self, so approval-seeking becomes a means of creating an identity we believe others will love. When we burn out on seeking approval, we resort to deception to keep up appearances and protect ourselves from rejection. Boundaries are the proper form of relational protection, but our codependency won't allow us to enforce them. And so the cycle starts over again. We must break this ruthless cycle if

we're going to realize the exceptional relationships we've been prepared for.

Then we get to the good news: six aspects of the good baggage our childhood put in us and how they can work together for the good of our relationships now.

Finally, we'll end with a couple of chapters that put this all together. One's on overcoming our obstacles to healthy relationships and the other's on how to start embracing our good baggage now.

I'm excited for the journey you're about to begin. There's some good stuff in your baggage, and I'm going to help you find it. Your difficult childhood prepared you for healthy relationships.

PT 1

THE UNSPOKEN QUESTIONS WE KEEP ASKING

Three common questions stir below the surface of our emotional worlds. Only when we name these questions can we begin to address the unrest they constantly cause in us.

The first two questions underlay many of the relational obstacles we face. Once we understand our subconscious struggle with these questions, we can begin to tackle these obstacles and achieve the objective of this book: learning to leverage our baggage for the good of our relationships.

We'll end the section with a question some of us still ask and others of us gave up hope on long ago: Can anything good come from what I've been through?

The answer we'll discover is the secret to maximizing everything this book has to offer: You and I live with an unrelenting passion to see our relationships go differently than the ones we experienced in our childhood.

1

IS ANYTHING EVER REALLY OKAY?

In July 2014, Sharon and I moved back to North Carolina after four years in Chicago. Sharon was a couple of months pregnant with our second child, and we were both finishing our dissertations. We moved back because North Carolina was where we wanted to be long-term. There was just one hiccup—we relocated before we got the final word on the job I was hoping to land. It was a stressful time for both of us.

We moved into our little, second-floor, two-bedroom apartment in Holly Springs and waited for our shipping pod with all our treasured possessions to arrive. We waited. And waited. On the day it finally came, it was your typical ninety-five-degree, 100-percent-humidity July day in North Carolina. I went to open the rolling door of our pod, only to find it was jammed. I got it open far enough to sneak my head in and awkwardly twist my neck to discover that one of our dining room chairs had shifted during transit and its foot was now firmly lodged in the rung of the rolling door.

You've got to be kidding me, I thought. *Not today . . .*

I wiped the sweat from my brow and went to work dislodging the chair. I fought the door for what felt like hours, making trip after trip into the apartment for yet another tool. Just as I was reaching my wit's end, it started to rain. That was the moment I broke. The sweat, the rain, and the tears all began to run down my face like tributaries rushing into a river.

I lost it. *Why does it always have to be hard? Why can't anything be easy? Why can't things ever be okay?*

This moment by the pod in the rain was a lot, to be sure. But honestly, it felt on par for life.

It's something that's real to many of us from dysfunctional families: the struggle to feel like things are ever *really* okay. This feeling is tough to bear when coupled with the sense that we're also the ones who should make it okay. Somehow, it's our responsibility to fix everything.

Sometimes things are okay, but that's only because we've constantly worked to keep them that way, and everything will fall apart if we stop. This isn't simply a lack of faith. It comes from us having played a stabilizing role in our dysfunctional family of origin. Now the part of stabilizer is ingrained into our beings. Unfortunately, as children, we couldn't keep things "okay" in our homes for long because they weren't really in our control anyway.

As adults, okay is never enough because we don't know what it feels like. Everyone tells us things are good, and we can see that, but we also believe things are more fragile than everyone thinks.

As it did for so many of us, the pandemic lockdown meant my whole family was at home all the time with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Sharon and I split our days between working and watching the kids. This meant long periods

when I had all three kids to myself. As the days and weeks went by and the pressures and tensions of life mounted, I struggled to be present with them. I was irritable and lost my temper too quickly. I was watching them, but my mind was working on problems at work.

Things weren't okay at home. Things weren't okay at work. And things weren't okay within me.

My depression was resurfacing, and I was beginning to struggle with anxiety. The fact that things weren't okay was intensified by the guilt I felt for not being able to make things okay. The plan of care my psychiatrist prescribed included an as-needed antianxiety medication.

As the pandemic dragged on and the tensions in our world heightened, I took increasing amounts of my antianxiety medication to numb the pain I couldn't fix and silence the shame I felt for not being able to fix it. Eventually I developed an unhealthy relationship with my medication.

Sharon discovered my medication misuse in what I've come to call a moment of God's severe mercy. This forced the most difficult confession of all: *I* was not okay.

The Source of This False Belief

As I dug deeper to understand the source of this pressure to fix everything, I found that at the base of it was the false belief that everything depended on me. The truth is, this was a weight I wasn't made to carry. (This pressure is exacerbated if we come from a family system in which we couldn't trust a caregiver to nurture, protect, and meet our needs.)

I was suffering under the weight of an overinflated sense of how much things depended on me. In theological terms,

I was dealing with a less commonly discussed form of pride. It's not that I was boastful or thought too highly of myself. Instead, it was the kind of pride that says, "Only I can carry this. Otherwise, it will fall apart."

Now, pride often gets labeled as a deeply sinful problem, and for those of us who grew up in religious contexts, we equate sin with something that needs to be punished. This is an incomplete definition of sin.

This kind of pride doesn't arise from foolish arrogance. It comes from the extreme sense of responsibility we carry into everything we do—a sense of responsibility for more than we were meant to carry by ourselves.

In the original Greek, "sin" was an archery term. It meant to miss the mark. The "sin" of an arrow was the distance between where the arrow landed on a target and the bull's-eye of the target.

Theologically, this is used metaphorically to name the reality that creation has "missed the mark" of what it was created to be—things aren't as they should be. In this light, some sin is willful disobedience and rebellion against God. But a lot of our "missing the mark" is the outworking of our brokenness. Things aren't as they should be because broken people hurt us, and we're living out of the brokenness inflicted on us.

This isn't an excuse to say we aren't responsible for our actions and decisions. But a more robust view of salvation is that Christ didn't come only to take away punishment for our sins. He also came as the great physician to *heal us* of sin and its effects. This is an especially powerful correction to our theology for those of us who grew up under harsh and abusive punishment.

Not everything in us needs punishing. Some of what's broken in us needs healing.

In this framework, pride isn't exalting ourselves above others. Pride is the overinflated sense that *everything* depends on us. Granted, this isn't a feeling we chose. It's something that formed in us because of the dysfunction of our childhood. Nevertheless, it needs to be healed because it produces overwhelming pressure that leads to exhaustion and burnout. It needs healing not just for God's sake but also for ours.

The antidote to pride is still humility, but a kind of humility that's different from what we're used to. Humility is often defined as thinking lowly of ourselves. Coming from dysfunctional families, that "humility" seems to come naturally for many of us. Instead, Andrew Murray gives one of the most beautiful definitions of humility: humility is living from a place of complete dependence on God.[1]

On this reading, the sin of pride in the garden of Eden wasn't that Adam and Eve wanted to be equal with God. The sin of pride was believing they could make their lives better by adding to what God had already given them. They moved from complete dependence on God to relying on themselves. Along with that came fear, shame, and doubt about God's goodness. Murray writes that at this moment, "They fell from their high position."[2] At the moment they attempted to exalt themselves to the side of God, they fell from the lightness and freedom that came from dependence on him.

In our own lives, we may feel a need to "help God" a little. We might not put it that way, but the sense that nothing is ever okay unless we constantly work to make it okay betrays this deep-seated belief. To this mentality, Murray says that in false humility, we say, "I'm only a little bit." But to say

we are a little bit is to say that God is not all. God is only "most." True humility is "the place of entire dependence on God," the simple sense of entire nothingness that leaves God free to be all.[3]

In humility, we remember that it all depends on God, and we live from a place of utter dependence on him.

Complicated by Stages of Intoxication

For those of us who grew up with a parent with alcoholism or substance abuse, this feeling that nothing was ever okay was exacerbated by the fact that we didn't yet understand the stages of intoxication.[4] This misunderstanding alone was a major contributing factor to our trauma as children.

Because of their limited awareness, children live with a sense of "omnipotence"—everything that happens around them is interpreted as a direct result of their actions. As children, this led us to believe that our parents' responses to us were about our actions rather than their level of inebriation.

A parent with an awful hangover might've responded to our request for a snack with great anger and disgust: "Why do you always need something from me?"[5]

However, within an hour or two, when they had resumed drinking, our parent might have replied, "Sure, buddy. What can I make for my favorite child?"

Without awareness of our parent's stage of intoxication, we assumed the change in response was due to *how* we asked the question. *From now on, I just need to ask the right way*, we concluded.

A while later, when they were in the happy drunk stage, our parent might've doted on us with hugs and high fives.

"You're so smart. I'm so proud of you! You know what? Tonight let's go celebrate YOU!" As a child, we were in heaven, unaware that this plan would change momentarily.

Finally, dinnertime came, and we said, "Let's go celebrate like you said, remember?" The parent, on the backside of the intoxication, replied, "Who would ever celebrate you?"

Without any awareness of the journey the parent had just gone on, we assumed we were the cause of both the positive and negative responses, and we internalized the guilt for causing the negative ones.

This led us, as children of such dysfunction, to be hypervigilant, overly conscientious, and self-critical, and to judge ourselves without mercy. We also concluded that we could control people with our actions if we figured out what they wanted from us.

Now, we experience great anxiety in our relationships because we fear that every occurrence of rejection, disapproval, disappointment, anger, or other adverse reaction is a direct reflection on us.

Although we now have an intellectual awareness that we aren't in control of everything, subconsciously we expect to be able to control everything. Or at least to fix it. When we learn that we have this subconscious belief that we can control others, we appreciate even more how our difficult childhood continues to affect us now.

Building a Cognitive Life Raft

In their book *After the Tears: Helping Adult Children of Alcoholics Heal Their Childhood Trauma*, Jane Middelton-Moz and Lorie Dwinell explain that an essential part of

dealing with our trauma is building a "cognitive life raft."[6] The challenges of adult life in the aftermath of our childhoods can be every bit as overwhelming as floating in the open sea. Building a cognitive life raft means developing a clear understanding of what happened to us in our childhood and then using that understanding to better cope with the ongoing impact of our childhood. This includes understanding the characteristics we developed to survive and how they may now work against us. Most importantly, we must understand that we're not "crazy." Instead, we "are having a normal reaction to what was an abnormal and painful life."[7]

This cognitive life raft allows us to unload many of the messages, responsibilities, and beliefs about ourselves that we've been carrying for so long. These thoughts have been like weights upon our backs threatening to force us under. As we name these messages, responsibilities, and beliefs, we can take them off and throw them into the raft. This allows us to discover what's essential to our identity versus what was necessary for our survival as children.

Many of these beliefs about ourselves came from the roles we played in our dysfunctional family. If we played the caretaker role, for example, we might carry the belief that we're responsible for ensuring everything is okay. We may feel anxious and out of place when we don't have anyone to take care of. Once we can name that this was a role and not essential to our identity, we can take that weight from around our neck and throw it into the raft. Picture yourself doing this; you may feel lighter already!

This isn't to say we shouldn't ever take care of people. It just means we don't bear the weight of ensuring everyone

is okay. We may enjoy taking care of others and find it to be meaningful work. But sometimes we take on this role for unhealthy, manipulative, or codependent reasons. The cognitive life raft allows us space to acknowledge this intellectually and then gradually come to accept it emotionally.

Using the Cognitive Life Raft

Here are a few ways to use the cognitive life raft that I've found most helpful. Try them out and adapt them for yourself. If one isn't helpful, that's okay. The important thing is to find what's most effective for unearthing what's operating below the surface in your own life.

Name the Messages, Responsibilities, and False Beliefs You Carry

A list of all the messages, responsibilities, and false beliefs you carry might include the following:

- If I'm not perfect, I'm worthless.
- "Fun and carefree" is not an option for me.
- I should be able to control the uncontrollable.
- Loyalty is always the best policy.
- I have to be superman/superwoman.
- If people really knew who I was, they would _____.
- I don't deserve their time, attention, or approval.
- I'm different from everyone else / no one understands me.
- All I know how to do is be impulsive.
- I'm just a screwup.

» No one will ever take me seriously.
» Why can't I do anything right?
» I'll never have a long-term relationship.

Think of Specific Moments When These Messages, Responsibilities, or False Beliefs Were Enacted

Can you think of a particular moment when you felt like you needed to step up? Why did you feel that way? Can you think of a moment you felt things would fall apart if you didn't perform perfectly? What consequences of failure did you fear? What would be the fallout of failing? Why did you feel so much pressure in that moment?

Utilize the "Five Whys" Tool

Our actions, reactions, and emotions are often just symptoms of what's going on deeper down within us. The "five whys" help us get at what that is.[8]

As the story goes, the five whys originated in Toyota automobile factories. Whenever there was a problem on the assembly-line floor, the manager would utilize the five whys to understand the root cause. For example, if windshield installation was consistently delayed, they wouldn't just go to that team member and tell them to work faster. They would ask the first why. It might go something like this:

First why: *Why are you having trouble installing windshields?*
Answer: The person in charge of prepping the windshields for me is delayed.
They would go and ask the second why: *Why are you late in prepping the windshields?*

Answer: The truck delivering windshields is consistently late.

They would then ask the third why: *Why are the windshield shipments late?*

Answer: The company supplying windshields is having trouble keeping up with orders.

They would ask the fourth why: *Why are they having trouble keeping up?*

Answer: Because there is a shortage of raw materials

The fifth why: *Why is there a shortage of raw materials?*

With this fifth why they have discovered the answer to their original question—Why is windshield installation delayed? Because a shortage of raw materials is slowing the production of windshields.

They could continue to address a symptom by reprimanding or repeatedly replacing the windshield installer, but until they address the supply shortage, they'll never truly address the issue. The same thing is true in our lives. If we continue to treat only the presenting symptoms, we may blame the wrong people or wrong causes over and over without any solution.

Here's an example taken word for word from my journal:

Problem: This week, I have been overwhelmed, short-tempered, and anxious.

Why have I been overwhelmed, short-tempered, and anxious?

Because we have two new employees and I want them to have a good experience on our staff. I always feel like my leadership weaknesses are exposed when someone new joins the team.

Why does this exposure overwhelm me and stress me out?

Because I think our organization should already be a perfectly well-oiled machine with no possible areas of improvement.

Why is it important that it be a well-oiled machine?

Because I don't want people to think I am incompetent or bad at what I do.

Why am I afraid of people thinking I am incompetent?

Because I want to be the best at everything I do.

Why do I need to be the best at this in particular?

Because my identity is tied up in being good at this. If new employees have a terrible experience, I'm finding my identity in something I'm bad at.

This fifth question answers my original one. I'm overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious because my identity is tied up in being a good leader. If these new employees have a bad experience, this calls my whole identity into question. These are high stakes for something as mundane as new employee orientation.

Note: There isn't anything special about the number five. Sometimes four or six whys can get you to the answer you need. I usually know I've pressed far enough when it gets painful to admit to myself what's going on. It's a bit like hitting a nerve.

Discuss These Scenarios with a Mentor, Counselor, or Pastor

A mentor, counselor, or pastor can help you understand how to respond differently to these emotions, instinctive ac-

tions, or impulsive reactions in future scenarios. They can also help you address false beliefs, problematic sources of your identity, and untrue messages you tell yourself.

Practice New Habits and Ways of Thinking

If you feel the impulse to jump in and rescue a situation when it's not your responsibility to do so, practice exercising restraint and let others feel the weight of responsibility or even fail. This adjustment will be hard for you and those around you who have become accustomed to you jumping in and making everything okay. The power of this practice is both the freedom it gives you and the sense of responsibility and ownership it requires of those who should have felt these things all along.

I have an extraordinary team member who always executes responsibilities with excellence. However, I fear this way of working will burn him out because of how often it requires him to take responsibility for something someone else on his team is responsible for.

I've continually encouraged this person to be okay with letting things not meet their level of perfection if it means someone on their team will feel the burden of their responsibility. It'll also force others to get creative about solving their problems rather than waiting for him to step in and do it for them. This is hard emotional work in the short term but incredibly liberating and freeing in the long run. This way of working promotes not only their individual mental and emotional health but the health of the team as well.

The need to make everything okay is real. This challenge runs deep in our bones and can't be changed just by being

aware of it. Getting to the point where we can let go will take a great deal of work. When we finally do, we will begin to leverage the good baggage packed in this challenge for the good of our relationships. Unfortunately, what trips us up when it comes to making our relationships okay is our uncertainty about what a "normal" relationship is in the first place. It's hard to know how to make things okay when we don't really know what okay looks like.