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professor of psychology and cognitive science, University of Toronto,
author of *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis*

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essayist and host of *The Integral Stage* podcast

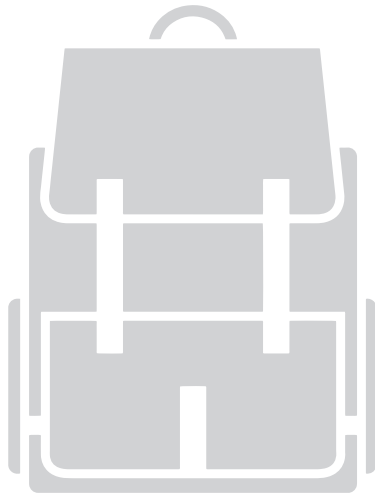
“The practice outlined in this book has the potential to profoundly transform your inner and outer world.”

MARIE-ANNE CROYÉ

M. Sc. Institute of Psychobiology, University of Trier

VIVIAN DITTMAR

The Emotional Backpack



edition est

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Note: For the sake of simplicity, many of my examples regarding couples reference a man and a woman. These examples are, of course, applicable to any gender configuration.

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For my mother

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Introduction

There are moments in life when you no longer understand yourself. It might be a simple thing, like the infamous “tube of toothpaste left open” that escalates into a relationship crisis. Or maybe something more out of the ordinary: a complete stranger insults you for no reason, and to your amazement – BAM, your day is ruined. I clearly remember one such moment from my own life. It happened over twenty years ago, but it occupied my thoughts for a long time.

It was a typical autumn day in Munich, and I had decided to take my son to the local swimming pool. He was about three years old at the time. It must have been a weekday morning because the place was mostly empty. That is, except for a group of senior citizens who happened to be having their water aerobics class in – of all places – the children’s pool. A young woman stood in front of the group, energetically trying to get some movement into the sluggish collection of frilly swim caps.

My son was already a passionate swimmer and wanted nothing to do with the baby pool. The large pool was much colder, and some go-for-glory athletes were stoically doing their laps. A three-year-old had no business there. The senior citizens weren’t occupying the entire children’s pool, so we went around to the back side and slipped into the water without a second thought.

We hadn’t been in for more than thirty seconds when the course instructor came storming over. I can’t remember exactly what she

said, because at that moment something completely unexpected happened. It was as if the sky came crashing in on me. If I had been standing on solid ground, I would have sworn that a chasm had opened up between my feet to swallow me whole. The room began to twist around me. My emotional system went completely haywire. It's impossible to say exactly what I felt. Everything inside of me was swirling around like a tornado.

I did the only thing I could think of at that moment: I mumbled something, grabbed my son, and fled to the bathroom, where I burst into tears. And I mean really uncontrollable sobbing. I hadn't cried like that in years.

What had happened? I had no clue. The situation would have been easier to understand if I'd been suffering from depression or navigating a life crisis. But I wasn't. It had been a perfectly normal morning. I'd always been a bit more sensitive and emotional than the average person, but this reaction was extreme, even for me.

I had a thousand questions: where did all these feelings suddenly come from? How could a perfect stranger, whom I had never seen before in my life and would never see again, throw me off balance like that? What gave her so much power over my emotions? Why had my usual sense of control dropped away? Why hadn't I been able to tell her off, protect my child, or at least accept the situation without a complete emotional meltdown? I didn't have any answers.

That was over twenty years ago. Now I know what was going on back then. Something about the situation reminded me of a long-forgotten experience that I hadn't processed. In other words, a package had been triggered in my emotional backpack. That realization certainly isn't groundbreaking. What's important is that I have since learned not only to cope with my backpack, but to cherish it as a valuable resource. It was a long road from there to

here, full of detours and many supposed “solutions” that turned out to be dead ends.

In recent years, I’ve been working with people and sharing my insights in personal development seminars, festivals, leadership trainings, and many other places. I’ve come to realize that whether you’re a tough-as-nails manager, a meticulous engineer, a whimsical artist, or a loving mother – everyone carries an emotional backpack. Everyone experiences moments when they lose control emotionally.

Maybe you’re really good at keeping a stiff upper lip and not letting it show when you’re falling apart inside. Maybe you even manage to hide it from yourself most of the time. Maybe when your emotional backpack kicks in, your symptoms are very different from mine. Not everyone immediately bursts into tears. Some people fly into a fit of rage and, in retrospect, don’t understand what came over them. Others suddenly feel nothing at all and observe the situation as if it were happening at a distance. Still others encounter wild emotional swings, accompanied by an overwhelming flood of uncontrollable thoughts.

No matter how you experience emotional activations, and how you survive them, they all have one thing in common: you lose control and are no longer able to respond appropriately to the situation. You become unrecognizable to yourself. In the aftermath, you can often only shake your head helplessly and wonder what on earth came over you. And that’s when things are going well. When things go poorly – and unfortunately this happens very often – you blame the trigger for your reaction. Immature parts of me might take a self-righteous stand, arguing that the water aerobics chick was a nitwit who had no right whatsoever to kick a child out of the children’s pool. But that doesn’t change the fact that my emotional reaction was completely out of proportion. Nitwit or not, the

woman at the pool had nothing to do with that. That was my emotional backpack.

The example I outlined above was extreme but also relatively innocuous. I had no relationship with that woman. In fact, I never saw her again. The only thing that had been ruined, in the end, was a beautiful morning at the swimming pool. But the aftereffects of such encounters are not always so harmless. You often experience emotional activations with people close to you: your partner, your children, your parents, or your boss. In those situations, your emotional baggage and your inability to deal with it appropriately can have disastrous consequences. You may treat your loved ones like an emotional landfill, say something that costs you your job, or end a romantic relationship that you actually wanted to continue, to name just a few examples. Dealing with your emotional backpack isn't some kind of optional luxury. It's essential if you want to have healthy relationships, make good decisions, and not simply pass your emotional baggage on to the next generation.

The effects of emotional backpacks can be seen in every important area of your life. They're at the root of many breakups and divorces. The relational space gets poisoned bit by bit until the mere presence of the other person becomes unbearable. Businesses also pay a staggering cost when employees and managers are unable to deal with their emotional backpacks. They disrupt and distort communication, making constructive collaboration impossible. Eventually most parents are horrified to discover that, despite having vowed to never do so, they behave exactly like their own mother and father. Their emotional backpacks undermine all of their good intentions, turning them into caricatures of their own parents.

Last but not least, your emotional backpack robs you of precious moments in your life, as it did for me that morning at the

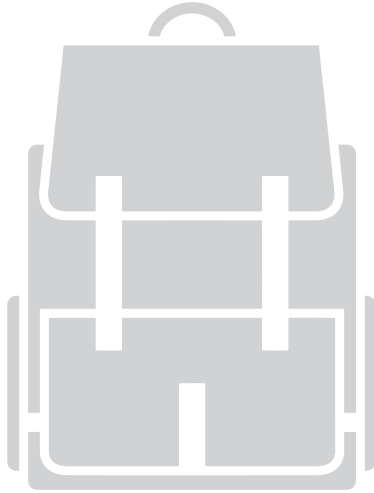
pool. But it doesn't have to be that way. While they may appear random and irrational, these situations follow a logic all their own. You can learn not only to understand but even to take advantage of them. Moments of emotional activation are not strange dilemmas. They are precious opportunities to tidy up your emotional backpack and to take steps along your own path to personal growth.

The process isn't always easy, but it's worth it. It's not about arriving at a place where your emotional backpack is completely unpacked and you can finally enjoy your life. For me, the journey has become the destination. I've discovered so many treasures along the way that today I wouldn't want to miss out on a single step.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start at the beginning – by taking a closer look at your emotional backpack.

PART I

Emotional Baggage



As you journey through life, there are experiences that you can't easily shrug off. And that's good. You need challenges to develop. You have to push up against the boundaries of what you can handle and sometimes even go beyond them. For obvious reasons you would probably rather skip these parts of your path, but that desire isn't particularly helpful. Moreover, you have limited control over what you experience. It's true that you have less control in childhood than later in life, but ordinary and extraordinary challenges will arise for you even as an adult. Depending on which interpretation you prefer, these challenges can seem like divine intervention or the anarchic whim of a soulless universe. Sometimes you even appear to be the author of your own troubles – making the same bad decision over and over again, creating difficulties that drag you way outside of your comfort zone.

Regardless of whether your challenges seem to be self-inflicted or imposed upon you by fate, these experiences take their toll. How you pay that toll determines the impact that they have on the course of your life. It all boils down to one simple question: do you break, or do you grow? In other words, do they make you sick or wise?

Indeed, the answer to these questions is far from simple. Platitudes like “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger” may sound good, but they aren't very useful in real life. You often want to grow from life's challenges but simply don't know how. Your go-to strat-

egies prove ineffective in these situations. And with each new challenge that causes you to break rather than grow, your emotional backpack gets a little bit heavier.

In Part I, we'll start by taking a closer look at emotional baggage. What's it made of? Where does it come from? How does it show up in your life? And above all, what should you do with it? If, as I claim, emotional baggage isn't primarily there to make your life difficult, then what in the world is it good for? In Part II, we'll turn to the question of how you can handle this baggage effectively. Part III explores what this healthy handling looks like in your everyday life.

1 *You Are Carrying a Backpack*

A backpack is an extremely practical invention. It contains your most essential belongings on trips or hikes. Many souvenirs get added along the way. Of course, you only want the bare essentials. Even when everything is nicely stowed away in a backpack, experienced travelers know that every gram counts.

The beauty of a backpack is that you can carry all of your belongings on your back, out of sight. Once you've been on the road for a while, you get accustomed to its weight. It's as if your backpack were an extension of your body. You can often forget about the burden you're carrying, even if you may occasionally wonder why the journey feels so arduous. The same is true of emotional baggage.

Each of us carries an emotional backpack. Some people have a very large, oversized one, like the kind you'd need for a polar expedition or similarly ambitious excursion. Such backpacks contain camping gear as well as provisions for several days. Other people carry a much smaller one, perhaps in the style of those purses that seem to be all the rage every few years, tiny pouches that dangle somewhat forlornly on long straps between the shoulder blades. They can only hold a wallet, maybe a tube of lipstick and a crumpled tissue.

But what exactly is this thing, this emotional backpack? Where does it come from? How did it develop? What should you do with it? In order to understand this, you'll first need to get clear on the difference between feelings and emotions. They are often regarded

as the same thing, but I make a clear distinction. Feelings and emotions each have their own origin, and each needs to be dealt with differently.

What Is a Feeling?

Let's start with the term "feeling." There is no uniform definition among psychotherapists or scientists, which is why I took the liberty of establishing my own in my book *The Power of Feelings*. In my definition, a feeling is a sensation that arises from an interpretation of a situation, fulfilling a specific function at that moment. For example: I come home; the dishes aren't done; I interpret that as "wrong"; as a result, anger arises.

This anger gives me the energy I need to take action. I might wash the dishes myself or address the issue with my roommate. If it's a pure feeling, free of emotional baggage, then the anger generated is exactly as deep and intense as the situation requires. Afterwards, the situation is resolved. There is no residual feeling left in my system because all the energy has been spent in the corresponding action. In my model of the "emotional compass," I outline five basic feelings that enable us to relate appropriately to every situation in life: anger, sadness, fear, shame, and joy. Why precisely these five, and why I believe they are all equally important, is a topic I will discuss in much more detail in Part III. At this point, I simply want to emphasize that feelings are very practical. Their bad reputation stems in large part from the fact that they are confused with those sensations I call emotions. And emotions, unlike feelings, can be very impractical indeed.

Emotions Are Different

There is also no uniform definition for the term "emotion." It's often simply used as a synonym for feeling. In my view, this convention

reflects the fact that our culture has not yet developed a differentiated language regarding emotions. An emotionally competent culture needs distinct words to accurately describe different emotional phenomena. Along with other authors, I use the term emotion to refer to unfelt feelings from the past, i.e., “emotional baggage.”

The inability to differentiate between feelings and emotions has far-reaching consequences for dealing with both. They differ not only in their origin but also in their function and impact. While feelings, as just described, arise from the moment, through an interpretation of a situation, emotions come from the past. They developed in moments when you couldn't or didn't want to process your feelings about a situation.

You may have been overwhelmed, and didn't have enough emotional capacity. Perhaps you were too young. It might be that you couldn't feel something and thus couldn't process it. Or maybe you didn't want to feel what came up from your interpretation of a specific situation because it was painful. Maybe you were too busy with “more important things.” Maybe it didn't fit your self-image. Or maybe you weren't in touch with yourself enough to notice what was actually happening inside of you.

Whether you couldn't or didn't want to feel what was there, your experience remained incomplete. It got stored away in your emotional backpack along with the unfelt feelings. These feelings are waiting there for an opportunity to be felt again so that the experience can complete itself.

Size Matters

If you carry a large backpack, you're probably shouldering a heavy load. Even if it's neatly packed, the sheer size and weight of your emotional backpack can drag you down. The “unprocessed weight” literally makes life difficult for you. You can see this first and fore-

most in the fact that you can't enjoy your life as much as other people. And as if that weren't bad enough, your emotional baggage also has an unpleasant knack for spilling out at inopportune moments, undermining your sense of emotional control and wreaking all kinds of havoc in your relationships.

If, on the other hand, your backpack is significantly smaller, you may hardly notice it. It's just there. Very rarely, if ever, does anything draw your attention to its existence. You may occasionally struggle with the emotional backpacks of your fellow human beings when they unceremoniously bump into you. But beyond that, backpacks aren't really an issue in your life.

I deliberately outlined two extremes here: the oversized polar expedition backpack and the almost comically small handbag backpack. Most people fall somewhere between these two extremes, in the range from daypacks to lighter trekking models, but we all know people at one extreme or the other. There are people who find life inexplicably difficult; those whom we instinctively approach with caution so as not to get blindsided by the burdens they carry. And the other kind, who stroll through life in an amazingly carefree manner, perhaps a bit superficially, not understanding why their fellow human beings are constantly caught up in dramas and take life so seriously.

A Universal Phenomenon?

Over the past few years I've had the opportunity to talk to hundreds of people about this phenomenon and have made some fascinating discoveries. The first insight was, as I said, that apparently everyone has an emotional backpack. I used to think that this only applied to some people – logically, those who would sign up for a personal development seminar about emotions. I assumed they were just like me: carrying huge backpacks that made their lives

difficult, they embarked on a quest to find something that could help.

But then I began discussing emotional activation in the context of business trainings, with managers and employees from a wide range of sectors and leadership levels, and lo and behold, they were all carrying an emotional backpack! What's more – and this was the second important insight – they also had a keen sense of the size of their own backpack and that of their colleagues. They knew precisely who they needed to handle with care and with whom they could be a little more blunt. Moreover, they knew – insight number three – when they were encountering someone's backpack. They possessed a sixth sense for when the air in a meeting could be cut with a knife, or when they had just entered a room where emotional baggage had been activated.

This realization was crucial for me since the participants in my trainings were not there because they had a specific interest in emotional competence. They had been enrolled by their HR departments for entirely different reasons. These people had never in their lives engaged with these topics, and might never do so again. They hadn't come to me because they felt a particular need or were suffering emotionally. They had simply ended up with me as part of an organizational development process: engineers, technicians, marketers, salespeople, shift supervisors, IT professionals, accountants; men and women at the beginning, in the middle, or nearing the end of their careers.

Based on these experiences, I'd venture to say that you, too, are carrying an emotional backpack. Right now, at this moment, whether you are aware of it or not. I can't say how big it is, but you can probably estimate that quite well yourself. You likely also have an instinctive sense of what kind of load you carry and how much weight is on your shoulders.

The Size of Backpacks

What factors actually determine the size of your backpack? Is it a predisposition? Does it have to do with your childhood? What other factors might play a role? I developed the following formula to calculate the size of my backpack. It was originally meant as a joke but has actually proven quite useful:

$$\text{Backpack size} = \frac{\text{Intensity} \times \text{Sensitivity}}{\text{Support}}$$

To elaborate, the size of your backpack is based on three factors. The first factor is the intensity of your life experiences. Did you come from a family in which everything was relatively stable, or was there more conflict than harmony in your house? Were you able to spend your life in security and moderate prosperity, as is considered normal for many people in industrialized countries, or did you experience forced migration, deprivation, and existential fear? This is not just about your childhood experiences, even though they play an undeniable role in shaping you throughout your life. Intense events as an adult also leave their mark: a difficult divorce, the loss of a job, a severe illness, the death of someone close to you, to name just a few examples. In short, how tough your life has been is one of the factors that determines the size of your backpack.

The second factor is summed up by the word “sensitivity.” How sensitive are you? How intensely do you experience things? How strongly do experiences affect you? For me, a key insight came when a teenage friend who supported me through my first major life crisis said, “You know what? I realized something about you; there’s nothing wrong with you at all. You’re just very, very sensitive.” He was absolutely right! I’m someone who was traumatized by a childhood in which, on the whole, everything was honestly pretty okay. Sure, you can always find a fly in the ointment, but

objectively it wasn't half bad. And yet I'm incredibly sensitive, so the moderate intensity of the experiences in my backpack formula is multiplied by a very high sensitivity rating.

In addition to the intensity of experiences and sensitivity of the person, which work together to increase the size of a backpack, there is a third factor that makes it smaller. In the formula this is called "support." The support factor is derived from how much other people were there to help you to process your experiences. This is particularly relevant with very large packages of emotional baggage, because they arose in moments when you didn't have enough emotional capacity to deal with an experience on your own. Accordingly, this means that you need the support of others to process that baggage. Why that's the case, and what kind of support actually helps, is something we'll explore in more detail. And no, it's not about doing psychotherapy, even though there are situations where that's a good idea.

Along with support from others, which is indispensable for processing large emotional baggage, the support factor also includes how much you can support yourself when working through challenging experiences. That may sound strange at first. After all, you're always on your side. How can you not support yourself? Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that many people don't effectively do that. They regularly abandon themselves in the process of dealing with difficult or unpleasant experiences. Their inner monologue – which usually operates unconsciously – follows well-worn paths. Phrases like, "Stop making such a fuss" or "Aren't you over it yet?" or "Pull yourself together!" were internalized by many people in childhood and beyond. Let's be honest: if your self-talk sounds like that in tough times, or when old emotional wounds are opened up, you aren't cultivating a supportive and loving relationship with yourself.

Whose Backpack Is It?

I still vividly remember sitting with a good friend in a café at a busy airport many years ago when an unattended backpack was discovered just a few yards away from us. It was sitting in front of the public transportation ticket machines and actually looked rather innocent. An exhausted traveler must have left it there while struggling to get a ticket. Delighted with their successful purchase, they left the backpack there by accident.

It didn't take long before the police were alerted and were reluctantly forced to get involved. This was years before the events of September 11th officially launched the era of the War on Terror. At that time, rationally speaking, it was highly unlikely that the backpack contained a bomb. Nevertheless, an elaborate spectacle ensued. It began with increasingly urgent announcements that the owner of the aforementioned backpack should attend to it immediately. But that didn't happen. Presumably, they were already on a train to the city center, completely oblivious to all of this. An area around the backpack was cordoned off by a handful of police officers, who of course took their job very seriously. Frustrated passengers were kept away from the ticket machines. The police were waiting on the arrival of specialists – trained dogs or explosive disposal experts, or perhaps both. I don't remember the exact details.

What I do remember quite clearly, however, is that my friend thought it was utterly hilarious. She is one of those people who is blessed with the ability to find humor in any situation. In her eyes, the whole thing was a theater play staged especially for us. She found it amusing that an absent-minded traveler could be completely unaware of having caused such an uproar. What tickled her the most was the idea of going to the police and pretending to be the backpack's owner. She would have loved to play the role of the scatterbrained traveler and to witness the reaction on the faces of

the people who, before our eyes, were getting more and more deeply involved in their drama.

I don't recall how it all ended, perhaps we simply left. But this scene stayed locked in my memory because my friend's reaction was so unusual. I imagine that most people, myself included, would have been incredibly embarrassed to have caused such a commotion. I'm sure that my friend would've been embarrassed, too. But it was precisely this embarrassment which she found hilarious. Unlike me, she can laugh at her own shortcomings the way that people laugh at their favorite comedians. So she would have gladly raised her hand and said, "This backpack belongs to me!" That's a phrase few people can easily bring across their lips, especially when it comes to their emotional backpack.

Who's Responsible for Your Backpack?

My friend would have gladly taken responsibility for a backpack that wasn't even hers. Not because she wanted to have it, but because she thinks it's funny to be imperfect, and she finds excitement in the moment of releasing built-up tension. A similar release happens between people when they begin to take responsibility for their own emotional backpacks. It's the first crucial step in changing your relationship with your emotional baggage. But it's precisely this step that people often stubbornly resist. It's a tough pill to swallow.

You may feel like a victim of overwhelming experiences and see no reason why you should also be responsible for cleaning up the mess. Not everyone was as fortunate as I was, having a fairly decent childhood. Many people suffer from some form of lack as children, even in circumstances where everything appears fine on the surface – a lack of attention, a lack of presence, a lack of acceptance of their uniqueness, a lack of unobserved time. Many children

these days still grow up in circumstances that are far from ideal. In other words, it's completely understandable that you don't want to take responsibility for your emotional baggage, which was often created in childhood. Let someone else deal with it. After all, you've already suffered enough!

As understandable as this attitude may be, it doesn't help you move forward. The people you hold responsible for your suffering have often already passed away, or they haven't the slightest idea what challenges you now face. Even if they have empathy for your burden, even if they acknowledge that the oversized packages that landed in your backpack are a result of their behavior, it's of surprisingly little help. This thing still hangs on your back. Its burden still weighs you down.

Taking responsibility for your emotional backpack doesn't mean that you are to blame for what happened. In fact, it's not about blame at all. Your backpack contains life experiences that you haven't processed. Why you had those experiences, and whose fault it is, is irrelevant to the question of taking responsibility.

These experiences can involve people who actually meant well, like my grandfather, who regularly beat his children because he genuinely believed that it was a necessary part of good parenting. Or they may have come from people who wanted to hurt you. There are also experiences for which no one is to blame, as with a good friend of mine who lost her mother to cancer when she was eight years old.

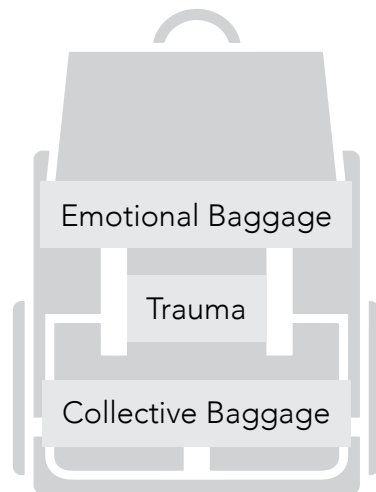
No matter what the perceived causes or instigators of your troubles may be, the responsibility for coming to terms with an experience always lies with the person who lived through it. You're not responsible for the experiences themselves, but for how they live on in you and the marks they left on you. To a large extent this is determined by how you process them (or don't).

This small but crucial difference in responsibility is essential for developing a new approach to your emotional backpack. One thing will become clear as you read this book: your backpack is not just a potentially dangerous burden. It is also a treasure waiting to be explored. It may comfort you to know that the treasure doesn't benefit the person you might hold responsible for the contents of your backpack. As a matter of fact, it benefits you. Recognizing it as a treasure takes work, and the path may seem exhausting at first. It will become clear, however, that the journey can be rewarding. And it might also be much easier than you think.

Inside the Backpack

Before we address the question of how your backpack affects your life, let's take a closer look at what's inside it. Over the years, I've come to realize that the packages stored in an emotional backpack can be broadly divided into three categories or layers. I'll briefly outline them, although the full extent of their differentiation will likely only become clear as we delve deeper into the backpack throughout this book.

The first category or layer is one I've already described: emotional baggage. This baggage was created in situations in which you were emotionally overwhelmed or which you didn't want to feel. The three factors described in the backpack formula determine the amount of baggage that accumulated over the course of your life's journey. So the layer of



The Layers of a Backpack

emotional baggage can be very thin or extend deep into the heart of your backpack.

The second category or layer is trauma. Like emotional baggage, traumas are the result of overwhelming experiences. However, while emotions develop due to unfelt feelings, traumas are the result of unresolved biological programs.

By biological programs, I mean instinctual survival mechanisms. These include the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response as well as biological needs like hunger, thirst, disgust, and sexual desire. Trauma occurs when these survival mechanisms are activated in a situation and then, just as with emotions, split off for later processing. This may have occurred in a single situation, such as a car accident. Or it may have been a gradual process over several years, as when a child is consistently given too little affection and is therefore in constant survival mode. The former is commonly referred to as shock trauma, while the latter is known as developmental trauma.

The distinction between emotional baggage and trauma is important. They have different origins, and so they require different approaches for healing. When it comes to emotional baggage, the focus is primarily on bringing unfelt feelings back into consciousness and experiencing them, thereby enabling them to be processed. This takes place on an emotional level. Trauma, on the other hand, involves biological programs, which are located at a pre-rational level. Therefore, traumas need to be processed through the body. Both concepts will be explored further in this book, and the distinction between them will become increasingly clear.

At this point it's important to note that in an emotional backpack, traumas are usually covered by a layer of emotional baggage. People who have gone through traumatic experiences tend to carry large backpacks. In everyday life and in their close relationships, the initial layer of emotional baggage is what typically comes to

the fore. It's often not readily apparent to the layperson whether or not trauma lies hidden underneath. The main focus of this book is not trauma therapy, but processing emotional baggage. However, since both are deeply intertwined in people who have experienced trauma, I will refer to both throughout the book.

The third layer or category in your backpack consists of collective baggage. People usually don't become aware of this until they have already processed a significant amount of the contents of their backpacks. Collective baggage is the result of societal or even global human issues that have not been processed. Theoretically, this layer can also be divided into emotional baggage and traumas, since both also exist at the collective level. In Germany, for instance, the two World Wars of the twentieth century play a prominent role in this context. Another example is the issue of sexual abuse toward women, which can affect many women who have not personally experienced it. Romantic relationships are also adversely affected by collective issues, for instance due to unprocessed wounds between men and women. I will discuss the theme of collective emotional baggage in more detail toward the end of this book. For now, it's enough to acknowledge its existence.

But let's get back to you and your backpack. What do you carry around with you? How does it show up in your life? Do you only occasionally bump into something, or does its weight affect you every day, in every relationship and area of your life? Frequently, emotional baggage will suffer a similar fate to the unattended backpack at the airport. A single moment of carelessness, and your emotional backpack becomes the catalyst for a host of problems. It can lead to escalating dramas, as if the backpack really did contain a bomb, which could explode like in an action movie. But just as often it initiates subtly shifting extremely diffuse dynamics. In such cases, no one really knows what's going on. Was someone just be-

ing careless? Was it intentional? Is there even really a problem? Or is everything actually fine, and you're driving yourself crazy for no reason?

In the next chapter, we'll explore the topic of emotional activation to gain a better understanding of how your backpack influences your life and relationships, and how you can recognize it. Many people seem to have a keen sense of the existence of their backpack. They also recognize when its contents are in play. But there are various manifestations of this phenomenon, and not all of them are easy to spot at first glance.

EXERCISE 1: Initial Backpack Inspection

Take some time to engage with your backpack by reflecting on the following questions:

1. How big is your backpack? Give it a score from one to ten, based on your gut feeling. If you like, you can use the formula. Rate intensity, sensitivity, and support on a scale of one to ten. You can also do this calculation for people close to you. How big do you think their backpack is?
2. How does your emotional backpack influence your life? Consider which relationships and aspects of your life are particularly affected by it.
3. Find a physical object which might symbolize an important piece of emotional baggage in your backpack.

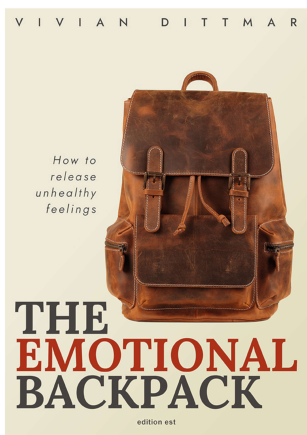
Feel free to journal your thoughts, reflect on them during a walk, or discuss them with someone you trust. This introspective exercise can help you gain insight into the size and impact of your emotional backpack.

Backpack Story #1

Dennis, age 55, is an architect with a big heart and a bad temper. When Dennis first came to learn to consciously release his emotional baggage, he was one of those individuals who people instinctively avoided because they sensed he was dangerous. His big emotional backpack would explode regularly, hurting the people he loved and causing emotional havoc in his relationships.

While learning a new way of handling emotions, Dennis quickly realized that there was a serious trauma component to his backpack, so he decided to complement his practice with body-centered trauma therapy. Dennis became aware of how, when he was emotionally activated, he often simply wanted to "destroy" the other person.

Years later, Dennis reports that his way of relating to life completely transformed. While he used to often find himself reacting without any sense of control, he is now able to pause and consciously choose his actions in "the small gap between trigger and response". He has regained an incredible sense of agency and freedom of choice in how to respond to the situation at hand. This has not only profoundly transformed how Dennis experiences life, it has also made him a wonderful person to be around.



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Vivian Dittmar is an author, wisdom teacher and founder of the Be the Change Foundation. Born in Germany, Vivian spent her childhood and youth on three continents, immersed in very diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts. This gives her a unique perspective on what it means to be human.

Her books include "The Emotional Backpack", "The Power of Feelings", "Your Inner GPS" and "True Prosperity".

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