

Weighed down by chips on our shoulders

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Most of us struggle day in and day out, with challenges presented to us. For parents, it's like constantly putting out fires that start simultaneously. Hot heads are common in households with teen and adult siblings. Last week, I received an expletive-laden text from my wife during an emotional outburst. It was as if fireworks exploded inside our livingroom. They say we all accumulate 'baggage' throughout our lives, and some of this luggage can be quite heavy and very unwieldy. There are times I feel like the wheels on my personal 'suitcases' are always getting stuck or pivot around uncontrollably. My wife often tells me that I 'have a chip on my shoulder' and need to get over things and let them slide. She thinks I'm a bit too defensive at times, thinking that every comment, every action, is a personal attack. She may be right. I will fully admit that my self-esteem isn't up to par, and perhaps little dents in my armour over the years have caught up with me. Odd, that I'm becoming defensive in my more mature years, when I should know better. The term 'chip on the shoulder' has a few meanings. It originated in the early 1800s, when the Long Island Telegraph reported on May 20, 1830: 'when two churlish boys were determined to fight, a chip would be placed on the shoulder of one, and the other demanded to knock it off at his peril.' It was a sign of being defiant, taking a stance, and perhaps getting ready for a fight. It has also come to mean that those with 'chips' have something to prove. They are the underdogs. And, then it refers to people like me, who sometimes feel inadequate or hard done by. 'Remember, a chip on the shoulder is a sure sign of wood higher up,' said Brigham Young. And Rick Ross noted that 'some experiences can give you a chip on your shoulder, but they also teach you the value of independence and looking out for yourself.' John G. Miller, author and motivational speaker, says the 'chip' is a type of 'victim thinking.' Feeling sorry for oneself often leads to belligerence, blame, whining, complaining, anger, and argumentativeness. I agree that none of this is healthy. Miller says this type of thinking brings us down. It's one of our human frailties and drawbacks. We don't need any help in wallowing - we're quite good at it on our own! Some of this comes from a feeling of being downtrodden, experiencing bad luck, and some difficult challenges. Yes, the world is not fair, and never has been. I fully understand that dwelling about the injustices in the world won't help. Yet, sometimes there are thoughts that surface, some from decades ago, that just smack me in the face, and bring out a certain amount of sadness. Not what my father taught me. Being from the 'very old school,' he was taught to be tough, suppress feelings and don't let anyone see your weaknesses. Perhaps it served him well in his youth. We are all stuck with ourselves, living in our own heads. Others don't really fully know us, and almost everything in life is up to interpretation. How often to you have a conversation with a family member about something hurtful they said, only to realize that was not their intent? 'Okay, we should all choose our words and think before we speak, but our brains don't always cooperate. There's a delay in that message from our brain to our tongue. I've come to believe that 'innuendo' is one of the worst words in our language. We jump to conclusions and believe our counterparts 'insinuate' this or that. But we can't really be sure. We don't know what's going on in their noggins. Should we just give everyone the benefit of the doubt? Well, I try to, and I try to avoid jumping to conclusions. I also avoid judgement. I believe only certain people, and the powers that be, can judge. In my line of work, I hear very convincing arguments from all sides of an issue. Is there a right and wrong? Is there one single truth? Well, it's complicated. I have heard very passionate people taking a stance on something. Their arguments are not completely accurate or factual, but they are allowed to express themselves. They are allowed to feel how they feel. Is that wrong? Some of these people have chips on their shoulders, but once you know where they're coming from, understanding becomes easier. And that's what we need to do - understand one another. We don't need to agree, or side with everyone all the time. We can't hold grudges and demand they 'knock off my chip.' I enjoy people from all walks of life, who have great stories and strong opinions. It's what makes the world go round. Yes, we all have pain and have had bad experiences. We've suffered heart-ache, physical pain, been ridiculed, teased and bullied. We all have 'chips,' but some are bigger than others. I can justify anything, and tell myself that my 'chips' are warranted. They are earned. And that's my burden to carry. But my wife, and Miller are right - it's not helpful or productive. I don't want to walk around thinking of myself as a 'victim' or being that 'grumpy dad.' I want to be free. The key, Miller said, is to recognize the 'triggers,' and wonder why they set us off. Everyone's goal should be to encourage one another to rise above, not sink below, the surface. In a new context, we should be asking others to permanently remove those chips from our shoulders.

