

When hand-me-downs become weigh-me-downs

Let's face it; when money is tight, we are more prone to accepting the "stuff" people give us. The promotional T-shirt that is two sizes too big, the mismatched coffee mugs and the uncomfortable old chair that still provides extra seating – these are all things we probably wouldn't have bought for ourselves if we had the money to buy what we wanted.

The emotional baggage that comes with the "stuff" is much more powerful than you may realise. Emotions that come up for people on the receiving end of hand-me-downs are as diverse as the types of things being handed down. They range from intense feelings of resentment to absolute gratitude.

I have been on both the giving and the receiving end at different stages in my life. When a friend told me she was getting a new lounge suite and asked if I wanted her old one, my gut reaction was, "I don't need charity!" The truth of the matter, though, was that I didn't have a lounge suite and her well-loved lounge suite, although not to my taste, would improve the quality of my life. I accepted. Around that time, I also accepted some hand-me-down clothes from my sister and some kitchen stuff from a colleague.

How did it make me feel? At first, honestly, it made me feel poor. On paper, I WAS poor, but "accepting charity" really drove it home for me. Then, on top of that, came the shame for being "ungrateful". And later, when I had found my feet and could afford to buy new things, I felt guilty for "getting rid" of the things I had been given.

I told my aunt about my feelings, and she laughed, patted my hand, and said, "oh child, you make things so complicated." The fact that I was in my early thirties and clearly no longer

a child was totally beside the point.

She went on to explain that if I insisted on labelling the gifts as “charity,” I would always feel poor. Instead, I should see them as blessings. “The moment you do that, you see, you will feel gratitude.” OK. That worked for me. “And what of the guilt when I get rid of something?” I asked. “Oh, that’s easy, you won’t feel guilty if you’re passing the blessing on.”

I never felt resentment, but I have heard of people who did. Some felt resentful that the giver was “flaunting their wealth”. Some felt anger because people saw them as “charity cases”. Others felt shame for needing to accept hand-me-downs. Others, like me, finally settled into gratitude.

From the giving end, I can honestly say that, for me, the intention behind the giving has never been anything other than: “if this will help, great!” Often, being able to give something away helps me too. If I no longer have a need for something, it is far easier to give it to someone who will gain from it, than to find another way to dispose of it. Unless it is something of great sentimental value, I also don’t really care if the receiver keeps it, sells it or gives it away to someone else.

Don’t let hand-me-downs become weigh-me-downs. Be honest with yourself. Accept gifts as blessings when you need them, with gratitude. Keep the blessings as long as they serve you, and if they don’t, sell them, give them away or dispose of them. And when you give, give with no strings attached. There is absolutely no reason to “make things complicated.”