

# What if Your Grievances Are a Fantasy?

Consider this. You wake from a restless night's sleep. You find yourself thinking about your 2:00 p.m. meeting. A colleague with whom past interactions have been difficult will be there. You vividly remember his sarcastic put down of your idea for a new marketing campaign. Standing in the shower, you silently rehearse how you will respond to him today.

Bad feelings toward a colleague may be just one of the grievances we live with. Most of us carry around at least a few grievances. We hold some grievances short-term; others are long-standing. Events of the day may shake one's confidence, and memories of belittling comments made by a parent might arise. One person may wish she'd developed her artistic talent, but discouraging words of a teacher ring in her ears. Another remembers a past romantic relationship, memories assure him he had been badly treated.

Memories of grievances run through our minds with a chorus that usually goes something like this: *Why did they treat me that way? I deserved better.* Carrying grievances is like going through the day dragging a bag of rocks and then wondering why we are stooped over, dispirited, and exhausted.

Dragging a bag of grievances may be so habitual that when somebody suggests that we drop the rocks, we wonder, *What are they talking about.*

We are certain we are responding appropriately to what life has dished up. But, what if memories are not accurate?

In a recent essay in *The Atlantic*, [Memory Lane Has a Three-Way Fork](#), Ed Yong reports on findings by neuroscientists at the University of Cambridge. Yong writes, "We're very used to thinking of our memory as a kind of storage vault, where bits

of information are recorded and filed away for later perusal. But it's not like that at all."

Memory, Jong writes, "isn't just an act of retrieval, but of reconstruction." Memories are built from "scratch each and every time." Yes, we may draw on information stored in the brain; but then we reconstruct our memories in the present via our thinking.

If you have ever argued with someone about the "facts" of a past event in which you both took part, now you know why: There is no "storage vault" from which either of you can access an accurate memory. Chances are, you're both at least partially wrong.

When we form a grievance we are certain we have the "facts" we need. But the "facts" are being reconstructed, not retrieved. Stop to think of the last time you were certain you were right, only to realize later that the "facts" you remembered were wrong.

Suppose the "facts" we remember are correct. Can we be certain we remember *all* the relevant facts? Can we be sure of the motives of the other party? What if not only our memories are inaccurate but our interpretations of our memories are inaccurate as well?

Back to the 2:00 p.m. meeting with the "sarcastic" colleague. We can consider these questions: What is my purpose in holding a grievance against a colleague? Do I enjoy telling my story of victimhood? Have I been focusing on what my colleague has done to me and ignoring the ways I may have wronged my colleague?

If our memories are not always accurate, and if our interpretation of those inaccurate memories are selective and self-serving, is it a stretch to say many of our grievances likely are fantasies? Can anyone be certain their grievances are on solid ground?

When we release the bags of rocks we've been dragging, we may find our energy levels are elevated. Without replaying our grievances, we may find that our relationships are more peaceful. Job satisfaction improves. Increased levels of happiness come our way.

How helpful are our grievances? We may get the satisfaction of blaming someone else for how we feel, but is that not the booby prize?

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