

LET GO OF YOUR EQUATIONS

One way to lighten up—to instantly experience more detachment, more fun, and more pleasure—is to notice your equations and let them go. Find out if there's anything you *think* you are that keeps you from lightening your load.

Notice your equations

An equation is any set of words or numbers joined by an equal sign (=) that forms a true statement. Most of us have seen equations with numbers, such as $2 + 2 = 4$, and $156 \times 237 = 36,972$.

Equations also work with things other than numbers. In fact, our self-image is a collection of equations. Those equations tend to take a certain form: $I = X$. In place of the X, you can put anything that people identify with.

Many of us find it easy to identify with our bodies ($I = \text{MY BODY}$). The problem is that our bodies change constantly. Bodies experience different levels of health or sickness. Bodies start young and then get old. They lose hair, and they gain weight.

To preserve our bodies for a while, we give them drugs, food, sex, weight lifting workouts, cosmetic surgery, and more. Still, bodies never stay the same, and eventually they just wear out. When we identify exclusively with our bodies, we give up peace and security. We let our serenity rise and fall on the roller coaster of constant change.

Some people identify with their possessions. For example, somebody finds that her new car is scratched. She gets as upset about this fact as she would if someone had scratched *her*. She acts as if she *is* her car. Her equation is $I = \text{MY CAR}$. People with this equation tend to treat their cars with the utmost care. They might even treat their cars better than they treat their bodies. These

people don't have their cars; their cars have *them*.

Other people identify with their money. If they lost their money, they might feel that they had lost themselves and that life wasn't worth living. Their equation is $I = \text{MY MONEY}$, and that equation might lead to suicide. These people don't have money; their money has *them*.

People can also identify with their thoughts. If you suggest that one of their ideas is wrong, these people think you're saying that *they* are wrong. In challenging their opinions, you challenge them. These people carry around the equation $I = \text{MY THOUGHTS}$.

Of course, they don't have to carry around this equation. People could have ideas and not *be* their ideas. They could have opinions and yet be willing to let them go when they discover a more accurate or useful opinion. Then they could have some great conversations with people who have different opinions.

Other people identify with their feelings ($I = \text{MY FEELINGS}$). When they feel sad, for example, they think sadness is more than just a feeling that comes and goes. They believe that they *are* their sadness. Or when they feel angry, they feel that they *are* their anger. Any emotion, no matter what it is, seems to fill their entire being.

Many people identify with their roles. They accumulate roles like they accumulate clothes. Ask someone, "Who are you?" and chances are he'll respond with a list of roles:

"I'm a counselor."

"A teacher."

"A supervisor."

"A married man."

"A sports nut."

"The owner of a BMW."

"A good worker."

There's no harm in playing roles as long as we keep them in perspective. The problem comes when we let our roles take charge of us and define who we are. We can make our roles more important than our souls.

Parents sometimes identify with their children. These parents see their children as reflections of themselves ($I = MY\ CHILDREN$). They know exactly what they want their children to be and to do, and they believe that they can be happy only when their children live up to these expectations. Suddenly, the children become responsible for their parents' happiness. And that's a big burden for the children.

My parents avoided this equation, and I'm thankful they did. They let me go my own way at a young age and did not see me solely as a reflection of themselves. They let me define who I am on my own terms, and that was the biggest gift they ever gave me.

Release the equation

All this leads to a tool for working with our upsets: After noticing the equation, just release it. When we acknowledge the limits of our equations, we can let them go and lighten our load—and then watch our upsets start to disappear like puffs of passing smoke.

Several years ago I got a chance to practice this strategy in a major way. I bought into a business venture that went sour. It went so sour that I started losing \$8,000 a day. Now at the time I bought this business, I had quite a bit of money. But money disappears fast when you're losing \$8,000 every day. Eventually I lost all of the cash I had in the bank. Then I started going into debt \$8,000 a day. In total, I lost over \$4 million.

Fortunately, I remembered Success Strategy #5. I remembered that I *had* money (or at least I *used* to have money) but I *wasn't* my money. Even when I started losing \$8,000 a day, I knew that I could eventually

get another job and earn enough over time to pay off all that debt. During this period of my life I never lost sleep over all that debt, and I never missed a meal. I let go of the equation $I = MY\ MONEY$ and stayed relatively happy.

Rewrite the equation

The question might arise that if we are not our roles, thoughts, feelings, possessions, or bodies, then who *are* we? When we talk about ourselves, what makes sense to put after the equal sign ($I = ?$)?

That's a great question. Philosophers and theologians have struggled for centuries to answer it.

My choice is to relate to people as if they are what they *say* they are. If someone says that his burning desire in life is to end hunger on the planet ($I = END\ OF\ HUNGER$), then that's how I interact with him. If another person says that her primary desire is to be loving ($I = LOVE$), then that's how I relate to her. And if someone says that his happiness depends on his athletic ability ($I = ATHLETE$), then that's how I treat him.

For me, the equation that makes the most sense is $I = US$. When I rewrite the equation this way, I realize that in some way I'm connected to everyone and everything in the world. And when I'm in touch with this connection, I usually experience the state that people call bliss, ecstasy, or heaven. My fear and upset are usually based on forgetting who I really am—on forgetting the equation $I = US$.

If you want to lighten up, then look for any hidden equations tucked away in your mind. And when you notice an equation, see if you're willing to release it or rewrite it. Change the habit of equating yourself with your thoughts, feelings, body, roles, car, money, or anything else. When you do so, you'll notice a decrease in your level of upset and a sudden increase in your level of joy.





Release or rewrite the equation

The Success Strategy “Lighten your load” implies that we are not who we usually *think* we are. We have ideas, and we are not our ideas. We have feelings, and we are not our feelings. We have possessions, and we are not our possessions.

As suggested in the previous article, the challenge is to notice our equations and let them go. Simply reminding ourselves with short phrases is a powerful tool. For example:

“I have a Cadillac, but I am not my Cadillac.”

“I have a new couch, but I am not my couch.”

“I have a job, but I am not my job.”

“I have hair, but I am not my hair.”

Writing in the space below, create some reminders that can help you release your equations. In your reminders, mention some of the people, places, and things that are part of your daily life.

If you like, consider writing an equation that expresses your fundamental values—the person you ultimately want to be. For example, if your primary value is to be loving, then your equation could be $I = \text{LOVE}$.

Write several versions of your equation below.

unconditional happiness

After reading about rewriting your equations, play with the idea a little more. In the space below, write 10 different endings to the following sentence:

I discovered that my happiness depended on ...

Now I realize that happiness is a choice independent of my equations. I intend to be happy regardless of ...

