

Is Your Relationship HAUNTED?

Understanding how past experiences can influence the tone and the progress of your current relationship can help you share and grow.

By Denise King Gillingham,
LMSW, ACC, CPM



Have you ever noticed that weather has an effect on your mood? Many of us feel happier or more cheerful on sunny days, whereas cloudy skies can sometimes cast a shadow on our outlook. But here's the thing about weather: it is completely beyond our control. There is, however, a type of weather over which you can have some control, and that is the "weather" in your relationships.

When we talk about the weather in the context of our relationships, we are referring to feelings that are evoked during any given interaction. For our purposes, let's call this "emotional weather." Like the weather outside, it is very changeable and affected by many variables; unlike the weather outside, we can influence the extent and the direction of its impact.

One of the variables that can affect emotional weather is "ghosts." A ghost is something the relationship is experiencing that nobody is talking about—the proverbial

elephant in the room. Like weather, ghosts come and go, and they can be positive or negative. Ghosts can be personal (an ex-spouse, a former boss, a frightening experience) or global (current events) in scope, and they can trigger a variety of reactions that can have an impact on the emotional weather in your relationships. Understanding ghosts, their impact, and how to handle them when they appear can help you have more-satisfying relationships. Here are five steps to help you the next time a ghost visits your relationship.

1. UNDERSTAND THAT GHOSTS ARE NORMAL.

No relationship occurs in a bubble, and we are all shaped by life experiences.

2. IDENTIFY THE GHOST OR GHOSTS IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP.

For example, your partner suggests an outing that he thinks will be fun and adventurous:

No relationship occurs in a bubble, and we are all shaped by life experiences.

white-water rafting. You cringe at the idea because six years earlier you were in a bad rafting accident. He does not understand your reaction and is unhappy that you do not share in his excitement. Now, how would things be different if instead of reacting and leaving your reaction unexplained, you shared with him that rafting is a great idea but you are afraid of it because of the accident? It is likely that your partner will understand you better and you might grow closer from sharing such a significant experience.

3. BE PROACTIVE. Talk to your partner and explore what ghost might be present in your relationship before it pops up and creates a problem. Some ideas for discussion include the role of the ghost in the relationship, the impact of the ghost on the relationship, and the possibilities for the relationship without the ghost.

4. DECIDE HOW YOU AND YOUR PARTNER WANT TO WORK WITH THE GHOST. Now that you both understand ghosts and their impact on your relationship, how do you want to tackle them? In some cases, simply acknowledging the presence of a ghost when it arises

is a good first step; then remind yourself, and each other, that while you feel its impact, it is not a part of either of you—and the integrity of your relationship does not have to be compromised as a result of its presence.

5. REMEMBER TO MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE. These can be heavy issues, so infusing lightness or humor into a discussion about ghosts can provide some welcome relief.

Remember, there is an element of choice in relationships. Take the opportunity to design your relationship by establishing some basic ways you want to be together: discuss who you are or want to be as a couple, and update as necessary. Consider including how you want to tackle ghosts when they appear. ❀



Denise King Gillingham, LMSW, ACC, CPM, is a certified coach and mediator. Denise creates and conducts programs for corporations and

organizations throughout the United States and Europe on social and emotional intelligence and nonviolent communication. Her coaching clients span all corners of the globe and all walks of life—from the international business executive to the stay-at-home mom. Denise has coached more than 500 clients. She received her MSW degree from Columbia University and has worked as a family therapist at The Paine Whitney Clinic in New York. Denise earned an advanced certification in systems and relationship coaching (ORSCC). She has also been a substance abuse therapist at the Bronx VA Medical Center in New York and had a private therapy practice in Prague, Czech Republic. Prior to receiving her MSW, Denise held various leadership roles in the financial services industry. Contact Denise at dkgcoaching.com.