

ThreadTherapy—Session 2

Text and photos by Cindy Scraba

In my previous column (*The Canadian Quilter*, Autumn 2011), I prescribed some basic remedies and green-themed approaches towards healthier stitching and quilting experiences. We discussed choosing and using quality threads and needles. This month, I'll address another common ailment, which I refer to as "Decorative Thread Syndrome". Usually, we have the best intentions to use our glitzy threads for embellishing. Often this turns into a quilter's nightmare due to thread breakages and poor tension. Are you paranoid at the very thought of sewing with decorative threads? Relax, your session has begun...

Which thread type has the reputation for causing the most trouble?

I believe threads have personalities. Some are easier to get along with when you understand their quirks and personality traits. Let's consider the notorious "Type A"—metallic thread.

Already your head is spinning and your palms are sweating. Okay, let's back up a few stitches. This thread type has a bad reputation in some quilter circles, which is unfortunate. It's famous for being uncooperative and shredding itself—it almost appears to have ADD (attention deficit disorder :!). A natural question is: "why or pour quoi"? Metallic is actually a very smart thread; I've named it "Smart Allec" because it has a memory. It contains a layer of silver (metal) in the construction and does not appreciate being over-handled causing its fibres to kink—ouch!

Whether you're stitching by hand or machine, the path a metallic thread must travel from start to finish line should be as direct as possible. The objective is to ensure the thread glides through the tension discs and any thread guides it meets along its way. For straight or stack-wound spools the thread should come straight off the upright

peg on your machine. Cones are wound crosswise as they appear. Position a thread stand (metal weighted preferred) at the back of your machine; slip your thread through the thread stand loop before joining up to your machine thread guides. Just wave at the last thread guide on the pressure foot—you won't need it. Also, due to metallics having a memory, avoid using the tiny (finger size) spools in your machine—they come with a bad habit of curling as they unwind—you won't be happy.

Most other decorative threads behave similarly to metallics so they tend to get along with comparable bobbin threads. That's good news. The rationale here is that other decorative threads are generally spun with polyester fibres along with a metallic. It's reasonable to assume a good quality polyester thread in the bobbin is correct, with a thread weight of 40 to 60 for most applications. For quilting, I prefer Superior's Bottom Line™ 60 weight because it's lint-free and the perfect companion for their 40 weight Metallics™ thread. Wonderfil™ also has several bobbin weight choices in its thread family. Check your bobbin isn't wound too tightly or too loosely. Ensure it spins freely within the bobbin case and that you've checked for lint bugs.

How intensely will your project be quilted or embellished with metallic thread?

When stitching with a metallic thread, you should apply a stabilizer, depending on the project and your stitch density. If it's a quilt, likely it has batting and a backing which already act as stabilizers. It's standard practice to use a suitable stabilizer for intense thread work like embroidery or threadplay, for dense decorative stitches and for delicate fabrics; otherwise you'll have unwelcome puckers.



Seven Remedies to Control Your Metallic Thread

- 1 Choose quality metallic threads from the get-go. Feel free to do your own research. I have tried several brands and prefer Superior's Metallic™ thread with its rice paper (pliable) construction along with a protective polyester coating. Plus it comes with a guarantee.
- 2 Check your thread path according to the guidelines outlined. The advantage to using a cone is the wider diameter from which the metallic thread is wound and releasing it without the curling trait.
- 3 Lower your top tension down to #1. Test it and adjust as needed. This step is necessary as machines have different factory settings. You are the adult in this relationship—take control with confidence. You can always return to the "default" settings on your machine.
- 4 The elongated eye of the #90/14 topstitch or metallic design needle will also protect a metallic thread from shredding. It has more room to dance freely up and down through the eye of the needle without rubbing and it has protection within the deeper groove on the shaft (as discussed in Thread Therapy Session #1).
- 5 Use a quality, compatible bobbin thread that plays well with metallic threads, as outlined.
- 6 As noted, apply stabilizer options depending on your specific project and stitch density.
- 7 Relax and slow down your sewing speed to minimize the stress on metallic threads and yourself.

Please note: There are specific “Bobbin threads” more accurately referred to as couching threads within the decorative thread family. These are much thicker and not intended as a machine top thread; however, they are wonderful embellishing threads and make great lifetime friends when you understand their idiosyncrasies...a topic for another Thread Therapy Session perhaps.

If you are one of many quilters who secretly suffer from “Decorative Thread Syndrome”, I hope you’re feeling better about Smart Allec—the metallic thread. You won’t need to avoid this thread personality any longer. A better understanding and respect for metallic threads clears the way for new and exciting opportunities with embellishing and quilting.

Happy stitching always!

