

To Forgive or Not to Forgive: That Is the Question

Participant's Guide

Definitions of Forgiveness

Vitz and Mango (1997)

The term “forgiveness” refers to a person’s conscious decision to give up resentment and any claims for redress from someone who has hurt him or her.

Luskin (1988)

The moment-to-moment experience of peace and understanding that occurs when an injured party’s suffering is reduced as they transform their grievance against an offending party. This transformation takes place through learning to take less personal offense, attribute less blame to the offender and, by great understanding, see the personal and interpersonal harm that occurs as the natural consequence of unresolved anger and hurt.

Affinito (1999)

Deciding not to punish a perceived injustice, taking action on that decision, and experiencing the emotional relief that follows.

Smedes (1984)

Forgiving is love’s revolution against life’s unfairness. When we forgive, we ignore the normal laws that strap us to the natural law of getting even and, by the alchemy of love, we release ourselves from our own painful pasts.

Worthington (2001)

The emotional replacement of (1) hot emotions of anger or fear that follow a perceived hurt or offense, or (2) unforgiveness that follows ruminating about the transgression, by substituting positive emotions such as unselfish love, empathy, compassion, or even romantic love.

What Forgiveness Does Not Mean

- NOT forgetting

We all know the old adage, “Forgive and forget”. However, forgiving someone does not mean we forget the wrong that the person did. Forgiveness has nothing to

do with forgetting. For example, what would happen if you burned your fingers on the stove, and you forgot that hurt? Remembering the pain helps us to not let the event be repeated.

An important part of forgiveness is remembering and dealing with what has happened. Pain inflicted will probably never be forgotten. Forgiveness allows us to put the pain in a place where it doesn't continue to hurt us.

- NOT condoning the person's behavior

By forgiving, we are not saying that what they did was acceptable or unimportant, or "not so bad". It was bad, it did hurt, and it was wrong. We are not declaring the offender "not guilty" or absolving the person of the wrong. We do not need to justify or explain the other person's behavior.

Forgiving does not mean removing responsibility for what the person has done. There is nothing about genuine forgiveness that precludes holding people accountable for their actions.

- NOT reconciliation

Forgiveness does not mean we have to meet face-to-face with the person who wronged us. Forgiveness and reconciliation are two different processes. Forgiveness we do by ourselves. Reconciliation requires the other person's participation.

- NOT self-sacrifice

Forgiveness is not swallowing our true feelings and playing the martyr or saying it's all right in spite of the pain. It is not gritting our teeth and tolerating those who hurt us, or using the "grin and bear it" approach. Self-sacrifice makes life less joyful and more difficult.

- NOT a clear-cut, one-time decision

Forgiveness cannot be forced, and it is a process. Researchers now look at forgiveness and unforgiveness as two ends of a continuum, with a person moving, often not in a linear fashion, between unforgiveness and forgiveness over time. There is also a new concept of "not forgiving", which is a conscious decision to withhold forgiveness. Sometimes what people really need is permission not to forgive, to feel what they feel. It is important to be at peace with a decision to not forgive, and not let the hurt continue to disrupt our lives.



What Forgiveness DOES Mean

- Canceling the debt

When someone does us wrong, we feel as though they have taken something that belongs to us – our peace, our joy, our happiness – and that they now “owe us.” When we forgive them, we simply release the debt. It’s no longer “you’ve hurt me and you’ve got to pay”. We don’t pretend the debt never existed, we just forgive it. “You no longer owe me anything.” **Forgiveness is about OUR healing. It is a way of getting poison out of our system.**

- Unilateral process

Forgiveness is something we do on our own. The other person does not need to cooperate or even be aware of it. Forgiveness does not depend on what the other person does or doesn’t do.

- Involves “letting go”

Forgiveness involves working through the feelings of what occurred and giving validity to “the loss.” It is a process that involves freeing ourselves from the emotional effects of what was done to us, getting free of the hurt, bitterness, and resentment. The number of times someone hurt us or whether they deserve forgiveness is not the issue. To forgive literally means “to give up”—to give up hatred, revenge, punishment. Our motive is to move our lives past bitter obsession.

When we have truly completed the process of forgiveness, what happened between us and the other person is no longer a “live” issue in the way we think of or relate to the person, or in the way we live our lives.

Signs of **genuine** forgiveness include:

- The ability to use anger constructively. We can use anger to initiate and sustain constructive activity (stop injustice, protect self, engage in conflict resolution). We are no longer controlled by anger or fearful of its expression.
- An increase in more neutral or genuine positive attitudes, especially toward the person forgiven. Greater life capacity to give and receive love, and experience gratitude.
- An ability to ask for forgiveness from others and to give forgiveness, even when the other refuses to forgive.

STEPS TO FORGIVENESS

1. Recognize the injury.

Whom do you need to forgive? Writing a list is helpful.

How have they hurt or injured you? Describe what happened. Writing out all the details helps bring the hurt to the surface, and helps you see that, no matter how horrible or extensive the offense, it does have a boundary and is not limitless.

2. Identify the emotions and feelings involved.

List the feelings you have about what happened. For example: “I am afraid to look at this because...” or “It made me furious when...” or “I felt resentful/damaged/bitter.” This can be difficult if feelings have been buried or stuffed down for a long time. Try writing and just letting your thoughts flow onto paper.

3. Express your hurt and anger.

Reaching genuine forgiveness almost always includes working through anger. Frequently, underneath anger are feelings of hurt. Anger that is left unresolved takes root and produces bitterness and resentment. Anger is not inherently good or bad, right or wrong. Anger is merely a fact of life. Healthy anger drives us to do something to change what makes us angry. Anger can energize us to make things better. Hate wants to make things worse.

It may be important to find a trusted friend, counselor, or religious community leader who can help work through the feelings. Be sure to choose someone who is nonjudgmental and is willing to just listen.

4. Set boundaries to protect yourself.

This is a way to possibly avoid additional hurts. Boundaries are limits. For example: “I will listen to what my mother tells me to do, but I won’t allow myself to feel that I have to do what she says.” Or, physically stay away from a particular family member for a time or for good.

5. Decide to forgive.

This is deciding that what you have been doing has not worked and being willing to begin the forgiveness process. Choosing to forgive is about healing your own feelings. It has nothing to do with what the other person does or does not do.

6. Work on forgiveness – cancel the debt.

Work toward empathy, understanding and compassion for the offender. See the person who, like you, is part of humanity on this earth. Acknowledge your pain and let it be. Let go of the emotional IOUs.

7. Commit to forgive.

Take your list of injuries and burn or bury them. Write a letter to the offender, detailing the issue and your feelings, write "Cancelled" across it, and destroy it without sending it. Make up a forgiveness certificate (for your personal use, not to be given to the offender!) and post it where you will see it every day. Such actions leave us with the memory of a definite time when we tangibly and concretely cancelled the debt.

8. Hold on to forgiveness and discover your release from emotional prison.

If grudge or resentment thoughts about the issue and person in question surface, remind yourself that you have forgiven him or her.

Discover your own need for forgiveness. These steps work for forgiving yourself, too. Discover the freedom of forgiveness. Decide whether or not reconciliation is wanted or possible. When seeking reconciliation, the goal cannot be to restore the relationship to where it was before----- the offense has changed it permanently. A new way of relating will need to be developed.

<p><i>Certificate of Forgiveness</i></p> <p>I (your name) do hereby declare that on (today's date)</p> <p>I have completely and unequivocally forgiven (name of person who hurt you) for (description of the offense)</p> <p>and give up my right to old feelings I have held, old characterizations of this person, and old stories about what was done to me.</p> <p><i>Signed</i> _____</p>
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Forgiveness Quotes

"Think of your mind as a radar screen and you as the air traffic controller. On that screen at any minute are all the things you need to think about and attend to at any given moment. And then imagine that on your screen is a plane that has been circling for 9 or 10 years. Think of how much energy it is taking to keep that plane up there. Forgiveness is letting that plane land."
---Fred Luskin

"Expectations are premeditated resentments."

---*Unknown*

"Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back... in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

---*Frederic Buechner*

"Forgiveness is the key to peace and happiness, and is the greatest healer of all."

---*Gerald G. Jampolsky, M.D.*

"If I hold onto a grudge because I'm angry, I feel strong. But to set that anger aside takes real strength."

---*Everett L. Worthington, Jr.*

"It takes courage and commitment to act in a more forgiving fashion. It is not at all a sign of weakness, but a mark of strength."

---*Dr. Carl Thorensen, Stanford University*

"Forgiveness is giving up hope for a better past."

---*John A. Mac Dougall*

"He who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself."

---*Unknown*

"You and I don't get a choice about whether we have relatives. And we may not have a choice about how those relatives feel about us. But we do get to choose what our relationship with our relatives will be. Even if there is distance, or a past hurt, we can reach out in love. The other person may not change, but we do."

---*Mary Manin Morrissey*

"Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others. Ask for forgiveness from others. Forgiveness can soften the heart, drain the bitterness, and dissolve your guilt."

---*Morrie Schwartz*

"I will have no thought for the future actions of others, neither expecting them to be better or worse as time goes on, for in such expectation I am really trying to create. I will love and let be. All people are always changing. If I try to judge them, I do so only on what I **think** I know of them, failing to realize that there is much I do not know. I will give others credit for attempts at progress and for having had many victories which are unknown. I, too, am always changing, and I can make that change a constructive one. I can change myself. Others, I can only love."

---*Families Anonymous*

"The man who opts for revenge should dig two graves."

---*Chinese proverb*

"I think it means...putting yourself in the position of the other person, and wiping away any sort of resentment and antagonism you feel toward them."

---*Jimmy Carter*

"When a deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive."

---*Alan Paton*

"Forgiving is an act of mercy toward an offender. We are no longer controlled by angry feelings toward this person."

---*Robert D. Enright*

"Forgiveness works directly on the emotion of anger (and related constructs such as resentment, hostility, or hatred) by diminishing its intensity or level within the mind and heart."

---*Richard Fitzgibbons*

"Forgiveness is the key that can unshackle us from a past that will not rest in the grave of things over and done with. As long as our minds are captive to the memory of having been wronged, they are not free to wish for reconciliation with the one who wronged us."

---*Lewis B. Smedes*

"Across all of the (four) studies, there was not one instance in which a group experiencing forgiveness education showed a decline in psychological health. In fact, statistically significant improvement in such variables as hope and self-esteem, as well as significant decreases in anxiety and depression, were more the rule than the exception."

---*Robert D. Enright and Catherine T. Coyle*

“Forgiving ourselves is a tough nut to crack. Which is probably a good thing. Forgiving ourselves *should* be hard. Probable, yes; easy, no. If forgiving ourselves comes easy, chances are, we are only excusing ourselves, ducking blame, and not really forgiving ourselves at all.”

---*Louis B. Smedes*

“It is hard to imagine a world without forgiveness. Without forgiveness life would be unbearable. Without forgiveness our lives are chained, forced to carry the sufferings of the past and repeat them with no release.”

---*Jack Kornfield*

“Healthy anger drives us to do something to change what makes us angry; anger can energize us to make things better. Hate wants to make things worse.”

---*Lewis B. Smedes*

“Why do we allow someone who’s nasty to us to rent so much space in our minds?”

---*Fred Luskin*

“Forgiveness demands every mental, moral, and spiritual resource you have. Like love, it never stays the same, never ends, and deepens over the years. Forgiveness is hard, painful work that can take a lifetime.”

---*Jeanne Safer*

For Further Reading:

Jampolsky, Gerald and Diane V. Cinnicione “10 Stepping Stones to Spiritual, Physical and Emotional Health”

http://www.forgivenessworks.org/fw/main/resources/articles/stepping_stones.html

Luskin, Fred, Forgive for Good. 2001, Harper, San Francisco.

Nelson, Mariah Burton. The Unburdened Heart: Five Keys to Forgiveness and Freedom. 2000, HarperCollins, New York.

Campaign for Forgiveness Research, <http://www.forgiving.org>



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