

FORGIVENESS: THE GIFT WE GIVE OURSELVES

Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.

—Mark Twain

Holding on to anger and resentment can be a very painful, and potentially harmful, process.

As Stephen Hayes, one of the founders of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy said, “Unforgiveness is like being on a giant hook. Next to you on the hook is the person who has hurt you. The hook is extremely painful. Wherever you go, so does the hook and so does the offender. The only way you can get off the hook is if you allow the offender off first. The cost of not allowing the offender off the hook is, perhaps, a lifetime of unhappiness.”

Just as hostility is noted to have many negative effects, forgiveness is shown to bring many benefits to the forgiver.[1] Some of beneficial effects include the following:[2-16]

- Improved mental health
- Improved well-being
- Reduced negative emotions
- Improved satisfaction with life
- Fewer physical ailments
- Reduced fatigue
- Better sleep quality
- Reduced vulnerability to chronic pain
- Less stress and distress
- Lower levels of disordered eating behavior.
- Lower levels of self-harm or suicidal ideation.
- Better heart health
- Lower rates of self-reported pain

What Is Forgiveness?

“Forgiveness can be defined as a freely made choice to give up revenge, resentment, or harsh judgments toward a person who caused a hurt, and to strive to respond with generosity, compassion, and kindness toward that person.”[17]

When we think of forgiveness, what comes to mind most often is about forgiving an offender. However, there are other forms of forgiveness as well:

- We may struggle to forgive ourselves.
- We may find ourselves needing to ask someone else for forgiveness.
- We may need to accept a request for forgiveness.
- We may find ourselves needing to find forgiveness related to existential concerns. An example of this would be the need to forgive the world for the suffering that is present in it, or to forgive God for not preventing a death.

In forgiveness work, a person must come to recognize that suffering is not directed at us alone; rather, it is part of human experience.

Forgiveness is a challenging area for most people, and confusion often exists about what it entails. The following are important points to keep in mind about forgiveness:

- Forgiveness does *not* require us to reconcile with the offender and have continued contact. There are times when it is in our best interest to stay away from the offender.
- Forgiveness is a process that can take time; it is not just a decision we make quickly. To forgive generally requires some emotional and mental energy on our part. (Refer to “The Stages of Forgiveness” below.)
- To forgive means that we have to fully accept what actually happened, how we were hurt, how our lives were affected by the offense, and even how we have changed as a result.
- When we do not forgive, we continue to give the offense and the offender power over us. To forgive is to become free to move forward.
- We need never forget what happened. In spite of our continued memory of the event, we nevertheless forgive and live life in the present.
- Forgiveness does *not* relieve offenders of their responsibility. If it is necessary to pursue justice, we can still take the action that is needed, such as pressing legal charges, filing complaints, or otherwise appropriately addressing concerns.

DECIDING TO FREE OURSELVES FROM PAIN: CHOOSING FORGIVENESS

No one can make this decision for us. We must be ready to reclaim the parts of our life that were affected. We may need assistance to do this, depending on such factors as who perpetrated the offense (oneself, a family member, a stranger, etc.) and the amount of suffering or loss involved. We might benefit from using a journal to write down our thoughts or to work through the process. (Refer to the “[Therapeutic Journaling](#)” tool.) Depending on the situation, it might also be helpful to talk with a trusted friend, clergy member, or therapist. Mobilize whatever resources will support you in this before continuing. If you find that you are becoming distressed, stop the activity and consider obtaining professional assistance.

THE STAGES OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness researchers Enright and Fitzgibbons provided four stages of forgiveness:[18]

- **Uncovering.** This stage is about gathering information about how the offense has hurt us, changed us, or cost us. Often this includes reflection on how it has preoccupied us mentally or emotionally.
- **Decision.** Once we understand how not forgiving has cost us and what forgiveness is, we can decide to commit to the process.
- **Work.** This stage is challenging. We work to gain a deeper understanding of the offender, our self, and the relationship, as applicable. During this stage, we begin to experience more empathy and compassion for our self and for the perpetrator.
- **Deepening.** Finding meaning in the suffering might include becoming more connected to others or recognizing that suffering is universal.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you

—Lewis B. Smedes

WHEN YOU ARE COMFORTABLE EXPLORING A GRIEVANCE, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING

- Are there events or situations in which you feel that you have been wronged and which continue to bother you?
- How did the event(s) change you? Did it change how you view your world, yourself, and others?
- What emotions are still present? Anger? Guilt? Shame? Hurt? Others?

- What has holding on to this cost you in terms of time, relationships, energy, happiness, etc.? Has it affected your health? Your sleep?
- How often does the event come to mind? How often do you dwell on it?
- What benefits might come to you if you were able to emotionally forgive the offense and/or the offender?
- Do you feel ready to do the work of forgiveness in order to free yourself from the past? Can you decide that forgiveness is for you and not the offender? If yes, continue with the following questions:
 - What is left to express to the offender or about what happened to you? Write it down, express it through creative means such as drawing, or talk it out. You can also write a letter to the offender, outlining what is unexpressed. There is no need to send it out unless that is important to you.
 - Have you needed forgiveness yourself from another person at some time? What was that experience like, and how did you feel? Recognize that everyone has been both the forgiven and the forgiver at some point.
 - Is some of what you experienced through the offense impersonal (not really about you) but rather related to the suffering that is experienced by others on this planet?
 - If you put yourself in the other person's place, it can create empathy. You may ask, what led them to do what they did? *This empathy, however, does not mean that their behavior is condoned.*
- What can you learn from this experience? How can this connect you more with others? How can more of your energy go into what you value? (Refer to the ["Values"](#) tool.)
- Appreciate that the process may take time or require additional resources. Refer to the Forgiveness Resources section at the end of this content.

Forgiveness is an absolute necessity for continued human existence...

—Bishop Desmond Tutu

RESOURCES

BOOKS

- Beazley, H. *No Regrets: A Ten-Step Program for Living in the Present and Leaving the Past Behind*. New Jersey: Wiley; 2004.

- Casarjian R. *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart*. New York: Bantam; 1992.
- Enright, RD. *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step by Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. Washington, DC: APA Life Tools; 2001.
- Enright RD. *The Forgiving Life: A Pathway to Overcoming Resentment and Creating a Legacy of Love*. Washington, DC: APA Life Tools; 2012.
- Enright RD. *8 Keys to Forgiveness*. New York: W. W. Norton; 2015
- Jampolsky GG. *Forgiveness: The Greatest Healer of All*. Oregon: Beyond Words; 1999.
- Luskin, F. *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*. New York: Harper Collins; 2002.
- Smedes LB. *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. San Francisco: Harper and Row; 1984.
- Smedes LB. *The Art of Forgiving: When you Need to Forgive and Don't Know How*. New York: Ballantine Books; 1997.
- Tutu, DM & Tutu, MA. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Forgiving Ourselves and the World*. New York: HarperOne, 2015.
- Worthington E. *Five Steps to Forgiveness: The Art and Science of Forgiving*. New York: Crown Publishers; 2003.

MOVIES

- *The Power of Forgiveness*. Journey Films; 2008.
- *Journey Toward Forgiveness*. A documentary originally for ABC TV.
- *Forgiveness: A Time to Love and a Time to Hate*; 2011. A documentary for PBS and available on PBS.org
- *Forgiveness: The Secret of Peace*; 2018. A documentary on IMDbPro.
- *Lessons in Forgiveness: Part One*; 2020. A documentary by Positive Revolutions Films, (free on YouTube)

WEBSITES

- [Forgiveness Worksheets and Handouts](http://www.psychologytools.com/technique-forgiveness.html) (with worksheets, handouts, etc.): <http://www.psychologytools.com/technique-forgiveness.html>

- [International Forgiveness Institute](http://internationalforgiveness.com/) from Dr. Robert Enright and associates: <http://internationalforgiveness.com/>
- [Project Forgive](http://projectforgive.org/): <http://projectforgive.org/>
- “[Therapeutic Journaling](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/therapeutic-journaling.asp)”:
<https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/therapeutic-journaling.asp>
- “[Values](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/values.asp)”:
<https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/values.asp>
- [Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance](http://forgivenessalliance.org/) from Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance:
<http://forgivenessalliance.org/>

FORGIVENESS MEDITATIONS

- Kornfield J. *The Beginners Guide to Forgiveness: How to Free Your Heart and Awaken Compassion*. Sounds True (recording with forgiveness meditations); 2002.
- Brach, Tara. Free guided meditation on forgiveness on her [website](#).
- [Bertin, M. Mindful.org. Free 10 minute meditation on forgiveness; 2019.](#)

AUTHORS

“Forgiveness: The Gift We Give Ourselves” was written by [Janice Singles](#), PsyD and [Shilagh Mirgain](#), PhD (2014, updated 2023).

This Whole Health tool was made possible through a collaborative effort between the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program, VA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, and Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.

REFERENCES

1. Lutjen LJ, Silton NR, Flannelly KJ. Religion, forgiveness, hostility and health: a structural equation analysis. *J Relig Health*. 2012;51(2):468-478.
2. Thompson LY, Snyder C, Hoffman L, et al. Dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations. *J Pers*. 2005;73(2):313-360.
3. Webb JR, Brewer K. Forgiveness and college student drinking in Southern Appalachia. *J Subst Use*. 2010;15(6):417-433.
4. Lawler KA, Younger JW, Piferi RL, Jobe RL, Edmondson KA, Jones WH. The unique effects of forgiveness on health: an exploration of pathways. *J Behav Med*. 2005;28(2):157-167.
5. Waltman MA, Russell DC, Coyle CT, Enright RD, Holter AC, M. Swoboda C. The effects of a forgiveness intervention on patients with coronary artery disease. *Psychol Health*. 2009;24(1):11-27.

VA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation

6. Rippentrop AE, Altmaier EM, Chen JJ, Found EM, Keffala VJ. The relationship between religion/spirituality and physical health, mental health, and pain in a chronic pain population. *Pain*. 2005;116(3):311-321.
7. Carson JW, Keefe FJ, Goli V, et al. Forgiveness and chronic low back pain: a preliminary study examining the relationship of forgiveness to pain, anger, and psychological distress. *J Pain*. 2005;6(2):84-91.
8. Lin WF, Mack D, Enright RD, Krahn D, Baskin TW. Effects of forgiveness therapy on anger, mood, and vulnerability to substance use among inpatient substance-dependent clients. *J Consult Clin Psychol*. 2004;72(6):1114-1121.
9. Akhtar S, Barlow J. Forgiveness therapy for the promotion of mental well-being: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Trauma Violence Abus*. 2018;19(1):107-122.
10. Toussaint LL, Shields GS, Slavich GM. Forgiveness, stress, and health: a 5-week dynamic parallel process study. *Ann Behav Med*. 2016;50(5):727-735.
11. Peterson SJ, Van Tongeren DR, Womack SD, Hook JN, Davis DE, Griffin BJ. The benefits of self-forgiveness on mental health: evidence from correlational and experimental research. *J Posit Psychol*. 2017;12(2):159-168.
12. Davis DE, Ho MY, Griffin BJ, et al. Forgiving the self and physical and mental health correlates: a meta-analytic review. *J Couns Psychol*. 2015;62(2):329-335.
13. Cleare S, Gumley A, O'Connor RC. Self-compassion, self-forgiveness, suicidal ideation, and self-harm: A systematic review. *Clin Psychol Psychother*. 2019;26(5):511-530.
14. Lee YR, Enright RD. A meta-analysis of the association between forgiveness of others and physical health. *Psychol Health*. 2019;34(5):626-643.
15. O'Beirne S, Katsimigos A, Harmon D. Forgiveness and chronic pain: A systematic review. *Irish J Med Sci*. 2020;189:1359-1364.
16. Rasmussen KR, Stackhouse M, Boon SD, Comstock K, Ross R. Meta-analytic connections between forgiveness and health: the moderating effects of forgiveness-related distinctions. *Psychol Health*. 2019;34(5): 515-534.
17. Enright R, Freedman S, Rique J. Psychology of interpersonal forgiveness. In: Enright RD, North J, eds. *Exploring Forgiveness*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press; 1998.
18. Enright RD, Fitzgibbons RP. (2015). *Forgiveness therapy: An empirical guide for resolving anger and restoring hope*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.