

## HOW TO FORGIVE OTHERS: A KEY TO EMOTIONAL HEALTH

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What does it mean to forgive? From an etymological perspective, the concept of forgiveness is derived from the Greek word ἀφίημι (aphesis), which has been variously interpreted as meaning “to release,” “to set free,” or “to let go.” Yet how do we let go when we feel like holding on to a resentment and never forgiving someone who has hurt us?

A starting point in understanding forgiveness involves understanding *resentment*, which can be compared to a type of internal revenge. Holding on to a grudge or resentment is like taking a poison and hoping it will kill the other person. In the words of Anne Lamott, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die” (2000, p. 134). Yet through our resentments, we cannot punish another person without punishing ourselves even more.

### **What is Forgiveness?**

Forgiveness can be defined as the process by which we are released from negative emotions such as resentment and anger. The key to understanding how we are released is contained in understanding how we hold on to negative emotions in the first place. We usually hold on to resentment because of the *interest*—the payoff. As long as there is a payoff for holding on to a grudge or resentment, forgiveness is impossible. The investment in resentment ties us to the problem—and binds us to the person—through anger. When we lose interest in the investment, we can learn to let go of the anger. When we are able to let go of our anger, we have taken a step toward forgiveness. In other words, forgiveness involves letting go of anger.

The benefits of practicing forgiveness have been studied from a psychological perspective (Smedes, 1984; Enright et al., 1991; Freedman & Enright, 1996). In *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes describes the psychological process of forgiveness:

Ordinary people forgive best if they go at it in bits and pieces and for specific acts. They bog down if they try to forgive people in a grand manner, because wholesale forgiving is almost always fake. Forgiving anything at all is a minor miracle; forgiving *carte blanche* is silly. Nobody can do it except God. (Smedes, 1984, p. 147)

### **What Forgiveness is Not**

When we say we have forgiven someone, but we still harbor resentment or maintain an attitude of indifference, then we have achieved only “pseudo forgiveness” (Enright, 2001). In contrast, authentic forgiveness involves a complete transformation in attitude toward the offender. It requires a willingness to experience and acknowledge to oneself the hurt, and it involves the development of a more complex view of the offender who inflicted the hurt (Worthington, 2001, 2006).

Forgiveness has little or nothing to do with telling another person, “I forgive you,” which itself can be a demeaning and judgmental statement. Unless a person specifically asks to be forgiven, saying to someone “I forgive you” is just another form of blame. Instead, we can silently say to ourselves “Bless them—change me.” Forgiveness is an internal process of letting go, although it can have profound external consequences.

Yet forgiveness is not the same as denying, forgetting, suppressing, condoning, excusing, pardoning, or reconciling. *Denying* is an unconscious defense mechanism that involves an inability to perceive the harmful injuries one has received. *Forgetting* implies that the memory of a transgression has slipped out of conscious awareness. *Suppressing* is similar to forgetting except that suppression involves a more conscious and intentional effort to push back out of awareness, with an unwillingness to clearly see the injuries that have occurred. *Condoning* implies justifying the offense or the offender, whereas *excusing* implies that a transgression was committed because of extenuating circumstances. *Pardoning* is a legal concept or a warrant granting release from punishment for an offense. Forgiveness is not the same as *reconciling*, which involves a positive change in the relationship between two people. Although forgiveness is a prerequisite to reconciliation, forgiveness can occur without reconciliation (as evidenced in the old Arabic adage, old Arabic saying: “Forgive, but tie up your camel”). In other words, it is possible to forgive without reconciling, but it is impossible to reconcile without forgiving.

### **Giving Forgiveness**

We live in a culture that permits everything and forgives nothing. In contrast, forgiveness is countercultural. Forgiveness is compassion in action. As psychologists Suzanne Freedman and Robert Enright point out, “There is a decidedly paradoxical quality to forgiveness as the forgiver gives up the resentment, to which he or she has a right, and gives the gift of compassion, to which the offender has no right” (1996, p. 483). The process of forgiveness does not change the past; it changes the present and opens the door to the future. Forgiveness is not an expectation that another person will apologize, make amends, or ask to be forgiven. In contrast, forgiveness involves letting go of *unrealistic expectations*,

which can otherwise serve as premeditated resentments. Forgiveness involves a sense of *loving detachment*, which is the ability to show compassion without trying to control outcomes. In contrast, holding on to resentment is a form of hostile attachment. In the same way that letting go requires opening one’s hands, practicing forgiveness requires opening one’s heart. Just as it is only with an open heart that we are able to forgive, it is only with a forgiving heart that we are able to love completely. In what might be described as the universal law of forgiveness, it is in forgiving others that we ourselves are forgiven.

### **Asking for Forgiveness**

The process of forgiveness works in both directions. We can not only learn to forgive others, but we can learn to ask to be forgiven by others. In contemporary language, we can ask forgiveness for the things we have said or done that have hurt others (acts of *commission*), as well as for the things we have not said or done that otherwise could have helped others (acts of *omission*). Asking for forgiveness involves making an *apology* (“I am sorry”), an *acknowledgement* (“I was wrong”), an *amendment* (“How can I make it right?”), a *commitment* (“I’ll strive to not do it again”), and a *request* (“Will you please forgive me?”). Admitting when we are wrong and making amends for our wrongs go a long way toward improving any relationship. To the extent that we become more concerned with being forgiven for our own transgressions, we become less concerned with those who have transgressed against us. To the extent that we are more concerned with the blind spots in our own eyes, we are less concerned with the wrongs we see in others.

**Receiving Forgiveness**

An often neglected aspect of forgiveness involves *receiving* it from others. Receiving—and accepting—forgiveness requires a humble heart. It is an act of grace. Yet one of the greatest obstacles against accepting forgiveness may involve our own inability to forgive ourselves. If forgiveness is compassion in action, then how can we love others if we have not learned to love ourselves?

**Suggested Action Steps**

Consider whether there is someone toward whom you experience anger or resentment that causes you harm. Think about the costs of holding on to this resentment, in contrast to the possible benefits of simply letting it go. You can act as if others did the best they could have done with what they had to do it with at the time. If you have a lingering resentment, then ask yourself, “What’s my part in it?” Rather than focusing on those who have hurt you, consider making a list of all those whom you have hurt. Consider taking an inventory of your own acts of commission (doing what may have harmed another person) as well as acts of omission (neglecting or not doing what may have helped). Acts of harm and neglect may have been by conscious *intent* (through awareness) or by consequential *impact* (through lack of self- or other awareness). Think about what it would be like to make amends to others without causing them further harm. If focusing on making amends to those in the past seems like an insurmountable task, then start today with making “living amends” to those who are part of your life each day. Going forward, pay attention to expectations that you have of others, and consider whether these expectations ever lead to resentments. Practice loving detachment by showing compassion toward others without trying to control them. You will begin to discover why forgiveness has been described as the ultimate expression of love.

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