

Forgive for Good:

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Of all the qualities that fall under the rubric of positive psychology forgiveness is one with a surprising amount of substantiating research and yet it remains difficult for many people to practice. Therapist's offices are filled with clients with unresolved grudges and thoughts of victimization who seem unaware of the need to and the steps to forgiveness. Forgiveness research has shown that forgiveness training helps people hurt less, experience less anger, feel less stress and suffer less depression. This research shows that as people learn to forgive they become more hopeful, optimistic and compassionate and they become more forgiving in general not just towards the particular person who wronged them. The research demonstrates that forgiveness has physical health benefits. People who learn to forgive report significantly fewer symptoms of stress such as backache, muscle tension, dizziness, headaches and upset stomachs. In addition people report improvements in appetite, sleep patterns, energy and general well being.

The first author has been the Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects for 12 years where he conducted the research quoted above. Dr. Luskin developed a nine step educational process (www.learningtoforgive.com) that shows people how to release the grudges and grievances they hold. The second author is a psychotherapist who has taken those practices and successfully applied them in clinical practice.

If forgiveness is so helpful why do so few of us choose to forgive when people hurt us and why do so few therapists promote it? First very few people have been taught how to forgive. Forgiveness is absent from most therapist training programs. The religious traditions tell us to forgive but do not offer the practical steps as to how. We also live in a culture that prizes the expression of anger and resentment more than the peace of forgiveness. To make matters worse most people are confused about what forgiveness is and is not.

First, forgiving an offense such as an adulterous affair does not mean you condone the affair. We are reminded often that we can only forgive that which we know to be wrong. Your partner's affair was wrong but you do not have to suffer indefinitely because you were betrayed. Secondly, forgiveness in no way means you have to reconcile with someone who badly treated you. If you were the recipient of childhood abuse or are in a harsh relationship you can forgive the offender and as part of that choice make the decision to end or limit contact. Forgiveness is primarily for creating peace of mind. It is to create healing in one's life and return us to a state where we can live capable again of love and trust.

Another misconception about forgiveness is that it depends on whether or not the abuser or lying person apologizes, wants us back or changes his/her ways. We can forgive our ex spouse for their insulting speech and even for abandoning us and our children... but forgiveness in no way means we do not take the ex to court to make sure our children get the support payments to which they are entitled.

A typical therapeutic experience with forgiveness involves Don who had not been able to forgive his wife for an affair she had earlier in their marriage. He came to the second author for therapy after he quit marital therapy with another therapist. In the initial sessions the therapist made the couple revisit the old issues and this made Don feel sick with rage and futility.

In forgiveness therapy Don started working with guided imagery and stress reduction exercises that helped him to calm down. Using Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique and gratitude imagery it became clear that Don still had plenty of love for his wife once he could still his anger and humiliation. He was able to remember how she helped him become financially successful. Don also re connected with how beautiful he found his wife and saw how attracted to her he still was.

Once Don loosened the grip of his fight/flight siege mentality, he was able to think more effectively. He saw that his "unenforceable rule" that his wife never betray him was keeping him stuck. As he softened his demand for her to be loyal and instead wished for her loyalty, he developed some empathy for the confusion and guilt she must have felt over this affair as she was a kid of only eighteen years of age. Don reconnected with his intent to have a loving relationship with his wife and was able to grieve his significant loss and move on with her. These sessions contained many of the 9 steps to forgiveness outlined below.

Nine steps to Forgiveness

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a couple of trusted people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person that upset you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace.
4. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset you are suffering now, not what offended you or hurt you two minutes - or ten years - ago.

5. At the moment you feel upset practice simple stress management tools to soothe your body's flight or fight response.
6. Give up expecting things from other people, or your life, that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the "unenforceable rules" you have for your health or how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship and prosperity and work hard to get them. However, you will suffer when you demand these things occur when you do not have the power to make them happen.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt seek out new ways to get what you want.
8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty and kindness around you.
9. Amend your grievance story to remind you of the heroic choice to forgive.