

Healing Through Forgiveness

To err is human; to forgive, divine.

-Alexander Pope

Scientific research has indicated that forgiving past wrongs can be helpful for a variety of health problems, including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and chronic pain. When we focus on forgiving, our blood pressure drops and our heart rate slows down. Our mood improves. Forgiveness can alter the state of our health.

What follows is a series of steps designed to help you forgive a past wrong. Follow each step, one at a time, and take a moment to write down your answers to each question. You need not share your answers with others. This process should be based on what feels best for you.

The Nature of Forgiveness

The following perspectives are based in part on the work of Enright and Luskin, as listed in the suggestions for further reading at the end of this handout.

- Forgiveness is a transformation. The key is to release suffering and increase inner peace and understanding.
- Forgiveness is NOT forgetting. In fact, you have to remember and acknowledge negative emotions and events before forgiveness can occur.
- Forgiveness is NOT pardoning, excusing, or saying that something will be treated as acceptable behavior in the future.
- Forgiveness is, first and foremost, done for the person doing the forgiving.
- Forgiveness is a path to freedom. It frees you from the control of the person who caused the harm. They lose their power to cause you to feel negative emotions.
- Forgiveness can break old patterns that might otherwise interfere when you try to create new relationships.
- Forgiveness can take a lot of time and hard work.
- Forgiveness need not require 'making up' with the person who caused the harm. It is an internal process. It is primarily for *you*. The goal is to help *you* heal, to help *you* grow.
- Thinking about forgiveness may not be enough. For many, tapping into principles described in various spiritual traditions from around the world is necessary. Meditation, interpersonal dialogues, and intense emotional work may be essential parts of the forgiveness process for many people. See the resources listed at the end of this handout.



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1. Think of a person who has wronged you, someone who you have not been able or willing to forgive thus far.
 2. Describe the experience or experiences in which this “offender” harmed you or treated you unjustly.
 3. Describe the emotions you feel as you consider these events. Do you feel anger? Shame? Guilt? How much time do you spend thinking about or re-living what happened? Take as much time as you need to acknowledge your feelings and experiences and put them into words.
 4. How has being unable to forgive affected your health? Has it affected your ability to relate to others? Did it change your view of the world? How has being hurt in the past caused you to protect yourself? Does how you defend yourself limit you in any way?
 5. What are the benefits of forgiving?
 6. Are you ready and willing to forgive? When you feel that the answer is “yes,” continue with the steps described below. Sometimes just deciding to forgive is the most difficult step of all!
- (Note: The following guidelines/suggestions are inspired by the works listed in the “Further Reading” section at the end of this handout. Follow the steps in whatever order works best for you.)**
7. Consider a situation in which another person had to forgive you for something. How did you feel? Recognize that everyone is involved in both forgiving and being forgiven. If you put yourself in the position of the person who hurt you, can you understand why they did what they did? (Again, understanding it does not mean you feel it was an acceptable thing for them to do.)
 8. Offer support to others who are in a similar situation. Helping others who have been suffering can help you move through your own painful experiences. You might consider performing an act of kindness toward the person who hurt you, but anything you do to honor your decision to forgive is important. Do what feels right to you.
 9. Replay in your mind the situation when you were hurt. What can you learn from it about yourself? What does it mean to you? Define your relationship with the person who hurt you on your terms. Break any harmful connections.
 10. Release the emotions that this hurt has caused you. Express those emotions and then move through them, so that they will no longer cause you to waste energy on them. Ask for support from friends or family members as you do this.
 11. For additional insight and assistance, consider discussing these issues with a health professional (counselor, psychologist, physician) and/or referring to the books mentioned below.



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Additional perspectives on forgiveness from the readings listed below:

From GG Jampolsky, MD:

- Forgiveness is the most powerful healer of all (p.16).
- Forgiveness is letting go of all hopes of a better past (p. 21).
- Forgiving others is the first step to forgiving ourselves (p. 33).
- Forgiveness creates a world where we do not withhold our love from anyone (p. 67)
- Forgiveness is the quickest pathway to happiness and the quickest way to undo suffering and pain (p. 71).

From Lewis B Smedes:

- You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well (p. 47).
- Forgiving is a miracle, however, that few of us have the magic to perform easily. Never underestimate the demands that forgiving puts on an average person's modest power to love... Nobody seems to be born with much talent for forgiving. We all need to learn from scratch, and the learning almost always runs against the grain...Yet people do forgive – ordinary people, not saints – and they do heal themselves of terrible pain (p. 126).
- Love is the power behind forgiveness. But it does not work the way a lot of people suppose. Love is not a soft and fuzzy sentiment that lets people get away with almost everything, no matter what they do to us. Love does not make us pushovers for people who hurt us unfairly. Love forgives, but only because love is powerful (p. 182).
- When we forgive, we ride the crest of love's cosmic wave; we walk in stride with God...And we heal the hurt we never deserved (p. 192).

From Rabbi Harold S. Kushner:

- To feel forgiven is to feel free to step into the future uncontaminated by the mistakes of the past, encouraged by the knowledge that we can grow and change and need not repeat the same mistakes again (p. 10).
- When we let ourselves be defined in our own minds by our worst moments instead of our best ones, we learn to think of ourselves as people who never get it right, rather than capable people who make an occasional, thoroughly human mistake (p. 38).

From Robin Casarjian:

Forgiving yourself is probably the greatest challenge you will ever meet (p. 135).



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For Further Reading:

- Casarjian R: *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart*. Bantam, 1992.
- Enright, RD: *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. Washington, DC, APA Books, 2001.
- <http://internationalforgiveness.com/> (International Forgiveness Institute--based on the work of Dr. Enright)
- Flanigan B: *Forgiving the Unforgivable: Overcoming the Bitter Legacy of Intimate Wounds*. Macmillan, 1992. Has a number of useful healing exercises in Part III.
- Jampolsky GG: *Forgiveness: The Greatest Healer of All*. Beyond Words, 1999.
- Kornfield J: *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*. New York, Bantam, 2004.
- Kornfield J: *Beginner's Series: The Beginner's Guide to Forgiveness: How to Free Your Heart and Awaken Compassion*. Sounds True, 2002. CD with forgiveness meditations.
- Kushner HS: *How Good Do We Have to Be?: A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness*. Little, Brown, and Company, 1996. Useful book for issues relating to self-forgiveness.
- Luskin F: *Forgive for Good*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002
- <http://learningtoforgive.com/> (Dr. Luskin's website)
- Meninger WA: *The Process of Forgiveness*. New York, Continuum, 1998.
- Smedes LB: *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1984.
- Worthington E: *Five Steps to Forgiveness: The Art and Science of Forgiving*. New York: Crown, 2001
- <http://www.thepowerofforgiveness.com/> Website of a documentary, *The Power of Forgiveness*. Lists resources on forgiveness.
- www.forgivenessday.org (Website of the World Forgiveness Alliance)

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