

# A DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

## 1. What it is:

### *Moral*

- It is a response to an injustice (a moral wrong).
- It is a turning to the "good" in the face of this wrongdoing.

### *Goodwill*

- Merciful restraint from pursuing resentment or revenge.
- Generosity or offering good things such as: attention, time, and remembrances on holidays.
- Moral Love or contributing to the betterment of the other.

### *Paradoxical*

- It is the foregoing of resentment or revenge when the wrongdoer's actions deserve it and giving the gifts of mercy, generosity and love when the wrongdoer does not deserve them.
- **As we give the gift of forgiveness we ourselves are healed.**

### *Beyond duty*

- A freely chosen gift (rather than a grim obligation).
- The overcoming of wrongdoing with good.

## 2. What it is not:

### *Forgetting/Denial*

- Time passing/ignoring the effects of the wrongdoing.

### *Condoning*

- Nothing that bad happened. It was only this one time. It won't happen again.

### *Excusing*

- The person did this because....it wasn't really their responsibility.

### *Condemning*

- She/he **deserves** to know they have wronged me.
- "Forgiving" with a sense of moral superiority.

### *Seeking Justice or Compensation*

- Forgiveness is not a quid pro quo deal--it doesn't demand compensation first.

## 3. Important Distinction:

- **Forgiveness:** One person's moral response to another's injustice
- **Reconciliation:** Two parties coming together in mutual respect

# Forgiveness as a Key to the Future

Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself. It is a release from the burden of anger and pain. When you choose to forgive, you choose to live in the present and the future instead of the past. It does not mean to forget but it does mean to release and go on. Forgiveness doesn't happen on it's own, you must choose to forgive.

You may have been hurt by something that your partner did to you. You may have been hurt because your expectations weren't met. You may have been hurt and you don't even remember why. You may have done something to someone else that you are sorry for. And you remember the pain and carry it with you like a grudge everywhere you go. When your burden becomes too great, it becomes the relationship, it consumes your life and it changes who you are and what your relationships can be. It is a wall between you and the intimacy that you seek.

## **When you forgive:**

1. You relieve yourself of the burden of the past. You shed the hurt, pain, anger, and loneliness. You can begin to heal.
2. You give the person you forgive (even yourself) the freedom to live in peace and to be able to change for the better.

## **Points about forgiveness:**

1. Forgiveness is not forgetting.
2. The pain may not be completely gone. One can forgive and still grieve a loss or feel pain from a wound.
3. Damage and wounds can take time to repair.
4. Forgiveness does not deny responsibility for behaviour. You have simply committed to not hold the other person in debt.

# Forgiveness

The process of forgiveness can be a liberating experience. One that if practiced proactively can lead to a wonderful experience of life. Interestingly, forgiveness can only occur because we have been given the gift of the ability to make choices. We have the choice to forgive or not to forgive and no one can force us to do either. Conversely, if we want to forgive someone no one can stop us no matter how poorly they may act. **This ability to forgive is a manifestation of the personal control we have over our lives.** It is nice to reflect upon and feel the respect that we have been given to be able to make such profound choices.

Compellingly, the option to forgive also implies that we had discretion as to whether or not we took offence in the first place. While forgiving may be a difficult enough choice for many of us, imagine how our lives would be if we rarely or never used our power of choice to take offence. Since we have choice, wouldn't it make sense to limit the amount of times we are hurt or offended so that the need to forgive rarely if ever arises? The ability to live life without taking offence, without giving blame, and by offering forgiveness are choices that offer a life of great peace.

The ability to offer proactive forgiveness proceeds along four steps.

At **step one** you are filled with self justified anger. At some point in your life you have been hurt and you are mad at the person you feel wronged you. You blame the person committing the wrong for how you are feeling. It is their action and not your choice of response that you feel is at the cause of your anger. You have forgotten that you have a choice as to how you will react, or are so angry that you are convinced that it would not be right to forgive the offence. At this stage there is usually both active and submerged anger.

The **second step** towards forgiveness emerges when after feeling angry with

someone for a while you realize that the anger does not feel good to you. It may be hurting your emotional balance or your physical health. Or you wish to repair the damage to the relationship. So you take steps to forgive. You may begin to see the problem from the other person's point of view or you may simply decide to let the problem go. In either case after an extended period of time you are no longer angry and you have forgiven the person with whom you were angry. This process can be applied to anger at oneself, another person or to life in general.

The **third stage** of forgiveness comes after you have seen the beneficial results of forgiveness and you choose to let go of your anger fairly quickly. In this stage the choice is to feel the hurt for a short period of time, and then work to either repair the relationship or let go of seeing the situation as a problem. In either case you decide to forgive because you have had some practice with it and see the benefit in your life. This could emerge in as simple a situation as being cut off by another car on the expressway or in a complex situation like an affair in a marriage. At this stage you are aware that the length of time you experience the situation as a grievance is primarily up to you.

The **fourth stage** of forgiveness involves the proactive choice to rarely if ever get angry. This means often to forgive in advance of a specific trigger. This stage often emerges at the same time as some or all of the following thoughts:

I don't want to waste my precious life in the discomfort caused by anger so I will choose to feel differently. I am able to forgive myself, forgive others, forgive life, and forgive God – who allowed this to happen in my life.

I know how it hurts when people don't forgive me. I do not want to hurt other people by my anger so I will let it go.

Life is filled with incredible beauty and I am missing some if I am experiencing unresolved anger. I forgive myself for getting sidetracked.

People do the best they can and if they err I can best help them by offering understanding. The first step in this process is to forgive the specific offence.

Everyone, including myself operates primarily out of self-interest. I must expect that some times I, in my self-interest, will be annoyed by some one else's expression of their self-interest. If I can understand that this is an ordinary part of life, what is there to be upset about? If I understand that self-interest is the way that I behave, how can I but offer forgiveness to

everyone, including myself for behaving that way?

These four stages of forgiveness will not be followed in the same way by all people and in all relationships. There are some people for whom we feel such love that we are almost always at stage four: open hearted and ready to forgive. There are other people for whom we feel so egregiously hurt and our well of good will for them is so dry that we can spend years at stage one. What is critical to remember is the power of personal choice and the importance of exercising that choice to forgive so that we can bring peace and healing into our relationships and ourselves?

# A PROCESS MODEL OF FORGIVING

My experience and dedication to the teaching of forgiveness as a psychological health intervention have led to the development of a process model of interpersonal forgiving. This model has a series of 20 steps, which are organized into four distinct phases. This is our best estimate of the general pathway that people follow when they forgive someone who has unjustly injured them. This process is not a rigid sequence and individuals may experience all or only some of the steps. The following is a brief description of the four phases of forgiveness.

## **Uncovering Phase**

During this phase the individual becomes aware of the emotional pain that has resulted from a deep, unjust injury. Characteristic feelings of anger or even hatred may be present. As these negative emotions are confronted and the injury is honestly understood, individuals may experience considerable emotional distress. Deciding on the appropriate amount of energy to process this pain and still function effectively is an important consideration during this phase. However, as the anger and other negative emotions are brought out into the open healing can begin to occur.

## **Decision Phase**

The individual now realizes that to continue to focus on the injury and the injurer may cause more unnecessary suffering. The individual begins to understand that a change must occur to go ahead in the healing process. The individual may then experience a "heart conversion" or, in other words, a life change in a positive direction. The individual entertains the idea of forgiveness as a healing strategy. The individual, then, commits to forgiving the injurer who has caused him/her such pain. Complete forgiveness is not yet realized

but the injured individual has decided to explore forgiveness and to take initial steps in the direction of full forgiveness. An important first step at this point is to forego any thoughts, feelings or intentions of revenge toward the injurer.

## **Work Phase**

Here the forgiving individual begins the active work of forgiving the injurer. This phase may include new ways of thinking about the injurer. The injured individual may strive to understand the injurer's childhood or put the injurious event in context by understanding the pressures the injurer was under at the time of the offence. This new way of thinking is undertaken not to excuse the injurer of his/her responsibility for the offence, but rather to better understand him/her and to see the injurer as a member of the human community. Often, this new understanding may be accompanied by a willingness to experience empathy and compassion toward the offender. The work phase also includes the heart of forgiveness, which is the acceptance of the pain that resulted from the actions of the injurer. This must not be confused with any sense of deserving the pain but rather a bearing of pain that has been unjustly given. As the individual bears the pain, he/she chooses not to pass it on to others, including the injurer. This is often where the challenge of a "quest for the good" is most evident. Indeed, the individual may now become ready to begin to offer goodwill toward the injurer in the form of merciful restraint, generosity, and moral love. This may or may not include reconciliation. The goodwill may be offered while at the same time taking into consideration current issues of trust and safety in the relationship between the individual and the injurer.

## **Outcome/Deepening Phase**

In this phase the forgiving individual begins to realize that he/she is gaining

emotional relief from the process of forgiving his/her injurer. The forgiving individual may find meaning in the suffering that he/she has faced. The emotional relief and newfound meaning may lead to increased compassion for self and others. The individual may discover a

new purpose in life and an active concern for his/her community. Thus, the forgiver discovers the paradox of forgiveness: as we give to others the gifts of mercy, generosity, and moral love, we ourselves are healed.

# How to Forgive: Nine Guidelines

As poet Edwin Markham approached his retirement years, he discovered that the man to whom he had entrusted his financial portfolio had squandered all the money. Markham's dream of a comfortable retirement vanished. He began to brood over the injustice and the loss. His anger deepened. Over time, Markham's bitterness grew by leaps and bounds. One day while sitting at his table, Markham found himself drawing circles as he tried to soothe the turmoil he felt within. Finally, he concluded: "I must forgive him, and I will forgive him." Looking again at the circles he had drawn on the paper before him, Markham wrote these lines:

*He drew a circle to shut me out,  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;  
But love and I had the wit to win,  
We drew a circle to take him in.*

Although Markham wrote hundreds of poems contained in many book volumes, the words he wrote while forgiving are his most popular and memorable. **As he forgave, a tremendous act of creativity was released within Markham.** The poets and mystics among us have long known and declared that the act of forgiveness releases great healing power.

Author and minister Charles Fillmore recommended forgiveness as the most effective way of restoring inner harmony and balance: "There is a mental treatment guaranteed to cure every ill that flesh is heir to: Sit for half an hour every night and forgive everyone against whom you have any ill will or antipathy," he wrote.

While forgiveness has always been an important concept in religion and ethics, only recently have psychologists begun to discover its powers as a psychotherapeutic tool. In three separate studies, people who had not resolved the wrongs done to them - college students, elderly women, and incest survivors - all improved when therapists helped them learn to forgive.

Although an increasing number of counsellors recommend that we forgive those who have hurt us, many people find forgiveness difficult to offer. Here are 10 guidelines to help extend forgiveness and ease resentment.

**1. Educate yourself about forgiveness.** "Forgive," according to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, means: "to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; pardon; to overlook an offence; to cancel a debt." Thus, **the goal of forgiveness is to let go of a hurt and move ahead with life.** Visit a library and research books or magazine articles on forgiveness so that you understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy forgiveness. For example, Robert Enright, Ph.D., an education psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, stresses that **true forgiveness is not:**

- **Forgetting.** If the hurt wounded you enough to require forgiveness, you may always have a memory of it.
- **Excusing or condoning.** The wrong should not be denied, minimized, or justified.
- **Reconciling.** You can forgive the offender and still choose not to re-establish the relationship.
- **Weakness.** You do not become a doormat or oblivious to cruelty.

**2. Spend a few minutes each day cleaning out your thinking.** At a local florist shop I once watched the owner remove tiny bugs from a potted plant. Using a cotton swab he meticulously plucked off one small tenaciously clinging offender after another. Although that tedious process took him several hours of silent concentration and steady work, he was able to rid the plant of what would ultimately stunt its growth and ruin its loveliness. There is a lesson from that florist which applies to daily living. The only way to keep us free from the

infestation of troublesome thoughts is to spend a few minutes each day cleaning out our thinking.

Has someone hurt you by his or her comments? Did someone publicly insult you? Did a friend fail to come through for you? Pluck off each offending layer of thought and dispose of it just as the florist disposed of the tiny insects destroying his lovely plant. Doing so insures that a vague irritation does not transform itself into a deep resentment and an intense hatred.

**3. Practice on small hurts.** To become a generous forgiver of major pains, practice forgiveness on small hurts. Forgive immediately the small slights inflicted by strangers - a rude clerk, a driver who cut you off, a doctor who keeps you waiting and waiting, etc. Use those events as practice time to prepare you for the tougher task of forgiving major hurts.

**4. Challenge the "shoulds" in your thinking.** Forgiveness is much easier when you give up the irrational belief which fuels your frustration, anger, and hostility - the expectation that other people will always act in the way you want. Beware of the "shoulds" in your thinking and speaking:

- He shouldn't have done this to me.
- She shouldn't act that way.
- My daughter should have known better.
- My son should be more attentive to me.
- I've worked hard and I should have been rewarded.

Whenever you find the word "should" in your mind and talk, challenge yourself. Tell yourself it is unrealistic to expect that people will always act decently and respectfully toward you. Remind yourself that everyone is fallible and capable of making a mistake.

**5. Understand that resentment has a high price tag.** "Holding a grudge takes mental, emotional, and physical energy. It

makes you obsessive, angry, and depressed," observes Barry Lubetkin, a psychologist and director of the Institute for Behaviour Therapy in New York City. "There's a strong connection between anger and a wide spectrum of health miseries - chronic stomach upset, heart problems, and skin conditions among them. Without question, the more anger we experience within, the more stress we're under," he adds. Whenever a hostile or hateful thought enters your mind, try to be fully aware of the harm that resentment can do to you, even making you ill. Let that knowledge further motivate you to forgive and let go.

**6. Remember: Lack of forgiveness is giving others power over you.**

Withholding forgiveness and nursing resentment simply allow another person to have control over your well being. It is always a **mistake to let such negative emotions influence your living.** Forgive, and you will be able to direct your life in positive thoughts and actions. An excellent example is that of educator Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). An emancipated slave who started out living in abject poverty, he had to work from the age of nine to help support his family. Instead of becoming bitter about the hardships he faced and viewing himself as a victim, Washington worked hard to improve his situation. He first became a janitor in a school to obtain his education. Then he went on to teach at Hampton Institute, one of the first African-American colleges in the U.S. Later he organized and became president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. **"I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him"** was Washington's lifelong motto.

**7. Recognize the ripple effect of harbouring a grudge.** When you can't forgive someone, **there can be a ripple effect, which negatively infects your family and friends.** Writing to advice columnist "Dear Abby," a woman says: "I have something to say to the millions of families whose lives are affected by divorce. An unforgiving and bitter person who has not let go of animosities can poison an entire family and ruin the

holidays for everyone. I know. I was that person." The writer, who signs herself as "Free in Vermont," explains she could not forgive her former husband and his new wife, and her children suffered her ensuing bitterness. "One day after a particularly harsh outburst, I understood the pained reaction on my children's faces. I prayed for the strength to change my ways so that I could stop hurting those I love most in the world." Although it was difficult for "Free in Vermont" to extend forgiveness, she did so and says:

"I have peace in my heart and my children are happy. They are free to enjoy both homes." **Forgiveness is a priceless gift, which you can give to yourself and your family.**

**8. Try instant forgiveness.** Lewis Smedes, a professor of ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, and author of *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, tells of his rage toward a police officer who brutalized his young son, John. The officer was a large 250-pound lawman who assaulted his 140-pound son and then charged him with resisting an officer. Although the charge was quickly dismissed, Smedes's rage and hostility were not so quickly appeased. Realizing that his intense feelings toward the police officer were creating a personal emotional

crisis, Smedes knew he had to find a way of forgiving.

"I tried a technique that everything in my temperament resisted," he writes. "I thought about how a priest gives instant absolution to a penitent, right off the bat, in the confessional booth. And I decided to give this cop absolution. 'In the name of God I hereby forgive you-go in peace,' I said out loud, at least six times. It worked enough to get me going. I felt myself pierced a couple of inches off my hate. And I was on my way."

**9. Recall repeatedly this one vital fact: forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.** A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who shared the ordeal with him.

"Have you forgiven the Nazis?" he asked his friend.

"Yes."

"Well, I haven't. I'm still consumed with hatred for them," the other man declared.

"In that case," said his friend gently, "they still have you in prison."

That story points out this reality: ultimately, **forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.** Bitterness and anger imprison you emotionally. **Forgiveness sets you free.**

# The Top Four Steps Of Preparation To Forgiveness

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For many people forgiveness is one of the hardest steps of all in our progress toward freedom of spirit. Yet it is essential. For as long as we are unable to forgive, we keep ourselves chained to the unforgiving. We give them rent-free space in our minds, emotional shackles on our hearts, and the right to torment us in the small hours of the night. When it is time to move on, but still too hard, try some or all of these steps. *(Note that **these steps are appropriate for events resulting from an ongoing adult relationship with anyone**. They may not all be appropriate for the random act of violence from a stranger, nor for someone who was abused as a child or while in some other position of true helplessness.)*

**1. Understand that forgiving does not mean giving permission for the behaviour to be repeated.** It does not mean saying that what was done was acceptable. Forgiveness is needed for behaviours that were not acceptable and that you should not allow to be repeated.

**2. Recognize who is being hurt by your non-forgiveness.** Does the other person burn with your anger, feel the knot in your stomach, experience the cycling and recycling of your thoughts as you re-experience the events in your mind? Do they stay awake as you rehearse in your mind what you would like to say or do to 'punish' them? No, the pain is all yours.

**3. Do not require to know 'why' as a prerequisite to forgiveness.** Knowing why the behaviour happened is unlikely to lessen the pain, because the pain came at a time when you did not know why. Occasionally there are times when knowing why makes forgiveness unnecessary, but they are rare. Don't count on it and don't count on even the perpetrator knowing why.

**4. Acknowledge your part.** Were you honest about your hurt or did you hide the fact that the behaviour hurt you? Did you seek peace by reassuring the perpetrator that it was all right? **Did you stay when you could or should have left?** If so, then you, too, have some responsibility. *(Here you start to move away from being a victim.)*

# Workshop To Forgive

## An individual exercise in forgiveness:

1. **Write down with pen and paper all of the things that you have done wrong.** It is imperative that you *write*. Word processing is not the same.
2. **Read the list.**
3. **Now say "I did the best that I could with the knowledge that I had at the time. I now forgive myself and go free."**
4. **Destroy (*burn or shred*) the list.**
5. **Repeat the exercise for each of the other people who have hurt you** except for the recent one, whose relationship / hurt is eating away your energy
6. **Make a list of what you need to forgive.** What was actually done that caused your pain? Not what you felt, what was done.
7. **Make a list of what you gained from the relationship,** whatever form of relationship it was. Looking back you may be focusing on the negatives, the hurts. Yet if they were repeated, you must have stayed to allow the repetition. You did not remove yourself. Why? There must have been some positives if you chose to stay around. What were they?
8. **Bury the grudge - literally. Write a letter** (*with paper and pen; NO Word Processing with PC*) **to the person who hurt you but DO NOT MAIL IT.** Express fully, clearly, honestly how you feel and why that person's act hurt you and made you angry. **Conclude with the bold declaration that you have forgiven him or her.** Then, **bury the letter in a potted plant or somewhere in your yard.** (*This is a powerful symbolic exercise, which many people have found to be extremely therapeutic.*)
9. **Write another letter** (*with paper and pen No Word Processing with the PC*) **to the person (DO NOT MAIL IT).** Acknowledge what you gained from the relationship, and express forgiveness for the hurts. Allow yourself to express all your feelings fully. Do not focus only on the hurts.
10. **Create a ceremony in which you get rid of the letter, so symbolizing the ending of the link between you.** You may choose to visualize placing them on a raft and watching it drift gently away down a river. You may prefer to burn them and scatter the ashes. You may invent some other form of ritualised separation.
11. **Visualize the person you are forgiving being blessed by your forgiveness** and, as a result, being freed from continuing the behaviour that hurt you.
12. **Now that you have freed yourself from the painful links and released the pain,** feel yourself growing lighter and more joyous. Now you are free to move on with your life without that burden of bitterness. Do not look back in anger. **Now begin anew to live your life** without the burden of unforgiving pain.