

Forgiveness



Old resentments and unmet expectations often interfere with the enjoyment of our lives. Try to identify the pain and move on.

What Forgiveness Is

Forgiveness is letting go of the need for revenge and releasing negative thoughts of bitterness and resentment. If you are a parent, you can provide a wonderful model for your children by forgiving. If they observe your reconciliation with friends or

family members who have wronged you, perhaps they will learn not to harbor resentment over the ways in which you may have disappointed them. Even if you are not a parent, forgiveness is still an extremely valuable skill to have.

In the movie Avalon, the uncle stopped talking to his family members for the rest of his life because they started Thanksgiving dinner without him after he was excessively late for the zillionth time. What a waste of energy it is to stay angry for decades. Forgiveness can be a gift that we give to ourselves. Here are some easy steps toward forgiveness:

- Acknowledge your own inner pain.
- Express your emotions in non-hurtful ways without yelling or attacking.
- Protect yourself from further victimization.
- Try to understand the point of view and motivations of the person to be forgiven; replace anger with compassion.
- Forgive yourself for your role in a difficult relationship, and then decide whether or not to remain in the relationship.
- Perform the overt act of forgiveness verbally or in writing. If the person you want to forgive is dead or unreachable, you still can write down your feelings in a letter.

What Forgiveness Is Not

- Forgiveness is not simply forgetting.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting or pretending it did not happen. It did happen, and we need to retain the lesson learned without holding on to the pain.
- Forgiveness is not excusing. We excuse a person who is not to blame. We forgive because he or she committed a wrong.
- Forgiveness is not giving permission to continue hurtful behaviors; nor is it condoning the behavior in the past or in the future.
- Forgiveness is not reconciliation. We have to make a separate decision about whether to reconcile with the person we are forgiving or to maintain our distance.

An Example of Forgiveness

Edith had been hostile for years toward her brother Robert because of a heated dispute over an unfair distribution of a substantial inheritance from their father. She was consumed by envy about his wealth and lifestyle, which diminished her capacity to appreciate the richness of her own life. As her children matured, they became aware of the underlying tension between their mother and their uncle at extended family events, and they expressed their discomfort.

Finally Edith decided it was time to let go of her resentment toward Robert because it was unhealthy for her and her children. She arranged a meeting with Robert in which she told him that she wanted to forgive the past and have a positive relationship with him, but before they could bury the past she needed to tell him exactly what she was forgiving him for. Robert listened attentively without interrupting as she requested. She did not want to rehash the original disagreement by listening to his side. Robert said that he had missed her and her family, and she felt a sense of relief. When her son graduated from high school, Robert was there. Thanksgiving will be the first full family gathering in a decade. Edith is a happier person now than for the many years in which she was burdened by her bitterness. Forgiveness is a gift that we give to ourselves.

The Rewards of Forgiveness

The process of forgiving estranged family members can reward us by reconnecting our children to the extended family and dissolving our own sense of alienation. Karl had not spoken to his father, Sam, for many years because his father had been physically and emotionally abusive during his childhood. Karl's wife, Donna, maintained minimal contact with Sam because he called from time to time to inquire about his young grandchildren.

It was ironic that although Sam had been a terrible father, he had been a very gifted teacher in the creative arts. Donna suggested that Karl allow his father to visit the children at their home with his second wife. Donna's father was dead, and Sam was the children's only grandfather. Karl did not want reconciliation with his father, nor did he want to confront this 75-year-old man with the abuse of the past. It took a year before Karl felt prepared to allow his father to visit his home. He had to let go of his anger, but he did not let go of his memories of the cruelty of which his father was capable.

Karl was civil but not warm when Sam and his wife came to visit. Sam brought creative materials and beautiful books for the children; he got down on the floor with them and stimulated their imagination. Karl and Donna were present to supervise these visits. The children now have a grandfather at their birthday parties, and everyone anticipates the holidays with less tension because the ghosts from the past will not be an unspoken presence at family gatherings.

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