



## FORGIVENESS

No one gets through life without being hurt by another person. We all have experienced the pain of a thoughtless remark, gossip, or lies. If you have experienced an unhappy marriage, the devastation of infidelity, or suffered physical or emotional abuse, you know what it feels like to be hurt. It is tempting to hold on to these feelings and build a wall of safety around yourself, but the best way to heal is to forgive the person who hurt you.

### What is Forgiveness?

When you forgive another person, you no longer allow their behavior to cause you anger, pain, bitterness, or resentment. When you choose not to forgive, you make the choice to hold onto your feelings of resentment, anger, and pain.

*As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.*

— Nelson Mandela

### Why should I forgive?

Think of forgiveness as a gift that you give to yourself. It is not something you do for the person who hurt you. It is a gift to yourself, because it enables you to stop feeling painful feelings and pushing others away. Forgiveness frees you from anger and allows you to restore your ability to have close and satisfying relationships with others.



Anger is a poisonous emotion that comes from being hurt. When you are consumed with anger and bitterness, it hurts you at least as much as it hurts the person who has harmed you. It is as if you were filled with poison. If these feelings are not resolved, they can begin to eat you up inside. You have two choices: to stay connected to the person who hurt you by keeping these poisonous feelings alive, or to let the feelings go and forgive the person who harmed you. When you withhold forgiveness, think about who is actually being hurt. It is more than likely that the person who is filled with anger and anxiety is you, not the other person.

### What forgiveness is not?

Forgiving another does not mean that you will never again feel the pain or remember the thing that hurt you. The hurtful experience will be in your memory forever. By forgiving, you are not pretending that the hurtful behavior never happened. It did happen. The important thing is to learn from it while letting go of the painful feelings.

Forgiveness is not about right or wrong. It doesn't mean that the person's behavior was okay. You are not excusing their behavior or giving them permission to repeat or continue the behavior.

When you forgive another, it does not mean that you wish to continue your relationship with them. That is a separate decision. You can forgive a person and live your life apart from them.

Forgiveness can take place only because we have the ability to make choices. This ability is a gift, and we can use it whenever we wish.

We have the choice to forgive or not to forgive. No other person can force us to do either.



*Without forgiveness, there's no future.*  
— Desmond Tutu

*There is a hard law. When an injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive.*  
— Alan Paton

## What are the steps of forgiving another?

**The experience of forgiveness is a process.** Since each situation is unique, it is impossible to predict how long it will take or which steps will be the most important to carry out. Here are some ideas for beginning the process:

**Acknowledge your feelings of anger and hurt.** Sometimes it seems as if it might be easier to deny the feelings or push them back down, because it hurts to feel them. In the long run, denying these feelings only causes you more pain and actually prolongs the hurt.



**Express your feelings constructively.** No matter how badly you were treated or how angry you are, it is never acceptable to harm anyone else. You may need to find a neutral third party to talk to until you feel calmer toward the person who hurt you.

**Protect yourself.** Depending on the situation, the person who hurt you may still be a danger to you, physically or emotionally. It is important to keep from being harmed again.

**Pay attention to your feelings.** At some point, you will see that you are being harmed by holding onto feelings of hurt and anger. These feelings can take up space in your psyche and intrude on your sense of well-being. You may feel physically ill. This is when you will be ready to make the decision to stop hurting.

**Be willing to see the situation from the other person's point of view.** This will help you develop compassion, which will eventually replace the feelings of anger. One helpful technique is to write a letter to yourself as if you were the other person. Use his or her words to explain the hurtful things that were done to you. This takes you out of the victim role and helps you restore your power.

**Look at yourself.** Think about the part you played in the situation. Don't blame yourself; rather, forgive yourself for the role you played.

**Recall a time when you caused harm to another person, and that person forgave you.** Remember what the guilt felt like. Then, remember what you felt when the other person forgave you. You probably felt grateful and relieved. Remember how this felt, and consider giving this same gift to the person who hurt you.

**Make a list of the actions you need to forgive.** Describe the specific actions that caused you harm. State what happened, as objectively as possible.



**Make a list of the positive aspects of your relationship with the person who hurt you.** There must have been something positive, or you wouldn't have participated in it. This helps you regain some perspective and not paint the picture in completely negative terms.



**Write a letter to the person who harmed you.** This letter is for your healing, and you do not need to mail it. Describe the positive aspects of the relationship and express your forgiveness for the hurtful behaviors. Express all of your feelings, both positive and negative.

**Have a ceremony.** If you have decided to end your relationship with the person you have forgiven, have a ceremony to symbolize it. You may wish to burn the letter and the list, or you may visualize something to symbolize it. You may wish to burn the letter and the list, or you may visualize some kind of ending.

**Forgive yourself.** Sometimes the person you need to forgive is you. You can begin to forgive yourself by realizing that when you made the mistake, you did not set out deliberately to hurt another person.

**Make the forgiveness tangible.** You may choose to send the letter to the person you are forgiving or tell a trusted friend what you have done.



*When you forgive, you in no way change the past  
- but you sure do change the future.*

-Bernard Meltzer

*Life is an adventure in forgiveness.*

-Norman Cousins