

Forgiveness—a Gift to You

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Forgiveness. The word, to say nothing of the concept, has been around a long time. Most people have heard of it; some have embraced it; others have demurred. Either way, confusion continues to abound. This topic of forgiveness is presented in the following sections:

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2. What Forgiveness Is 'Not'
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1 - You Forgive for You

Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself and to the people who love you.
—Edward Hallowell, MD

Have you ever heard someone say, “Why should I forgive? Of what possible benefit would that be to me? Likely just more heart ache . . .”

Think again. Here is the bottom line: **you forgive for you.**

Research has uncovered multiple brain-health benefits related to forgiveness. It also has discovered that the person who does the forgiving benefits the most. Therefore, although this topic covers aspects of research, you forgive for you. Briefly, this represents healthy selfishness. Taking care of you. Yes, those whom you forgive may feel better—if they know or even think they did anything that warrants forgiveness. However, you are the one who benefits the most. Forgiveness is about *you* more than anyone else. Studies have shown clearly:

- The one who is unforgiving ultimately suffers the most
- The one to be forgiven does not need to know or even still be alive
- The one forgiving benefits the most

Whenever we do not forgive others, we are bound to the one who hurt or betrayed us. Forgiveness is releasing another from the debt we believe they owe us. Without forgiveness, both of us would be bound, the maker of the promise in self-righteousness and the receiver in bitterness. —Daniel Tocchini

2 - What Forgiveness Is 'Not'

Forgiveness does not equal forgetting. It is about healing the memory of the harm, not erasing it. —Ken Hart

It can be helpful to define what forgiveness is 'not.' This can offer clarity about what genuine forgiveness actually 'is.' Forgiving does not mean forgetting or pardoning an offense. Therefore, my brain's opinion is that any discussion of forgiveness needs to identify clearly what forgiveness is 'not.' It is not:

- **Condoning injurious behavior; minimizing, justifying, excusing the injury / wrong, or even trying to pretend it did not happen. Perpetrators may say "I'm sorry," (assuming they even believe themselves responsible in any way for what happened). Perpetrators often think that grace means they are immediately granted immunity from personal, professional, or relational fallout from their actions and believe forgiveness entitles them to full reconciliation. Unfortunately, they may pressure their victim to comply. Sometimes they search for an advocate (e.g., teacher, clergy, attorney, judge, family member, close friend) who will serve as a go-between and try to obtain amnesty from the person that was harmed.**
- **Absolving a criminal of his/her crime or the individual for the incident he/she caused. As the old saying goes, "If you do the crime, you do the time." Sometimes parents try to 'protect' a child from adverse financial or other types of negative outcomes. Perhaps a friend will take responsibility for the incident because the actual driver didn't have a current driver's license or was under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Denying the other person's responsibility or taking the credit or the blame for what happened when you did not cause it, is really a form of lying. It can actually 'enable' the individual to repeat a similar type of behavior because, after all, someone else took the responsibility.**
- **Waiving your right to compensation. If someone smashes your car, it is your right to ask for and accept compensation for the damage. If you lease a vehicle and fail to take care of it as outlined in the lease agreement, the company may not throw you in jail but will, in all likelihood, require that you pay appropriate compensation or penalty. Turn-about is fair play. Just letting it all go, sweeping it under the rug, or pretending it never happened does a disservice to both the perpetrator and the victim. If you have been abused, suffered violence, or been the victim of a heinous crime, there needs to be recompense. If the perpetrator or a representative or even a family member or friend says, "Can't you just let it go?" the healthy and functional response would be, "No. To just let it go would be an injustice." Your refusal would have nothing to do with bitterness or vengeance or even unforgiveness.**

Forgiveness doesn't erase what happened or make up for it or even balance the scales. If you have been terribly wronged, recompense may need to be made.

- Choosing to reconcile or remain in an abusive relationship or environment. Forgiveness is not an excuse to remain in an abusive relationship, allowing others to mistreat *You*. Neither is it an excuse to mistreat yourself. When you lease a vehicle, the company typically provides you with manufacturer's guidelines on how to care for the vehicle, along with information about penalties that you will incur if you fail to care for it appropriately and return it in less than optimum condition. Following that lease analogy, you are leased a brain and body to use during your sojourn on this planet, along with the responsibility to care for them in the best way possible. This includes protecting both brain and body from abuse and mistreatment by others or by yourself through an unhealthy lifestyle.
- Inflicting punishment or revengeful actions or exacting retribution for perceived injury as seen in generational vendettas. When you retaliate, vengeance can make one feel "compensated" as in an eye for an eye, but revenge is certainly not forgiveness and does not provide the brain-health benefits received from being forgiving.

3 - Definitions of Forgiveness

It has been said that you can only deal with something effectively when you can label and describe it. Describing something is a type of definition. Therefore, developing your own definition of forgiveness may help you deal with it more effectively. In general forgiveness involves the process of giving up your right for requital from an offender and ceasing to feel resentment against the offender. That all sounds well and good. It is not always easy to do. It may need to happen more than once, as well. When a specific memory of how you were wronged pops up in your brain, you may need to forgive again. Following are examples of definitions.

- Forgiveness involves the process of giving up your right to retaliate toward an offender and ceasing to feel resentment against that offender. —Online Dictionary
- Forgiveness can be defined as the peace and understanding that come from: blaming that which has hurt you LESS, taking the life experience LESS personally, and changing your grievance story. —Dennis A. Marikis, PhD
- Forgiveness is giving up the wish that things could be different. —Valerie Harper
- Forgiveness has everything to do with relieving oneself of the burden of being a victim, letting go of the pain, and transforming oneself from victim to survivor. —C. R. Strahan
- Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude. It means you become less motivated to retaliate against someone who offended you ... and

more motivated by feelings of goodwill, despite the offender's hurtful actions. It doesn't mean forgetting or pardoning an offense. —Everett L. Worthington Jr, PhD

4 – Types of Forgiveness

At least three types of forgiveness are mentioned in the literature. It can be helpful to understand them.

- **Decisional Forgiveness** involves a behavioral intention to resist an unforgiving stance and to respond differently toward a transgressor. According to Everett L. Worthington Jr, PhD, “Decisional forgiveness is an unwavering decision to treat the other as a valuable person and not to pursue harmful responses, such as revenge.” This is helpful. It stops a person from mentally planning revenge even if actual revenge is not a goal. Decisional forgiveness is a choice, and it has health benefits.
- **Emotional Forgiveness** involves the replacement of negative anger and its spinoffs: outrage, resentment, fury, temper tantrums, bitterness, wrath, indignation) with positive other-oriented emotions and feelings. Yes, emotional forgiveness may be more difficult to achieve than decisional forgiveness. Nevertheless, emotional forgiveness involves psychophysiological changes in the brain and body, and it provides more direct health and well-being benefits than does decisional forgiveness.
- **Counterfeit Forgiveness** is crazy-making and unhelpful. On a conscious level you think “I should forgive them, so I do.” At a subconscious level your body not only remembers the abuse but acts out the pain daily. In the familiar fairy tale ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes,’ a false perception existed, to the humor of all. However, like the foolish crowd who cheered for the naked Emperor, a person who practices counterfeit forgiveness pretends that the Emperor actually *is* wearing clothes—pretends that physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual abuse did not occur—or that an excusable reason exists. There is never an excusable reason for abuse. Unfortunately, those assumptions—whether rooted in imagination or denial—could result in serious physical symptoms. In a perfect world, healthy functional parents would take great pains to protect their children and avoid abusing them in any way whatsoever. *Ours is not a perfect world.* To ‘honor’ abusive parents may simply involve acknowledging the position they hold in your generational inheritance and refraining from exhibiting ugly or abusive behaviors toward them. At the same time, moments of contact may need to be limited—or stopped altogether, if abusive behaviors continue. Are you ensnared in the lethal bondage of counterfeit forgiveness? That which is counterfeit is not real. Forgiveness needs to be real. Practice genuine forgiveness—or pay dearly.

Forgiveness, unforgiveness, and counterfeit forgiveness all impact your present health and your future. In fact, your future is each second, each minute, and each hour as they unfold. Therefore, ask yourself regularly, since unforgiveness and counterfeit forgiveness

negatively impact your brain-body health and longevity, can you really afford them? Your answer matters for your health, happiness, and longevity.

You may say, “*No one knows I’m unforgiving.*” Dream on! Your brain and body know.

Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) research, the study of how your thoughts and what you tell yourself impact your brain, immune system, and health, showed that your thoughts, mindset, and self-talk alter neurotransmitter, chemical, and hormonal levels in your brain and body. Every thought you think alters your neurochemistry, changes the chemical composition in your brain and body, which impacts your energy level, and suppresses or strengthens your immune system function. All of that contribute to your level of health and potential longevity.

- Anger – unforgiveness and counterfeit forgiveness involve anger. Anger increases adrenalin levels, which boost dopamine. Anger can be addictive due to this adrenalin-dopamine cycles. Anger and its spinoffs of bitterness, rage, and dramatic rehearsing can lead to addiction.
- Sadness – unforgiveness and counterfeit forgiveness involves sadness. Sadness and negative thinking have been found to decrease levels of serotonin, which can decrease your ability to feel pleasure or happiness.
- Fear - and its spinoffs of anxiety and worry often accompany anger and sadness. Fear that you cannot recover or that the physical symptoms may never resolve or that you will continue to experience abuse can be debilitating.

When forgiveness is offered too quickly, it may not be forgiveness at all. It may just be avoidance. —Dick Tibbits

5 - The Five R’s

There are behaviors that can stand in the way of becoming a forgiving person. Following are what have been termed the five R’s.

1. **Recall.** Individuals regularly recall the hurts they have experienced. They may keep reminders around the house or on their electronic equipment to remind themselves of the “hurt.” It is appropriate to be able to remember when others have done hurtful things to you so you can choose to protect yourself in the future. It is unhelpful to remind yourself on an hourly or daily basis of the hurt. Studies suggest that 50 percent of all the problems individuals perceive in life are of their own making—based on the way they think. Recall as needed, and then let it go.
2. **Ruminate.** There are individuals who ruminate frequently. It is reminiscent of a cow that ‘chews its cud’ for hours on end. The brain can hang onto unpleasant incidents and perceived hurts for a lifetime—creating an enemy outpost in your mind. If you did nothing to trigger it (or even if you did), maintaining an enemy outpost is expensive in

terms of energy. That resource would be better spent on activities that help you grow and become successful. You decide the amount of energy you want to spend ruminating and for what benefit.

3. **Rehearse.** Rehearsal involves repeatedly going over the perceived hurt with anyone who will listen. It is appropriate to verbalize your experience to get it out in front of you and to obtain input from a trusted family member, friend, or counselor. This can provide another perspective—almost like a third person looking in from the outside and describing what it looks like to them. Endless rehearsal just cuts the ruts of hurt more deeply. It can also exhaust those who are trying to be helpful by listening.
4. **Resentment.** Like bitterness, resentment is part of the emotion of anger. Initially, it can motivate you to take appropriate action. Anger tells you that your boundaries have been invaded—it was never meant to do more than alert you and give you energy to review and implement bona fide boundaries as indicated. Held onto, resentment can fester and trigger undesirable physiological changes to both brain and body. Acknowledge the anger (resentment, bitterness), take appropriate action, and let the messenger (anger) go. You have the information. Act on it appropriately. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting; it does mean learning whatever you can from the event and setting or resetting your own boundaries carefully.
5. **Reheat and serve for dinner.** Getting into the habit of regularly reminding others of their mistake can sabotage forgiveness. One man, who had made an unwise financial investment involving a joint savings account with his spouse—and lost the entire amount—asked his spouse for forgiveness and received it. However, every time the man did something that his spouse didn't like, however small, he reported, "My spouse reheats my mistake and serves it for dinner. Again, and again." That does not bode well for any relationship.

6 - Forgiveness and Remembering

You don't have to hold onto the pain to hold onto the memory. —Janet Jackson

The goal of forgiveness is not to erase your memory. If that happened, you would also lose the lessons you learned and the wisdom you gained. Remembering helps you to become wiser, to develop and implement appropriate personal boundaries, and to avoid falling victim to the dysfunctional and abusive behaviors of others. Remembering can also assist you in distinguishing between horrible events that were truly an accident versus those that resulted from premeditated selfishness or evil. Genuine forgiveness allows you to recall what you want or need to remember minus the sting of mental, emotional, sexual, or physical pain. Forgiveness is less about trying to forget and more about how you choose to remember. It is about giving up your right to exact 'an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth' from the person who hurt or wronged you. Sometimes that person is you! It involves scrubbing resentment from working memory. You consciously move from a victim (Poor me! Why me?) mindset to that of a survivor mindset.

Repressing

Real freedom is creative, proactive, and will take me into new territories. I am not free if my freedom is predicated on reacting to my past. —Kenny Loggins

Because it is painful to remember, you may have tried to deny or repress your memories, putting them out of mind or keeping yourself extremely busy in an attempt to forget. It involves trying to hide the memory from your conscious awareness. Memories are alive and well in your subconscious, however, waiting to resurface at any moment, often reactively. Consequences of trying to repress memories may include:

- Expending vast amounts of mental energy trying to block thoughts of the event or situation from conscious awareness.
- Failing to move through the grief recovery process, which can result in the building up of a slush-fund of unresolved grief. When this happens, the most miniscule “loss” can cause the dam to break (metaphorically), allowing all the unresolved emotion to overwhelm you and often triggering an overreaction.
- Forgetting the lessons you learned and the wisdom you gained or failing to create and implement appropriate boundaries. The result is that you become involved in events and situations where you get *hurt* again.
- Developing physical symptoms of illness because the body remembers—and does not lie. The memories that are not dealt with appropriately are often expressed through illness.

Ruminating and Rehearsing

As long as you hate, there will be people to hate. —George Harrison

There are undesirable outcomes related to getting in the habit of ruminating and/or rehearsing all the gory details to others. Consequences may include the following:

- Sensing the intense emotions from ruminating and rehearsing can result in re-experiencing pain—keeping it alive.
- The body is flooded with stress chemicals such as cortisol and adrenalin. As adrenalin levels rise, so do levels of dopamine, which temporarily helps you to feel better. You can even become addicted to the adrenalin and dopamine and trigger their release through ruminating and rehearsing.
- Your mind is kept occupied with the event, situation, or loss, which can keep you stuck in the past. This can derail you from moving on successfully and appropriately.

- You and your listeners can become worn out with the seemingly endless rehearsals, which rarely lead to recovery and resolution.
- A very subjective, intensely personal, and somewhat skewed view of the event or situation is continually reinforced.

Recalling and Releasing

When you hold resentment toward another, you are bound to that person or condition by an emotional link that is stronger than steel. Forgiveness is the only way to dissolve that link and get free. —Catherine Ponder

Using and developing the healthiest way of recalling and remembering ultimately becomes a personal choice that involves practice. Recalling and releasing can allow you to:

- Recall the key facts when it is important to do so. When a thought pops into your mind, you choose whether or not you want to keep thinking about it or change your mental focus. If you need to recall something about the event or situation, you do so—in a somewhat detached manner—more like an observer. You avoid re-experiencing all the emotion, reliving all the gory details, becoming immersed again in the pain, and pumping out cortisol, adrenaline, and dopamine. Results may include the following:
- Recall lessons you learned and new protective boundary strategies without flooding your body with stress chemicals.
- Free your mind to primarily get on with the business of living a successful and productive life rather than ruminating about the past and getting stuck in rehearsal.
- Avoid exhausting yourself and others through endless rumination and rehearsal. When you do need to discuss something about the event or situation, you are able to do so in a more neutral and less emotional manner.
- Reinforce a larger, more objective, and balanced view of the event or situation.

Reframing

For every minute you remain angry, you give up sixty seconds of peace of mind. Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities may have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

Have you ever reframed a so-so painting, only to discover that the artwork now looks quite different, exquisite even? Turn that into a reframing metaphor. Reframing a

painful event or situation can help you view what happened from a new perspective. By moving it (figuratively speaking) from an old frame to a new one, you may view the experience(s) less from the perspective of the pain or hurt and more from the position of it being just one small snapshot in your entire life's album.

You may identify a “gift,” something valuable you learned, or even the glimpse an unseen benefit. Envision different *frames*. Select the frame that creates the perspective that fits best with your desire for health and wellbeing. When you stand back and view the picture in its new (and sometimes larger) frame, ask yourself questions. What do I want for my life? Do I want to be stuck in a frame, living with/rehearsing my grievance on a daily basis? Do I want to be living in a different frame, acknowledging what happened and no longer in bondage to the person(s) who caused me pain?

Forgiveness might be an *old* word. Understanding and practicing it in a healthier, poison-free way, could be the exquisite new frame holding the portrait of the *healthier* you.

The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget. The wise forgive but do not forget. —Thomas Szasz

7 - Forgiving Yourself

The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect he becomes an adolescent. The day he forgives them, he becomes an adult. The day he forgives himself, he becomes wise. —Alden Nowlan

One of the most difficult things to do is to forgive yourself. Counselors have opined that peace is impossible without forgiveness. Have you forgiven yourself for the mistakes you have made, by accident or on purpose? Be clear that self-unforgiveness is like a cancer that has taken over your brain and is growing and growing. The only way to stop its growth is to forgive yourself.

Typically, you treat others like you treat yourself. If you cannot forgive yourself for your mistakes, you will likely be unable to forgive others. The long-term impact of this is that you accumulate a slush-fund of unresolved unforgiveness, and it will hold you back in life. It is a bit like self-talk: you tend to talk to others as you talk to yourself. Therefore, if you need to communicate with others more appropriately, begin with your own self-talk.

The Golden Rule, so called, admonishes people to treat others as they themselves would like to be treated. So, do you forgive others but refuse to forgive yourself? If you forgive others, forgive yourself, too.

In spite of the fact that the law of revenge solves no social problems, men continue to follow its disastrous leading. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path. —Martin Luther King, Jr

**If you haven't forgiven yourself something, how can you forgive others?
—Dolores Huerta**

The freedom to be at peace in our own skins—that's what forgiveness allows. We relinquish this freedom when we hold onto anger and resentment. Enormous amounts of energy are wasted when we hold back our love, hold onto hate, and harbor acrimonious feelings. The only remedy is letting go and being willing to forgive. —Naomi Drew

**We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt and plant forgiveness. Tear out arrogance and seed humility. Exchange love for hate—thereby, making the present comfortable and the future promising.
—Maya Angelou**

When you forgive, you in no way change the past, but you sure do change the future. —Bernard Meltzer

Is it possible to take revenge on oneself? Certainly, it is. You take revenge by failing to take care of yourself through creating and maintaining a longevity lifestyle, and by neglecting the steps and strategies that could help you live a productive and fulfilling life.

Excuses for refusing to forgive yourself

You cannot change the past. You can create a healthier future for yourself. People often make excuses for failing to forgive themselves, if they identify and acknowledge that at all. Refusing to forgive yourself can have profound consequences, including ramifications to succeeding generations. Self-unforgiveness not only causes personal anguish (and sometimes physical or mental illness), but negatively impacts all interpersonal relationships. Reasons for failing to forgive yourself may include the following.

- **Low levels of self-esteem.** Persons may believe that they are 'bad' and 'unworthy' of forgiveness. Many an individual has created their own misery by hanging onto this perspective, and by treating others badly and then saying: 'See? They left because I am unworthy.' Everyone is worthy of forgiveness simply because he or she exists, and because mistakes are part of being human.
- **Fear of repeated mistakes.** There are those who fail to forgive themselves for fear they will forget what they did and make a similar mistake. They will make more mistakes. Period. That's part of being human. They can learn from their experiences, however, and minimize the likelihood of repeating the same mistakes.
- **Lofty expectations of perfection.** Individuals may have excessively lofty expectations related to doing everything perfectly and to avoiding all mistakes. When they do make a mistake and do not meet those often-unrealistic

expectations, they can become full of self-loathing—for which they perceive there is no hope and no forgiveness.

- **An attempt to relieve guilt.** There are also those who think that if they punish themselves for their mistakes this will relieve their sense of guilt. Punishing yourself is a dead-end street. It will not relieve the guilt and it certainly is not forgiveness. Penance or self-flagellation does not set you free from the memories nor does it prevent the consequences that result from your choices. For every action there is a reaction, negative or positive.
- **Need to punish themselves.** Individuals may have a misconception that if they forgive themselves, it will somehow show a lack of sorrow for what happened. This can lead them down a pathway toward sadness that, over time, can turn into chronic depression—which can suppress the immune system and contribute to illness and disease.
- **Personal responsibility.** Failure to take responsibility for your own actions can result in a belief that there is nothing to forgive. On the other side, assuming responsibility for situations things you did not cause and could not have prevented is equally detrimental. Take time to identify your contribution accurately and carefully. Forgive yourself for your contribution only. This can be especially important if a close friend dies in a plane crash, for example, and you purchased the ticket as a gift. Or a friend attempts suicide and you somehow assume that you could have prevented the attempt. If an individual is determined to die, that person likely will find a way to do so, and you likely will not be able to prevent it.

How to get started

You have the power to be miserable the rest of your life. Or, you can say, ‘I’m going to give myself the permission to heal.’ —Phil McGraw, PhD

Your capacity to make peace with another person and with the world depends very much on your capacity to make peace with yourself. —Thich Nhat Hanh

Healing, of course, begins with forgiving yourself. Start doing that now.

- Identify what you did—or think you did or were told you did—for which you cannot forgive yourself.
- Analyze the action or event and take responsibility for only your part. You may even discover that you bear no actual responsibility. It just happened or was an accident.
- Stand back and empathize with the hurt you are experiencing as if you were another person looking at the action or event.

- Give yourself the altruistic gift of forgiveness. This may involve forgiving yourself for taking inappropriate responsibility and wasting time and energy. This includes choosing to stop ruminating, rehearsing, and reliving all the details. When such thoughts arise, choose to think of something else, something for which to be grateful
- Make the choice to regularly forgive yourself, making amends wherever and whenever it is appropriate and possible to do so. Hold onto that choice even when you may feel overwhelmed because of a mistake or perceived failure. You are worth it.

As long as you don't forgive, who and whatever it is will occupy a rent-free space in your mind. —Isabelle Holland

8 – FORGIVENESS CONFUSION

Resentment and unforgiveness are like taking poison and expecting it to kill the other person. —Nelson Mandela

Differing beliefs exist about forgiveness, which have created confusion and puzzlement. Religious writings often contain comments related to forgiveness. Here are two examples:

- Forgive and you will be forgiven. —Luke 6:37
- If you do not forgive (others) their sins, yours will not be forgiven. —Matthew 6:14-15

Note: According to Everett L. Worthington, Jr, PhD, the interpersonal forgiveness being spoken about in Matthew 6:14-15 as a condition for your own forgiveness likely refers to the fact that harboring resentment effectively blocks one's own personal experience of connection with a higher power.

Problems can arise with interpretations of Scriptures that purport to describe how the Deity forgives. For example:

- Hurls your iniquities into the depths of the sea —Micah 7:19
- Forgives ... and remembers your sins no more —Jeremiah 31:34
- Forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases —Psalm 103: 2-3

A misunderstanding of what forgiveness is may contribute to individuals returning to abusive environments, sometimes to their death. This may occur based on a personal misunderstanding or upon the advice of others. Organizations often have their own 'writ,' which encourages a responsibility on the part of adherents to wreak vengeance on any who believe differently. When this happens, there is a clash between vengeance and forgiveness.

How do humans tend to forgive?

Often grudgingly or incompletely or may only embrace decisional forgiveness. Or they

continue to recall the injury, harbor resentment, and rehearse to anyone who will listen or reheat and serve it for dinner.’

Nevertheless, humans *can* forgive. *It is a choice*. Metaphors can be extremely helpful, and the brain tends to like metaphors. Create a metaphor for yourself. Here are couple examples.

- Create a metaphorical cemetery. Use it to bury all the wrongs, injuries, and mistakes that you have forgiven—your own and those of others. Use no headstones so you cannot return and dig up what you forgave and buried.
- If a cemetery metaphor doesn’t work for you, place what you are forgiving on a large leaf or piece of bark and let it float away down the river.

Think of this as changing your grievance story.

You create your own personal perspective, your brain’s opinion, so you can alter it any time you choose to do so. —Dr. Marikis

When we react to other people, we join their dance—and why dance with a person you don’t like? Forgiveness allows you to stand on the side and watch them dance. You don’t have to dance with them if you don’t want to. You can dance the dance you enjoy with whomever you enjoy. —Dick Tibbits

9 - THE FORGIVENESS-HEALTH CONNECTION

Our anger and annoyance are more detrimental to us than the things themselves which anger or annoy us. —Marcus Aurelius

Studies have shown that forgiveness is involved with more than just psychology. Being unable to forgive another person’s faults is harmful to your health. Until quite recently it would have been difficult to find much if any information on the physiology of forgiveness. Few people realized that *forgiveness research* even existed. Although the field is admittedly new, it has grown exponentially over the past decade with more than 1,200 published studies (up from fifty-eight as recently as 1997). An inability or unwillingness to forgive has been linked with a variety of health hazards and negative consequences. In fact, unforgiveness may underlie various problems that individuals grapple with in life.

According to one cleric, his belief at time of ordination was that about half of all problems were due (at least in part) to unforgiveness. Ten years later, he estimated that at least three quarters of all health, marital, family, and financial problems stem from unforgiveness. After more than twenty years in ministry, he concluded that *over 90 percent* of all problems are rooted in issues related to unforgiveness. Studies have revealed the power of forgiveness and its link with health. Counselors have known for a long time that those who refuse to forgive tend to struggle with relationships—but that’s not all. There is a link with health.

There's something called the 'Physiology of Forgiveness' —being unable to forgive other people's faults is harmful to one's health. —Herbert Benson, MD, internationally known cardiologist and researcher

Unforgiveness results in negative outcomes to your health and overall wellbeing. Forgiveness results in positive outcomes to your brain and body along with increased levels of health and overall wellbeing.

Denial is a never-ending river that carries you along in a rush. Be aware. When you are unforgiving, the accompanying anger increases the release of stress hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. As adrenalin levels increase, dopamine release is triggered. Individuals can actually become addicted to their own adrenalin and dopamine that is released by rehearsing dramatically. The accompanying sadness can impact levels of neuropeptides (chemicals that impact mood) and serotonin, which can negatively alter your mood.

Every thought you think (*imagine*) changes the structure of your brain. PET scan studies have shown little if any observable difference in changes to brain imaging print-outs between actual versus virtual experiences.

Your thoughts create mental pictures that the subconscious mind can follow. If you say: "I hate _____ and I refuse to forgive." a representation (mental picture) of whatever *hate* and *unforgiveness* means to you goes into working memory.

On the other hand, say, "Joe, you regret what happened. You choose to forgive _____ for the benefits you receive." In this case, a representation (mental picture) of whatever *forgiveness* means to you goes into working memory. Your choice will impact your brain-body-health and maybe even your longevity.

If you choose unforgiveness, studies have identified negative side effects, including:

- Increased stress levels and muscle tension
- Increased blood pressure and heart rate
- Increased levels of adrenaline and cortisol
- Suppressed immune function
- Increased risk for depression, heart disease, stroke, and cancer
- Decreased neurological function and memory
- Impaired relationships at home and at work.

Fortunately, there is good news. Steven Campbell, PhD, points out that your brain locks onto what you decide to lock onto, which locks out other options. When you say: *I refuse to forgive*, you lock out forgiveness options. When you say: "Janet, you choose to forgive," you lock out *unforgiveness*.

If you choose decisional and emotional forgiveness, studies have shown positive

outcomes, including:

- Healthier relationships
- Lower blood pressure
- Less anxiety, stress, and hostility
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Lower risk of alcohol and/or substance abuse
- Increased compassion, kindness, and peace
- Increased mental, physical, and spiritual health

**One of the secret causes of stress plaguing millions of people is unforgiveness.
—Don Colbert, MD**

10 - Lifesaving Steps

Denial is more than the name of a famous river. —Old Proverb

Step 1: Identify what happened to you

Acknowledge the event or situation simply, clearly, and honestly. Avoid pretending either that the event was no big deal or making more of it than is warranted. Take responsibility for the contribution you made, if any. Never take responsibility for anything you did not contribute. Avoid blaming others in an effort to displace a portion of your discomfort onto someone else. Realize that your goal is to create a future that is better than your past. Start moving from a victim stance to that of a survivor, one day at a time.

A victim stance allows what happened in the past to control your future. A victim mindset burns up norepinephrine (mood and stress), stops emotional growth, and blocks recovery. It involves feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and often a sense of being *special* because you have been injured. You are not special because you've been injured—everyone is damaged because of living in the war zone of planet earth.

A survivor stance allows you to create a healthier future regardless of what happened in the past. Moving into a survivor mindset is a badge of honor—you can:

- Recover
- Grow up emotionally
- Heal wounds from the injury
- Role model a survivor mindset
- Help others appropriately and effectively

Step 2: Outline the actual consequences to you

Life is an adventure in forgiveness. —Norman Cousins

Identify negative outcomes from the event or situation. Separate actual damage from your own hurt feelings. There may be positive outcomes, as well, if you are willing to look for them and be open to that possibility. It is important to have as accurate and balanced a picture as possible.

Mentally step away from the situation and ask yourself how others might view the event. At times it can result in your identifying positive outcomes that you have missed, lessons you have learned, and opportunities that opened up.

Genuine forgiveness acknowledges the consequences and faces the pain. Genuine forgiveness works through the process so that the pain no longer dominates your thinking and no longer triggers anger and thoughts of revenge.

Step 3: Decide to forgive and embrace both Decisional and Emotional forgiveness

Without forgiveness there is no future. —Desmond Tutu

Recognize the value of forgiveness to your life and health. Think of decisional forgiveness as a behavioral intention to resist an unforgiving stance and to respond differently toward a transgressor in your mind. In effect, it removes the enemy outpost in your head. Otherwise, you'll live in the past and be held hostage to the person who caused you pain. Aristotle reportedly said that any person who can make you angry controls you. Forgiveness neutralizes the power of the person in your past and allows you to move forward. This doesn't mean you choose to associate with the person, however. You may choose to be in the same room for short periods of time (e.g., at family gatherings) or not. It is up to you. In the same way, trust must be earned. Forgiving does not mean trusting injudiciously. You may never choose to trust the person again. It is up to you.

Step 4: Embrace emotional forgiveness

**The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.
—Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi**

Think of emotional forgiveness as the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions. Emotional forgiveness, which involves psycho-physiological changes, has more direct health and well-being consequences. If you have been harboring anger and resentment, replace those thoughts and emotions with positive emotions. While it has often been said that love is blind, so is anger. Emotional forgiveness is a process of altering a one-dimensional perspective into a more inclusive big-picture dimension. If you fail to forgive, the person who hurt you still holds you as an emotional captive. Forgiveness doesn't erase what happened or make up for it or even balance the score. It can keep you from spending the rest of your life mentally with the person who did you wrong.

Step 5: Alter your personal perspective

To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to hang onto it. —Oriental Proverb

Your perspective reflects your brain's opinion. It will be as unique as your brain is unique—there isn't another on the planet exactly like yours. Forgiveness doesn't change what happened. Rather, it is designed to help you alter your perspective. It's the old 20:80 rule. Only 20 percent of the negative effect to your brain and body can be laid at the door of the event or situation. About 80 percent of the negative effect involves your personal perspective, i.e., the weight you give to what happened and the importance you place upon it. You may not be able to do anything about the 20 percent; you most certainly can do almost everything about the 80 percent because it involves your own brain's opinion, and you can alter your opinion. Use whatever works in your life to help you to expand and reframe your personal perspective.

Step 6: Stop ruminating and rehearsing

If you repeat your negative memories in your mind and feel self-pity, then YOU are both the abuser and the victim - not those who wronged you in the past. Your present and future will be happier if you take control of your thoughts.

—Maddy Malhotra

When you ruminate you tell your story to yourself over and over. When you rehearse, you tell your story to others repeatedly from your own perspective. Usually you include only the bad, sad, angry, and hurtful aspects. In the process, you may trigger the release of adrenalin (receiving a momentary shot of energy) and, as adrenalin levels increase, so do dopamine levels, which help you feel better for a brief period of time. The human brain can become addicted to the adrenalin and dopamine released during rehearsal.

In addition, because the brain wants congruence, while you are rehearsing, your brain will search for other memories involving times when you felt the same way: sad, angry, or hurt. This can begin to snowball until you really feel quite rotten.

In general, the female brain needs to process verbally and talk about what happened, get the story out in front to view. One woman said that she didn't know what she thought until she verbalized it aloud. If this is your style, you may need to tell your story a time or two. You can walk around the house and talk aloud. It's easy to get caught in the trap of rehearsing, however, so set a limit that works for your brain. Asking for feedback and listening to another perspective can often help with the process of reframing.

Typically, the male brain tends to process silently and internally, preferring to arrive at a conclusion before it talks about what happened to others. If this is your style, set a limit on internal processing that works for you and then find a trusted friend or counselor to whom you can state your conclusion. Asking for feedback and listening

to another perspective may help with the reframing process.

Most award-winning performances require a great deal of rehearsal. Unless you are planning to take your story of injury on the road, stop rehearsing. Instead, spend the time you would have devoted to ruminating and rehearsing the injury on implementing the next step; step seven.

Step 7: Develop a perpetual mindset of gratitude

Forgiveness is not an act; it is a perpetual attitude. —Martin Luther King, Jr.

You *can* choose to create a forgiveness mindset and hone the requisite skills to change your thoughts from negative to positive. A positive mindset helps the neurons of both brain and body create positive electromagnetic energy. When you do recall the event, quickly focus on something for which to be grateful. It is physiologically impossible to be fearful and grateful at the same time. When an old memory crosses your conscious mind, you may need to take a moment and move through decisional and emotional forgiveness again. Then, embrace an attitude of gratitude.

He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not but rejoices for those which he has. —Epictetus, Greek Philosopher

If gratitude is not something you learned growing up, build it into your adult mindset. Choose, first thing in the morning, to think of one thing for which you are grateful. You might go through the same process at night, just before you fall asleep. If you have difficulty getting started or get stuck trying to think of something for which to be grateful, identify something small and rather ordinary, such as: “(your name) _____, you are grateful for your comfortable shoes. Not everyone even has shoes.” Keep this up and you will have developed the attitude of gratitude before you know it!

Every human being goes through times of discouragement. Working through forgiveness for a particularly egregious injury may be one of those times. If you are fortunate, a close friend may reach out to encourage you. Each person can be forever grateful to friends who have shared their spark. Part of gratitude may encompass looking for ways to share your spark with others—a way of passing thanks forward.

At times, our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us. —Albert Schweitzer

11 - VICARIOUS ABUSE

Studies have indicated that when a person witnesses abuse or evil actions, mirror neurons behind the forehead fire as if what is being observed is happening to you. The brain absorbs the abuse or evil vicariously. This points out how critical it is to avoid watching abuse and evil actions on multi-media sources.

You may say, “Well, it didn’t happen to me. I just watched it or heard about it. Who do I need to forgive?”

Studies have shown that when you watch another person being abused, mirror neurons in your brain experiences that vicariously, as if it were happening to you. In any situations where a person is person is abused mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, socially, sexually, or you name it, the effect to their brain and body of the observer is similar to that of the “target individual.”

If you had no choice but to close your eyes and ears, there may be nothing for you personally to forgive. In that case, it will likely be less about forgiveness and more about simply acknowledging that “it was what it was” or “it is what it is.” You didn’t cause it. However, you can choose to consciously think about happier and positive things and not rehearse in your own mind what happened.

On the other hand, if you have been choosing to watch negative behaviors electronically, you may need to forgive yourself for subjecting your brain and body to the observations and avoid watching such behaviors in the future. For every action there is a reaction. A desirable goal is to choose actions and behaviors that result in positive, rather than negative consequences, to your mind and body.

12 - ERRONEOUS EXPECTATIONS

Expectations are part of being human. There are genuine and helpful expectations as well as those that are erroneous and unhelpful. You have expectations for yourself, appropriate or unrealistic. You also have them for others—often unhelpful because you cannot control another’s choices or behaviors. Expectations often raise their head in the area of forgiveness.

First, when you forgive someone, that does not necessarily mean that you continue to want them in your life—or that it would even be safe to do so. If you do want them in your life, then carefully evaluate when, how much, and under what circumstances. If you do not, then carefully plan how you will separate. You may need to tell them, “I need some space, and I’ll let you know when I’m ready to spend time with you again. Then we’ll see where we both are and negotiate what works for both of us.

What is they do not want you in their life? Grant them the right to select who they want to spend time with and who they don’t—even as you make similar decisions for yourself. It may have nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. You cannot force someone to like you, to love you, or even to want to be with you. You are the only person who will be with you for your entire life so if you forgive yourself or if you refuse to do so, you are still with “you.”

Unrealistic expectations have sunk relationships and burned bridges that could never be repaired or rebuilt. Ordinarily if a human being appears healthy on the outside, it is typical

to “expect” them to behavior like a healthy person. If, however, you see someone on crutches or in a wheelchair, the brain tends to automatically readjust any expectations you might have had for that individual. The problem arises when the individual is unhealthy on the inside, but you cannot “see” this in the way you would if the person were on crutches or in a wheelchair. Consequently, your brain likely does not adjust expectations—and because they are damaged, you may be “hurt” when they do not meet your expectations.

According to global estimates, anxiety is the number one mental illness on the planet, followed closely by depression. You may not be able to “see” this internal unhealthiness. It may be evidenced in behaviors that you experience as “hurt.” What types of behaviors might give you a clue about internal damage?

- Signs of anger, bitterness, or resentment
- Unkind or ugly remarks in person or electronically
- A tendency to distance from you
- Triangling—passing along messages through a third person or manipulating a relationship between two parties by controlling communication between them
- Threats—if you do this then I will do that

Develop a “visual metaphor” to help you alter your expectations as needed. For example, when dealing with a person who is unpredictable or who has exhibited hurtful behaviors, picture them with a blood-stained bandage around their head. That can remind you that they may not be thinking clearly—perhaps they are downshifted or profoundly angry or depressed. Mental conditions can and do alter brain function. If you know that a person has experienced a loss, picture a blood-stained bandage over their heart. This can help you recognize that their behaviors reflect their level of pain and dysfunction. You can alter your expectations and set your boundaries accordingly.

13 - EMBRACING FORGIVENESS

When you say, ‘I forgive you,’ you’re also saying, ‘I want to be healthy.’ The act of forgiving allows the body to turn down the manufacture of catabolic (stress-related) chemicals and instructs the subconscious to banish negative feelings from the mind. —Doctors Arnold Fox and Barry Fox , *Wake Up! You’re Alive!*

Here are reasons for embracing forgiveness:

- It’s the right thing to do since all humans make mistakes.
- To receive forgiveness. You often receive back what you send forth.
- To preserve your health.
- To avoid wasting energy and to keep your energy levels positive.
- Because you benefit the most (a form of healthy selfishness).

**Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.
—Mark Twain**

Anger and unforgiveness are hungry parasites that gorge until there is nothing left for the brain or heart to eat. —Arlene R. Taylor, PhD

Caveat: Studies suggest that the brain is innately spiritual but may not be innately religious. Affiliation with religion, at least in adulthood, represents a choice. Typically, individuals who are very spiritual tend to forgive at both decisional and emotional levels. Those who are rigid in their religious views but are not very spiritual, tend to be less forgiving and more critical, judgmental, and vindictive. Examples of situations abound down through the centuries. They include at least the crusades, Middle-Ages persecution, racial or religious conflicts, Israeli-Palestinian wars, Iraq-Iran issues, India-Pakistan problems, and others.

**To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner is you.
—Lewis B. Smedes**

“But I don’t feel like forgiving,” you may say. Everett L. Worthington Jr, PhD, devised a five-step program known as **REACH** to help people learn to forgive.

Step 1: Recall the hurt objectively, without blame and self-victimization. Step away mentally, outside of yourself, and imagine how a third person, uninvolved in the event and looking on, might perceive it

Step 2: Empathize by trying to imagine the viewpoint of the person who wronged you. It may give you a new perspective and help you see the big picture.

Step 3: Altruistically think about a time you were forgiven and how that felt. Choose to give that gift to others whether they know about it or not. Your brain and body will know.

Step 4: Commit to forgiving, doing both Decisional and Emotional forgiveness.

Step 5: Hold tight to forgiveness and forgive, as necessary.

Do you need to forgive yourself for something? Is there someone in your life you need to forgive? How healthy do you want to be?

Forgiveness is a choice, a gift you give you. It may be the quintessential example of healthy self-care. The path to genuine forgiveness is rarely easy. It is, however, a prescription for health. Yours.

The willingness to forgive is a sign of spiritual and emotional maturity. It is one of the great virtues to which all should aspire. Imagine a world filled with individuals willing both to apologize and to accept an apology. Is there any problem that could not be solved among people who possessed the humility and largeness of spirit and soul to do either or both when needed? —Gordon B. Hinckley

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