

# FORGIVENESS: PART I



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**F**orgiveness is an action that requires our will, both on the side of the forgiven and from the perspective of the offended. It is interpreted in many ways by people and cultures, and it is explained at length in all religious scriptures. Hundreds of self-help books address the subject. It's impossible for me to fully address the wonderful complexities of forgiveness in an article, but I am offering some food for thought.

We must understand what forgiving others is not. It is not the act of suppressing the hurt, or minimizing and forgetting the offense. It doesn't mean that there is nothing further to work out in the relationship. It doesn't mean that you have to continue the relationship. It is not a sign of weakness and surrender. The act of forgiving doesn't mean you're saying that everything is okay. Interestingly enough, it is not something you do for the other person; it is something you do for yourself. It is worth noting that one should not 'conjure up' forgiveness, unless there has been an exploration and full expression of the feelings that deep hurts, abuse, or violence has left behind. Forgiveness doesn't mean there is no need for justice.

**Benefits of forgiveness:** Forgiveness towards a person we no longer want a relationship with, means that we can move forward without the lingering anger and resentment that live rent-free in our minds and that snuff out our happiness. In a committed, loving relationship, forgiveness is an integral component that can lead to a lasting, healthy union. Research shows there is a significant connection between forgiveness and spiritual, physical, and mental health. In general, forgiveness allows victims to move forward so they can live the life they were meant to live. This benefit is demonstrated in experiencing a positive disposition, reduced stress/anxiety, and ultimately less depression. A recent study showed a link between hostility, resentment, and stress, with people who also held unforgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't always about saying "I forgive you," followed by hugs and kisses. That's because emotional hurts run deep. When the one who loves you, hurts you, it may leave you feeling that your feelings don't matter. If your feelings don't matter, then you must not really matter. This leads you to feeling disrespected, devalued, or unloved. Through the journey of forgiveness, which is about processing your emotional trauma, you can find inner healing and personal growth. You may learn to have better boundaries, or understand how you can get your needs met more successfully. Maybe you can improve how you honor and take care of yourself, or have a voice in your relationship. You may identify that you could improve on your communication skills that lead to better resolutions and less damage. The forgiveness journey is about your 'internal' work and growth, and not so much about the offender.

**Forgiving yourself:** This is a tough one, depending on the severity of the matter. How do you forgive yourself for injuring or killing someone because you drove while intoxicated? How do you forgive yourself for cheating or lying or being mean? What if the person you offended has now passed, and you can't reconcile anything? In our society, bad actions are punishable. That's why criminals can have lingering guilt and shame over the crimes they got away with, not the ones they were punished for. As a marriage and family therapist, I find that self-forgiveness, is a struggle for clients who have committed seemingly unforgivable things, as well as those who have made small mistakes. Regardless of the transgression, there is one thing in common: we are all human, we transgress, and we deserve to work through our self-forgiveness.



A stumbling block in self-forgiveness is that your egregious action is tied-up with a negative belief about yourself. For example, you may believe, "I am a horrible person.", "I wasn't a good parent to my children.", "I am not good enough.", or "If people really knew me, they wouldn't find me lovable."... etc. Disturbing, emotional experiences are stored in the brain differently than other experiences in life. They are stored with images of the experience, negative feelings and beliefs about yourself. Studies show that our bodies even keep the score of emotional/physical traumas and can manifest as illnesses. If you have lived with regret for a long time, the transgression may have become a part of your identity. Secretly, that is how you think of yourself. Maybe it's time you practice intentional self-forgiveness.

**Start the journey of forgiveness and see where it goes.** The first step is to acknowledge and process your emotions. Make your thoughts and feelings more concrete by writing them down. This action often serves as a documentation of either, the painful experience you lived, or the hurt you inflicted on someone else. On one side of a page, write down the negative beliefs about yourself that have emerged over time. This can help you understand how your inner critic sabotages your life. On the other side, write the positive beliefs you prefer to believe about yourself, even though they may not seem so true right now. At the bottom of the page, get very clear about what you want to accomplish. In therapy, we know that in order to make a change, we must interrupt the pattern. Identify the negative destructive patterns that don't serve you anymore.

At any time, when it seems too overwhelming, visualize those thoughts and feelings going into a locked container. Tell yourself that you are locking them up until you're ready to deal with them again. Come back to the process when you're ready to do so. It takes time, patience and directed action on your part to get to the place of forgiving someone or yourself. If you're struggling too much with the process, you may benefit from talking to a therapist. You can experience how freeing forgiveness can be.

The topic of forgiveness is the size of Lake Tahoe, and this article is just a tea cup. As we interact with each other, it is inevitable that we can irritate each other, offend and cause hurt. Each of us, our families, and our communities have much to learn about fostering forgiveness and cooperation, especially in times like these. Some of us have been fortunate to have someone in life to model a forgiving disposition. Our world has experienced those unusual political and spiritual figures who have demonstrated the loveliness of grace and forgiveness in action. By forgiveness, we are held together. Next month, I will continue to expand on this essential and life-giving virtue, as it pertains to loving partnerships.