

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Why do we need to forgive?

No one escapes the pain of frustration, disappointment, betrayal, or conflict in loving relationships. It's hard living together. At some point, we need to forgive in order to re-establish peace and continue living with one another. As a therapist, I find forgiveness to be a necessary part of the process of psychological healing for everyone I see. Successful therapy entails a reduction of bitterness, resentment, and blame. Forgiving ourselves and those who have been hurtful to us are important in moving toward personal responsibility and getting rid of illusions of human perfection.



How do we know there is something we need to forgive?

We perceive we have been treated unjustly. Our pride may have been hurt, there may have been an unfair assault, or another may have violated a basic principle of justice or fairness. It is not necessary that the offending party actually intends to do harm.

How do we respond to unjust treatment?

There are only two responses to psychological injury: 1) blame (Someone made me do it or it's someone else's fault; or 2) forgiveness. The typical response is to be angry and blaming, to feel helpless, to engage in recrimination, to have thoughts of revenge. We want the wrongdoer to understand that our welfare or rights can't be disregarded without consequence. This response gives us the sense that we are not helpless in the face of what has happened to us.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness has been defined as a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward someone who has unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward the other. Forgiveness is volitional, not obligatory, and the new stance created toward the other includes affect (overcoming resentment and substituting compassion), cognition (overcoming condemnation with respect and/or generosity), and behavior (overcoming

indifference or even the tendency toward subtle revenge with a sense of goodwill). In essence, forgiveness wipes away the negative consequences of the offender's injustice and is a merciful reaching-out to the offender. When we forgive, we take responsibility for the impact of what has happened on us and refuse to be victimized. We refuse to take the consequences of what happened. We open up the possibility that the relationship can return to the original blueprint that we had for the relationship and the original respect and compassion we showed to each other. It allows for a future that is not determined by the past—we are freed to imagine and move to new possibilities.

Does forgiveness keep people from taking responsibility for hurtful behavior?

Forgiveness is not about tolerating injustice. It is not “putting the past behind us.” It is not condoning or excusing wrong-doing. It is more than ceasing our anger or taking a neutral stance toward the injurer. We must make room in our hearts and lives for the offender. Forgiveness includes gift-like positive qualities of compassion and mercy toward another. It comes from a sense of justice. We see the wrongdoing, but nonetheless, we offer compassion and generosity.

Is forgiveness the same as reconciliation?

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness is a response to injury. Reconciliation is about two people coming together again. In order for reconciliation to occur, the injurer must realize the offense, see the damage done, and take steps to rectify the problem. If both are guilty of injustices toward each other, both need to forgive, realize their failures and make a commitment to change. If the situation is one of chronic abuse or the injurer is deceased, reconciliation may not occur. Reconciliation cannot occur unless there is a commitment to positive change on the part of the injurer. It also cannot occur if the forgiver does not give up the right to resentment and negative judgment. If we forgive and then continually remind the other of their injury to us, we are exercising superiority, a stance incompatible with forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a ploy to maintain or gain power over another. When we forgive, we welcome the other as a fellow human being who is worthy of our respect, not our criticism.

How important is self-forgiveness?

In order for forgiveness to occur, we must understand that we are all in need of forgiveness. It is part of the human condition. It is important for each of us to experience some kind of loving acceptance from others, especially for parts of ourselves we find disturbing—anger, hatred, inadequacy, mistakes, ignorance, hurtfulness, alienation, irresponsibility. Forgiveness takes place in the context of a loving relationship with others. Reconciliation occurs when we can acknowledge and embrace our own fallibility and genuinely desire to be brought back into relationship with others. By forgiving and being forgiven, we take our place in the human community. Forgiveness maintains the integrity of this community and calls us to confront our own failings and be merciful to others. WWII General George Patton once said, “Forgiveness is discovering something—that I am more like those who hurt me than I am different from them.”

What happens if we don't forgive?

We remain captive to the past and therefore incapable of focusing on the present and the future. In addition, the refusal to forgive can result in physical symptoms. Toting around emotional baggage can take its toll on one's body, and recent studies suggest that forgiving can ease the psychological strain.

1. Cortisol—People who are less forgiving have elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Over time high cortisol levels have a negative effect on the body.
2. Cardiovascular system—when subjects were asked to think of a person who had hurt them and then think of them in forgiving and unforgiving ways, blood pressure was significantly higher when they focused on unforgiving responses.
3. Forgiving people have been reported to have fewer illnesses and use less medication than those who don't forgive.
4. Forgiveness techniques have been found to lower symptoms of stress such as backache, neckache, and dizziness and increases the experience of physical vitality.

The implication of all this is that if individuals hold on to unforgiveness in a chronic way, it will have the same bad effect that holding on to any kind of chronic stressor has—cardiovascular risks and immune system problems. Psychological benefits are distinctive as well—forgivers become less depressed, less anxious, more hopeful, more grateful, and report higher self-esteem than those who did not.