

Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time



Finding forgiveness — Learning to let go

Nearly everyone has been hurt by the actions or words of another. These wounds can leave us with lasting feelings of anger and bitterness that prevent us from forgiving and moving on. It is important to forgive when we have been hurt — even if we weren't the ones that caused the conflict. Forgiveness is an important part of the healing process.

Generally speaking, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. When we forgive, we let go of these and other negative emotions that block the healing process. Letting go of these emotions does not necessarily mean that we forget who or what it was that caused us to hurt. Instead, finding forgiveness helps us to focus less on the hurt, and more on the other positive parts of our lives.

To forgive also doesn't mean that we deny the other person's responsibility for hurting us, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. We can forgive without excusing the act. Once we have been hurt and we do not heal properly, those who have hurt us have a certain power over our emotions. When we forgive, we take away that power. This improves our own emotional and physical health, as well as our relationships with others. The benefits of finding forgiveness are well-documented. Some are listed below.

BENEFITS OF FINDING FORGIVENESS

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Researchers at the *University of Tennessee* found that harbouring anger and resentment tends to increase blood pressure. Forgiving seems to decrease blood pressure and have overall cardiovascular benefits.
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Research from the *Stanford University Forgiveness Project* suggests that forgiveness skills can be learned. Individuals who took part were trained in specific forgiveness and coping techniques. Those who took the training had decreased levels of stress and increased levels of optimism.
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As written in *Psychological Science*, investigators at *Hope College* in Michigan conducted a study suggesting that a sustained pattern of unforgiving over time could result in poorer health because of the negative physical and emotional states that accompany the reluctance to forgive.
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A study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that forgiveness not only restores positive thoughts, feelings and behaviours toward the offending party, but the benefits of forgiveness spill over to positive behaviours toward others outside of the relationship. Forgiveness is associated with more volunteerism, donating to charity and other altruistic behaviour.

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. Actually forgiving someone requires that we reflect on the facts of the situation, how we've reacted, and how this combination has affected us. It is also important to recognize the value of forgiveness and its importance in our lives.

When we are ready, we may actively choose to forgive the person who has hurt or offended us, even if it wasn't a result of something we said, or did. Moving away from our role as the victim releases the control the offending person, and the situation, has had in our lives. As we let go of grudges, we no longer define our lives by how we've been hurt. We may even find compassion, understanding and closure as a result.

Below are some things to keep in mind when forgiving someone who has hurt or offended you.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ✔ **Forgiveness can be challenging.** It may be particularly hard to forgive someone who doesn't admit they are wrong or doesn't say they are sorry. If you find yourself stuck, it may help to write in a journal, or use guided meditation (a meditation session conducted with verbal instruction from a teacher). You may also want to talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, an unbiased family member or a friend.
- ✔ **If the hurtful event involved someone whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness may lead to reconciliation.** However, this isn't always the case. Reconciliation may be impossible if the offender has died or is unwilling to communicate with you. In other cases, reconciliation may or may not be appropriate, especially if the event that caused harm was an attack or assault. But even in those cases, forgiveness is still possible — even if reconciliation isn't.
- ✔ **If you haven't reached a state of forgiveness, being near the person who hurt you may be tense and stressful.** To handle these situations, remember that you can choose whether or not to attend specific functions and gatherings. Respect yourself and do what seems best. If you choose to attend, don't be surprised by a certain amount of awkwardness and perhaps even more intense feelings. You may find that the function or gathering helps you to move forward with forgiveness.
- ✔ **Getting another person to change his or her actions, behaviour or words isn't the goal of finding forgiveness.** Finding forgiveness is not about how you can change the actions or lives of others. Think of it as being more about how it can change your life — by bringing you more peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing.

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