

## ***Forgiveness: Practice and Process***



"Without forgiveness life is governed by...an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation."

~Roberto Assagioli

Sometimes the actions of another take on a personal meaning, an affront to one's sense of what is right. It is not unusual to start thinking in more primitive ways - along the lines of "don't tread on me". After such a perceived insult, you might notice thoughts like "I'm going to teach him a lesson," or "I won't let her get away with this." On the other side of this interaction, if you have impacted someone badly, whether wittingly or not, it is possible to get swept up in justifications and self-righteousness (often forms of entitlement) - "She's not the boss of me" or "After all I've done for this family, he shouldn't mind me doing something for myself".

Once the internal (or external) dust settles, we are faced with the bigger picture - that we want to deal with others more skillfully, that this relationship is too important to get stuck in divisive thinking, that there are others involved. In this reality of interdependence and interconnectedness, we may reach for forgiveness. But what does forgiveness really mean - "turn the other cheek," "let it go," "forgive and forget" - what if it's not so simple as that? Or you try this approach, yet feelings of resentment and anger linger anyway.

Due to its historical contribution to American culture and also relevance for those brought up with religion, let's acknowledge the influence of Christian definitions. In the bible, forgiveness is portrayed as a choice by personal will to defer to God and release the wrongdoer from the wrong, having faith that God will deal with the injustice. Forgiving other people is a condition of receiving forgiveness from the Lord: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Matthew 6:14-16." This may be appealing - to decide to forgive, and it may even be possible at times. Yet, what

about times when the repercussions are too involved and it is not that cut and dried? Or it does not feel authentic?

Therapeutic definitions of forgiveness add in skill, understanding, relationship repair and ongoing process along with this intention or choice to forgive. For example:

- Forgiveness involves a dialog either with an internal figure or the actual person (not solely your conscience or higher power) - reflecting the interpersonal dimension and impact of experiencing harm or hurt involving another.
- It is not about releasing the wrongdoer from consequences (though that may happen) as much as moving on emotionally - digesting the experience with understanding and compassion toward your own suffering and that of the other person.
- It often involves a dialog between parties that may extend over time and aims for learning about underlying motivation (e.g. emotional needs, differing dreams for life), skillful communication, and articulating implicit assumptions about values, relationships, and behavior.
- The dialog aims toward common ground and agreement about how things will change or differ going forward, including individual refinement of how to navigate this situation or relationship. We need to understand and forgive ourselves when we make a mistake or play a part in someone harming us.
- If common ground and safety are not possible, forgiveness may involve letting go of hurt feelings and moving on from the relationship.

For example, I have met with couples where one person spent significant money on a personal purchase (e.g. vehicle or clothes) without consulting their partner and then that money is not available for a child's education costs or a shared vacation they have talked about. As you may imagine, there can be significant emotional needs on both sides of this issue: for autonomy to go after what one wants or for security to inter-depend on a partner for support with shared goals. How will this couple deal with the repercussions in their lives and relationship? How can they work together, rather than getting stuck in a cycle of attack-defend? Can feelings of regret and compassion help to find a path forward that mends the rupture?



These situations call for a sensitive and nuanced dialog, rather than an abstract (general or impersonal) exchange of ideas and positions. It is helpful if the one who created the rupture can apologize out of genuine learning from their mistake - not that they are a bad or wrong person, but maybe can see they did not approach the decision well or communicate effectively. Can we ask for forgiveness without feeling entitled - "well, I stuck my neck out so you owe it to me to forgive" - it may take awhile or may not happen that our partner's feelings change. It is still helpful to ask. On the other hand when asked for forgiveness, can you take steps towards sharing your feelings and expectations going forward - to be assertive and willing to move forward? Will you allow the other person to see how you have been hurt, and give them the opportunity to show that they care?

If this sounds challenging - an investment of scarce time and energy - consider that forgiveness is a significant part of happy relationships and marriages. For example, in a study of more than 7,000 married couples by psychologist Kristin Mouttet utilizing Dr. David Olson's couples typology, 87% of couples considered highest in satisfaction and predicted longevity had high scores in forgiveness. On the other hand, less than 1% in the lowest category of relationship satisfaction reported a healthy capacity to forgive and move forward. In other words, forgiveness is a necessary skill for building close, happy long-term relationships, and our family of origin experience may limit our knowledge of the available response options.

When someone grows up in a family that is authoritarian - inflexible about roles and who is in charge - it may be difficult handling disagreements in adult relationships. Do you think things should be handled the same way they were in your childhood family? Was power shared and did leadership roles rotate? On the other hand, someone who grows up in a chaotic family that has difficulty making decisions or taking action, there may be too little attention to ruptures and this passivity can invite dominant patterns from others - *someone* has to decide! If any of this sounds familiar, think about what you want to carry on from your childhood family and what you want to avoid repeating. Consider embracing the dialog and aiming for both you and your partner, family member, or friend to feel good about *how* you talk rather than aiming for a particular outcome.

This goes for internal dialog as well - can I learn from my mistakes? Can I understand what I was thinking, feeling, and needing that made me approach that situation the way I did? Knowing what I know now, how do I wish I had handled it differently? Understanding and compassionate inner dialog goes along way towards self-forgiveness. Many decide that the process of forgiveness and the release from hurt or angry feelings is worth care and time taken to work it through.

For those wanting further practice, take a look at the chapter on compassion in [Self-Esteem](#) by Matt McKay. This chapter lays out an 8-step practice to develop compassion as a skill (rather than an immutable trait). For a couples dialog, visit [Prepare-Enrich](#) for 6-steps toward seeking and granting forgiveness.

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How did your childhood family deal with conflict? Were ruptures acknowledged and repaired? What helps you open up to ask or grant forgiveness?

Dr. Melinda Douglass is a clinical psychologist and relationship specialist in San Francisco, CA, and a trained couples counselor. Please call at (415) 215-4796 or visit her web site at [www.drmelindadouglass.com](http://www.drmelindadouglass.com).

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