

Mental Notes

A Monthly Newsletter

Volume 3, Issue 6, June 2009

Forgiveness: How (and Why) to Let Go of Past Hurts

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A Common Problem

Everyone, at some point in their lives, feels hurt by the actions of others. Hurtful actions take many forms: infidelity, betrayal, dishonesty, theft. When these kinds of actions happen to us, it is natural to feel hurt and angry. The problem comes when hurt feelings harden, turning into resentments, grudges, and hate. When this happens, we perpetuate the original wound by keeping it alive.

Did you know that forgiveness affects the body? Some research suggests that people who learn to forgive evidence lower rates of depression, less stress, lower incidences of cardiovascular disease, lower blood pressure, lower muscle tension, and higher immune response.

Although it might seem difficult, even people who have suffered devastating losses can learn to forgive. However, there are many misconceptions about the nature of forgiveness.

What forgiveness is NOT

Forgiveness is *not* forgetting or pretending the harm did not happen. The lessons you draw from the painful event are an important part of your future life. Forgiveness is *not* excusing or condoning the behavior. In fact, a behavior that can be easily excused is probably one that does not need to be forgiven. Forgiveness is *not* (necessarily) reconciliation. You can forgive someone without needing to reconcile your relationship with them. Forgiveness is *not* giving permission to continue the behavior. Forgiveness cannot occur unless you are safe from future harm.

What forgiveness IS

Forgiveness is a choice. No one can tell you whether or not to forgive. Forgiveness is a process. It takes time. Forgiveness is letting go of bitterness, resentment, and an obsession with the injury. Forgiveness is letting

go of revenge and the need to punish. This means choosing to live in an atmosphere of solutions rather than blame.

I want to forgive, but I don't know how!

Forgiveness is an important goal, but it need not be rushed. A person should not forgive until he or she feels ready. Forgiveness is also not an "all or nothing" process. A person can take steps toward reducing anger even while refusing to completely forgive the offense that has caused so much anguish.

Psychologist Janis Abrahms Spring writes that there are four kinds of forgiveness: cheap forgiveness, refusing to forgive, acceptance and genuine forgiveness. The first two are unhealthy and damaging to the victim; the last two are productive and lead to enhanced well-being.

Cheap Forgiveness

Cheap forgiveness is forgiveness that is premature, superficial, and undeserved. This happens when the victim rushes to forgive the perpetrator before processing the pain involved.

Refusing to Forgive

Not forgiving can make you feel powerful and in control, but it is a reactive, rigid, and compulsive response that ends up hurting the victim more than the perpetrator. People often refuse to forgive because they feel a continuing need to punish the offender.

Acceptance

Acceptance is a responsible, authentic response to injury when the offending party cannot or will not apologize for the offense. Acceptance allows the victim to let go of poisonous, stuck emotions and to see the situation with clarity. However, acceptance asks nothing of the offender. It allows the victim to choose whether or not to have a good relationship, an imperfect relationship, or no relationship with the offender. Most of all, acceptance provides necessary emotional resolution for the victim.

Genuine Forgiveness

Genuine forgiveness happens when both the offender and the victim do the difficult work that's required for renewal of the relationship. This is a two-party transaction, in which the offender recognizes the harm he or she has done and works to earn the forgiveness of the victim. This is often the most satisfying form of forgiveness, but it is not always possible.

References

- Glass, S. P. & Staeheli, J. C. (2004). *Not just friends: Rebuilding trust and recovering your sanity after infidelity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Luskin, F. (2003). *Forgive for Good*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
- Spring, J. A. (2004). *How can I forgive you?* New York: Harper Collins.

RELAXATION SESSIONS

Wound Up?
Stressed Out?
Muscles Tense?

Relaxation Sessions incorporate progressive muscle relaxation and guided imagery as means of reducing stress and promoting better mental & physical health.

June 4 & 18
July 23 & 30
August 6 & 20

Time: 3:00 - 3:50PM
Location: Kirschman Hall 401

Relaxation Sessions are FREE and open to students, faculty and staff.

For disability-related accommodations for these events, please contact Adrian Péré in Counseling Services at 280-6683.