

HOW TO FORGIVE

Forgiveness can set you free

By Victor M. Parachin

As poet Edwin Markham approached retirement, he discovered that the man to whom he had entrusted his financial portfolio had squandered all the money. Markham's dream of a comfortable retirement vanished. He began to brood over the injustice and loss. His anger deepened, and his bitterness grew by leaps and bounds. One day, Markham found himself drawing circles on paper as he tried to soothe the turmoil within. Finally, he concluded: "I must forgive him, and I will forgive him." Looking at the circles he had drawn before him, Markham wrote: He drew a circle to shut me out, heretic, rebel; a thing to flout; but love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle to take him in. Although Markham wrote hundreds of poems, the words he wrote while forgiving are his most popular and memorable. As he forgave, a tremendous act of creativity was released within Markham. Many have declared that the act of forgiveness releases great healing power. Author Charles Fillmore recommends forgiveness as the most effective way of restoring inner harmony and balance: "There is a mental treatment guaranteed to cure every ill that flesh is heir to: Sit for half an hour every night and forgive everyone against whom you have any ill will or antipathy," he wrote.

While forgiveness has always been an important concept in religion and ethics, only recently have psychologists begun to discover its powers as a psychotherapeutic tool. In three separate studies, people who had not resolved the wrongs done to them all improved when therapists helped them learn to forgive. However, many find forgiveness difficult to offer. Here are 10 guidelines to help extend forgiveness and ease resentment.

1 Educates yourself about forgiveness.

"Forgive," according to Webster's New World Dictionary, means: "to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; pardon; to overlook an offense; to cancel a debt." Thus, the goal of forgiveness is to let go of a hurt and move ahead with life. Understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy forgiveness. Robert Enright, Ph. D., education psychologist, University of Wisconsin Madison, stresses that true forgiveness is not:

Forgetting. If the hurt wounded you enough to require forgiveness, you may always have a memory of it.

Excusing or condoning. The wrong should not be denied, minimized, or justified.

Reconciling. You can forgive the offender and still choose not to reestablish the relationship.

2 Spend a few minutes cleaning out your thinking.

At a florist's shop I watched the owner remove tiny bugs from a potted plant, meticulously plucking off one small tenaciously clinging offender after another. Although that it took him several hours of silent concentration and steady work, he was able to rid the plant of what would ultimately stunt its growth and ruin its loveliness. There is a lesson from that florist which applies to daily living. The only way to keep over selves free from the infestation of troublesome thoughts is to spend a few minutes each day cleaning out our thinking. Has someone hurt you by his or her comments? Were you publicly insulted by someone? Did a friend fail to come through for you? Pluck off each offending layer of thought and dispose of it just as the florist disposed of the tiny insects destroying his lovely plant. Doing so insures that a vague irritation does not transform itself into a deep resentment and an intense hatred.

3 Practice on small hurts

To become a generous forgiver of major pains, practice forgiveness on small hurts. Forgive, immediately the small slights inflicted by strangers a rude clerk, a driver who cut you off, a doctor who keeps you waiting, etc. Use these events as practice time to prepare you for the tougher task of forgiving major hurts.

4 Challenge the “should” in your thinking

Forgiveness is much easier when you give up irrational belief that fuel your frustration, anger, and hostility – the expectation that other people will always act in the way you want. Beware of the “should” in your thinking and speaking: He shouldn't have done this to me / She shouldn't act that way / I've worked hard and I should have been rewarded.

Whenever you find “should” in your mind and talk, challenge yourself. Tell yourself it is unrealistic to expect people to always act decently and respectfully toward you. Remind yourself that everyone is fallible and capable of making a mistake.

5 Understand that resentment has a high price tag.

“Holding a grudge takes mental, emotional, and physical energy. It makes you obsessive, angry, and depressed,” observes Barry Lubetkin, psychologist and director, institute of Behavior Therapy, New York. “There's a strong connection between anger and a wide spectrum of health miseries – chronic stomach upsets, heart problems and skin conditions among them. The more anger we experience within, the more stress we're under,” he adds. Whenever a hostile or hateful thought enters your mind, try to be fully aware of the harm that resentment can do to you, even making you ill. Let that knowledge further motivate you to forgive and let go.

6 Lack of forgiveness is giving others power over you.

Withholding forgiveness and nursing resentment simply allows another person to have control over your well-being. It's always a mistake to let such negative emotions influence your living. Forgive, and you'll be able to direct your life in positive thoughts and actions. Educator Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), an emancipated slave who started out living in abject poverty, had to work from the age of 9 to support his family. Instead of being bitter about the hardships he faced and viewing himself as a victim, Washington worked hard to improve his situation. He first became a janitor in a school to obtain his education, then went on to teach at Hampton Institute, one of the first African-American colleges in the U.S., later becoming president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. "I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him" was Washington's lifelong motto.

7 Recognize the ripple effect of harboring a grudge.

When you can't forgive someone, there can be a ripple effect which negatively infects your family and friends. Writing to an advice columnist a woman said: "An unforgiving and bitter person who has not let go of animosities can poison an entire family and ruin things for everyone. Once after a particularly harsh outburst, I understood the pained reaction on my children's faces. I prayed for the strength to change my ways so that I could stop hurting those I love most in the world. "Forgiveness is a priceless gift you can give to yourself and your family.

8 Bury the grudge – literally.

Write a letter to the person who hurt you but don't mail it. Express fully, clearly, honestly how you feel and why that person's act hurt you and made you angry. Conclude with the bold declaration that you have forgiven him or her. Then, bury the letter in a potted plant. This is a powerful symbolic exercise which many people have found to be extremely therapeutic.

9 Try instant forgiveness

Lewis Smedes, professor of ethics and author of *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, tells of his rage toward a police officer who brutalized his young son. The officer, a large 250 pound lawman assaulted his 140 pound son and then charged him with resisting an officer. Although the charge was quickly dismissed, Smedes' rage and hostility were not so quickly appeased. Realizing that his intense feelings toward the police officer were creating personal emotional crisis, Smedes knew he had to find a way of forgiving. "I decided to give this cop 'instant forgiveness.' 'I hereby forgive you; go in peace,' I said out loud, at least six times. I felt myself pried a couple of inches off my hate."

10 Recall repeatedly this one vital fact: forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.

A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who had shared the ordeal with him. "Have you forgiven the Nazis?" he asked his friend. "Yes," his friend replied. "Well, I haven't. I'm still consumed with hatred for them" the other man declared. "In that case," said his friend gently, "they still have you in prison." That story points out this reality; ultimately, forgiveness is a gift you give yourself. Bitterness and anger imprison you emotionally. Forgiveness sets you free.