

Forgive & Forget- Who Me?

Donna Daisy, Ph.D. explains why letting go is good for you.



Most of us have, at one time or another, been told we should forgive a person when they've wronged us. But the word forgiveness conjures up some highly charged responses. For some, it's a religious mantra that must be incorporated into our daily lives. Others tend to bristle at the concept of forgiveness, and think, "I have the

have the right to be angry after what he did to me!" I must confess, I'm a recovering "bristlier."

I've read enough research to know anger and resentment are likely to do far more damage to me than the person with whom I am angry. But learning to forgive (for me, at least) is a huge challenge. I even have trouble forgiving people I don't know. About the time I was writing this article, I happened to see an Oprah show on television in which she exposed puppy mills for the horror they really are. I sat and wept.

I wanted to do even worse things to those

breeders than they were doing to their dogs. Needless to say, this incident forced me to seriously think about forgiveness, and whether or not I would ever be able to "put my money where my mouth (or pen, in this case) is."

So why should we forgive? We pay a very high price when we choose to hold on to anger and resentment. Studies in the area of mind/body research have repeatedly shown that unforgiving people are more stressed, depressed, narcissistic, angry and paranoid than those who forgive. In addition to emotional distress, they also have more

have more physical symptoms than those who've managed to let go.

In addition to scientific research, many religious traditions have shared with us their wisdom about holding on to anger. My favorite is from the Buddha, "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned."

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is healing. Forgiving yourself and others has been shown to boost your immune system and help you recover more quickly from illness. People who've forgiven others experience lower levels of physical pain, anger and depression. In addition to the physical benefits, letting go of anger by practicing forgiveness can strengthen your relationships and, in the end, help you become a happier person.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

When you've been wronged, hurt, insulted, betrayed or attacked by another person, there is always a decision to be made. Do I try to avoid that person? Do I seek revenge? Or do I take the higher road of forgiveness. If you're faced with such a decision, it might be helpful to consider what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not reconciliation or the reestablishment of a relationship. Nor is forgiveness about condoning (which implies justifying, minimizing or tolerating) or making excuses for the offender. Perhaps most importantly, forgiveness is not something you do for the benefit of the other person. What, then, is forgiveness? It's something you do for yourself, a shift in thinking that entails trying to let go of your hurt, anger and hostility and adopt a more charitable and benevolent perspective. I have to admit, of all the happiness and well-being strategies that I try to incorporate into my personal life, forgiveness is the most difficult. Nevertheless, researchers assure us (and I believe this to be true) that letting go of past wrongs is a skill that can be learned, and the benefits are well worth the effort. A good place to start is with a simple challenge to yourself. Choose someone in your life with whom you hold a grudge and forgive them. You can do this in person or only in your mind. In either event, you rid yourself of the harmful physiological and psychological effects of negativity and open yourself to a healthier, happier lifestyle.

GETTING STARTED

Here are some tips that have been helpful to me as I work on my own forgiveness skills

As with any advice, take what's helpful and leave the rest. Remember that forgiveness is a conscious decision that will benefit you physically and emotionally. It also helps you take responsibility for your own

happiness.

- Understand that forgiveness takes time. You may first need to work through emotions such as shock, anger, pain and/or grief.
- Realize that forgive and forget is probably an unrealistic ideal. You may never really forget what happened to you, but you can let go of it and it's the letting go that allows healing.
- Avoid the mindset that forgiveness is a weakness. It takes a stronger person to forgive than to attack.
- Remember, you are forgiving the person, not the act.
- Don't get discouraged. Forgiveness isn't for the faint of heart, nor is it easily achieved.

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