

The Power of Forgiveness

Forgiving someone who has hurt you deeply — a parent, sibling, spouse, ex-spouse, employer, or even a stranger — is one of the most difficult challenges you'll face in life.

Until you can forgive, anger, resentment, and bitterness will continue to eat away at your heart and mind, causing emotional and even physical damage because of increased stress.

"Not forgiving means you carry in your heart the pain the person has caused you," says Kathleen Griffin, author of *The Forgiveness Formula: How to Let Go of Your Pain and Move on With Life*. "Not letting go of this burden can keep you trapped in the past and unable to move forward into a better future."

People who have been deeply hurt often say there's a "before" and "after" the hurt occurred. They remember the time before the hurt as one without problems, and withholding forgiveness becomes a way of trying to go back to how things used to be.

"But to begin the journey of forgiveness, you need to give up hope of things being as they were before the hurt occurred," says Ms. Griffin. "Your life is different, and accepting that what happened to you really did occur, but that you can forgive and let go of the pain it caused, is the first step."

Lighten your load

Choosing to forgive — and it is a choice — can make a significant difference in your peace of mind and future happiness.

"Think of people you know who can forgive," says Ms. Griffin. "Now think of those who bear a grudge. Which camp would you rather be in?"

To imagine the difference forgiveness could make in your life, think about a time when you took a trip and packed too much. Remember how grateful you were to put down your bags and not have to carry them anymore?

"Your forgiveness issues are just the same," says Ms. Griffin. "You may not be conscious of carrying them every day, but they weigh you down just the same. Imagine letting go of the burden of your resentment and anger, and think about how much easier your life journey would be."

Practice forgiveness

Make two lists: an "easy" list of people who have not done you a great wrong but with whom you still have issues, and a "hard" list of those who have hurt you deeply. Begin by working to forgive the people on the easy list first.

"Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting what was done to you, but it does mean completely letting go of the hurt someone has caused you, because you have decided to do so," says Ms. Griffin.

"Forgiveness is never about the other person. It's all about you and your decision to live a less painful and more liberated life."

Writing in a forgiveness journal can help. In the journal, note how you feel about forgiveness and where you are in the process. quietly with your eyes closed and become conscious of your breathing.

Other ideas

- Meditate to help center and calm your spirit. Sit quietly with your eyes closed and become conscious of your breathing.
- Take "life breaths" to help you cope with negative emotions. Choose a word that describes your feelings, such as anger, fear, or hate. As you take a deep, slow breath in through your nose, imagine you're breathing in the opposite words: hope, love, or peace. Now slowly and deeply breathe out through your mouth, breathing out the fear, anger, and hate.
- Visualize a forgiveness room. Imagine a room deep within your heart. The room contains all the bitterness and sadness of not forgiving. Open that room, clean it, and little by little, make it a part of yourself again so that no part of your heart is shut down.

"As the years pass, you may have people who seem beyond your power to forgive," says Ms. Griffin. "But you always have a choice: Do I choose to hold on to bitterness or to forgive? To forgive is to say, 'It stops here. With me.'"

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Our counselors have been providing services since 1981 and are committed to providing clients with the highest quality personalized treatment services possible. Experienced and caring clinicians will work with you to determine the nature of your problems and develop a treatment plan to assist you in their resolution.

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Positive Ways To Accept Criticism

Do you hate being criticized even when you know you've made a mistake? If so, it's no wonder -- criticism can make people feel incompetent, angry and just plain awful.

How do you, personally, respond to criticism? Do you make excuses or lash back with criticism?

"This fight-or-flight response is natural and common, but it isn't very productive. It cuts off communication, often just when it's needed most," says Jean Lebedun, Ph.D., author of the video program "The Art of Criticism -- Giving and Taking."

Many supervisors don't give criticism in a tactful manner. Nevertheless, you should accept criticism so you can learn from your mistakes. But don't fret; it'll be easier when you use Dr. Lebedun's "4-A Formula -- Anticipate, Ask questions, Agree with something and Analyze."

Anticipate

Accept the fact that everyone makes mistakes and that you'll probably be criticized for yours. That way, criticism won't come as a surprise.

"You anticipate criticism by asking yourself, 'What can I learn from this criticism?' Then, whenever you feel yourself growing defensive or getting angry, you repeat the question 'What can I learn?'" advises Dr. Lebedun.

Here's another way to anticipate: Take the wind out of the sails of criticism by admitting your mistake first, before your supervisor has an opportunity to say anything to you. This makes your supervisor's job easier and makes you appear more professional.

Ask questions

Many times, people who criticize are letting off steam and may be exaggerating the problem. This is especially true when the criticism contains the words "always" and "never." Therefore, it's important to pinpoint the criticism by asking questions like these: "What part of the report didn't you like?" "What aspect of my attitude makes life at work difficult for you? Could you give me an example?"

Asking questions accomplishes two things: It gives you specific information on how you can improve, and it teaches people they'll have to be specific when they criticize you.

Agree with something

When faced with criticism, most people focus on the part of the negative feedback that may not be true and ignore the rest. This doesn't solve any problems, and you don't learn anything.

When you agree with one part of the criticism, you become open to learning. An easy way to agree is to say something like this: "You might be right; my report doesn't have all the details."

"You don't have to agree with everything; even agreeing with one small aspect of the criticism will create an atmosphere of teamwork," says Dr. Lebedun. "The focus then can become how you'll work together to solve a problem, which will lessen your feeling of being attacked."

Analyze

Finally, take a break and evaluate what you've heard.

You need time to process the information, determine if it's a valid criticism and decide what you'll do to solve the problem or correct the mistake. If this is a complaint you've heard repeatedly, you should think about what you can learn from the situation so it doesn't happen again.

The benefits of the 4-A Formula are that you'll look for solutions rather than excuses and you'll be in control of your emotions, Dr. Lebedun says. "You'll also appear more professional."

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