Finding Forgiveness

How to Shed Grudges and Self-Scorn for Greater Peace of Mind

Created by Jeffrey Harris, MFT, PCC, CEAP
Objectives

- Identify the connection between “unforgiveness” and physical & emotional stress
- Understand the four unlovely human traits that keep us from forgiving fully
- Describe the five steps towards finding forgiveness
- Describe a four-part model for “letting go” of grievances
- Recognize and practice statements of self-forgiveness
Author Fred Luskin

- Stanford Forgiveness Project
Unforgiveness and It’s Connection to Physical and Emotional Stress

- Your heart beats faster, your blood pressure goes up, you feel hurt and mad
- When you think about a wrong someone did to you, your fight-or-flight system is aroused
- But you could be sitting still and feeling how good it is to be alive on such a beautiful day
Study after study has found that forgiving is good for the body as well as the soul. It can lower blood pressure and heart rate and reduce levels of depression, anxiety, and anger.

People who forgive generally have better relationships with others, feel happier and more hopeful.

Stress reduction research has found that writing about important personal experiences in an emotional way for as little as 15 minutes over the course of three days can improve mental and physical health.

Unforgiveness and It’s Connection to Physical and Emotional Stress
How Unforgiveness Might Be Used to Control Our Fears or Our Offender

- Do you use anger as a way to make you feel safe?
- Do you use guilt or anger to control or manipulate others?
- Do you use the grievance as a way to avoid communication?
- Do you use silence as a weapon?
- Do you hold onto the pain from the past as an excuse for not taking charge of your life today?
- Do you secretly wish to punish the offender?
- Do you want to retaliate and cause the offender to suffer as much as you?
How Grudges Are Formed

- Taking an exaggerated level of personal offense
- Blaming our partner for how we feel
- Creating a grievance story
Four Unlovely Human Traits That Sustain Unforgiveness
The following are four common “unlovely human traits” that can block the process of forgiveness, and contribute to sustaining the state of unforgiveness, which results in raw, unrelenting pain, anger, bitterness and resentment.
1. Promise
2. Punishment
3. Power
4. Protection
Promise

- Forgiveness is often withheld as a leverage to secure the PROMISE that our partner won't continue or repeat the hurtful behavior or choices.
- We might also withhold forgiveness as a wait-and-see approach.
- Yet another reason people withhold forgiveness comes from the worry that your forgiveness would be seen as condoning the hurtful actions.
- But your partner’s future pro-social behaviors are more likely influenced through assertiveness, authenticity, and direct communication, not the threat of continual unforgiveness.
Punishment

“Do you know how deeply you have hurt me? Here, let me give you a dose of that pain by reminding you (and myself) frequently by displaying my pain, hurt, anger, disappointment and shaming.”

- Carrying your pain and anger is a burden, but frequently reminding your partner of that pain may be experienced as PUNISHMENT and retaliation.
- This unlovely human trait leads us to wound our partner and damage respect and trust, thus creating new grievances for them about us.
- And that’s ironic, isn’t it?
Power

- When we’ve been hurt or deeply disappointed, we may feel that we’ve lost power in the relationship.
- Unforgiveness is sometimes used to “one-up” our partner’s report of their own pain or disappointment, effectively trumping their grievance or shutting them down.
- But this POWER is counter-productive to building trust and mutual respect, and our partner may feel manipulated.
Protection

- Keeping my anger stoked and flaming has the effect of minimizing intimacy and keeping my partner at arms-length.
- Who wants to come closer to someone who’s super angry?
- I therefore feel PROTECTED from further hurt or pain.
- But this is an illusion—your partner still has the ability to make new mistakes or hurtful choices.
- There are other ways to influence your partner to make better choices.
- The downside of maintaining protective anger is that intimacy, nurturing and compassion are squelched.
Abandoning Un-Useful Coping Techniques

- Make a list of the things you have thought, felt and done in response to whatever your forgiveness issue is
  - Yell
  - Talking to the offender
  - Not talking to the offender
  - Creating “soap opera episodes” in your mind
  - Gossiping about the offender
  - Solicit support for your version of the event
  - Read a self-help book
  - Seek therapy
  - Take medication
  - Got sloshed
  - Had a counter-affair

- Put a star by anything that hasn’t been helpful
- Does anything on your list solve the problem?
Myths of Forgiveness

- Forgive and forget
  - Forgiveness doesn’t mean a sudden case of amnesia
  - We just don’t need to remember the pain
- Forgiveness is a sign of weakness
- My forgiveness will be misinterpreted as agreement
- Staying calm will make me a doormat
- I will experience a loss of control or power in my relationship
No matter what the offense, the process of forgiveness is the same: you let go of anger and hurt by being mindful and focusing on gratitude and kindness.

Forgiveness is for me. I’m the one most hurt by my anger and frustration.

Forgiveness can be learned.

In-depth forgiveness is not an epiphany or a one-time event. It takes patience and practice. But the rewards are powerful.
Thoughts About Forgiveness

- Forgiveness does not require that you reconcile with the offender
- To forgive is to let go of the extra suffering you have imposed on yourself after the normal cycle of grief has run its course
- Forgiveness is taking back your power from being wounded
- Forgiveness is taking responsibility for how you feel now
- Your best chance for successful future relationships and overall happiness is to forgive your former partner
Creating Readiness for Finding Forgiveness

- First of all, forgive yourself that you didn’t start this process earlier
- Forgiveness training includes the acknowledgement that you are fully responsible for your long-term attitude
- In order to forgive, you must fully evaluate what you stand to lose if you let go of your grievance
- For healing to occur, you have to begin to tell a different story about yourself
- “I need to stop being furious with ________”
- Give up all hope for a better past
  - Forgiveness is for today and not yesterday
- Seek “benign apathy”
Four Stages of Forgiveness
The Four Stages of Forgiveness

- **Stage 1**
  - A loss in your life has caused you to experience anger and hurt
  - You feel justified in your negative feelings

- **Stage 2**
  - Forgiveness begins when you realize that the hurt and anger filling your life after a betrayal feels bad
  - You start to notice that your bad feelings are not helping you and, in fact, are making things worse
The Four Stages of Forgiveness

Stage 3
- You begin to concentrate on how good it can feel to forgive
- You begin to use forgiveness techniques as soon as you feel a grudge forming, and thus challenge your bad habits on the spot
- You deliberately choose to feel the hurt you have experienced for a shorter period
- You realize that the length of time you suffer because of your partner’s wrongdoing is up to you

Stage 4
- At this stage, you simply become a forgiving person, and make a habit of practicing forgiveness with others
- You make the decision to forgive first, and let go as many troubling things as you can
- You save your feelings of hurt and anger for when they are truly needed
 Forgiveness Masters

- Those who work to master the skills of forgiveness become more flexible, less black-and-white in your expectations of how life or other people will be.

- “I can’t predict what life will hand me, but I’m going to respond to it in this way.”
Letting Go of Past Grievances

1. Begin with an intention to forgive
2. Acknowledge the pain caused by the grievance
3. Evaluate the gains and losses that come with forgiveness
4. Assess your attitudes and beliefs around forgiveness
5. Practice “Letting Go” exercises

- Review worksheet “Letting Go of Past Grievances”
- Review worksheet “Forgiveness Affirmations”
How to Let Go
A Four-part Model For “Letting Go” Of Grievances

See associated worksheet “How to Let Go”
How to Let Go

The Controllable

Action

Influence

Inaction

Forfeit

The Uncontrollable

Struggle

Letting Go

The Personal Power Grid © Scott & Jaffe
How to Let Go

The Controllable

Action

Influence

Inaction

Forfeit

The Uncontrollable

Struggle

Letting Go
How to Let Go

The Controllable

Action

Influence

Struggle

The Uncontrollable

Inaction

Forfeit

Letting Go

The Personal Power Grid © Scott & Jaffe
How to Let Go

The Controllable
Action
Influence
Inaction

The Uncontrollable
Struggle
Forfeit
Letting Go

The Personal Power Grid © Scott & Jaffe
Changing Our Perception of the Offender

“If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find in each person’s life enough sorrow and suffering to disarm all hostility.”

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

- Correcting our perception will reduce self-torturous thoughts
Self-Forgiveness

Eliminating Self-Scorn
We must forgive self-forgive for the many ways we have failed to be the best version of our self. Examples might be:

- A commitment to yourself that you’ve broken
- A goal that you set for yourself that not only did you *not* achieve it, but you did something totally counter to achieving it
  - As an example, maybe you committed to going on a diet, and not only did you go off the diet, but you gained more weight
  - Or maybe you were going to quit smoking and you started smoking again
Applying Self-Forgiveness

- We also may have to apply self-forgiveness when we have attempted to make amends to someone else for wounding them, and no forgiveness is issued
  - Whether they accept the apology from me and forgive me or not, that’s something I don't have any control over. If I have been genuine in my acknowledgment and my apology, then I have done what I can do to that point
  - It also means letting go to what the response from the other person is to my apology. Because sometimes they are going to embrace it and sometimes they're not.
  - Whether he forgave me or not was his choice and the burden that he would choose to carry or release.
Characteristics of Self-Forgiveness

- Practice self-compassion
- Remember that when we behave badly, it is because of deep feelings of pain
- We forgive ourselves for doing wrong, not being wrong
  - That is, we made a poor choice, but we are not broken or deficient
  - When we acknowledge that we made a bad choice, we can then accept responsibility for it and be accountable for it.

- Review handout “Statements of Self-Forgiveness”
On the Other Side of Forgiveness: How to Apologize the Right Way
How to Apologize the Right Way

- Discuss the 3 steps to a meaningful apology

- Read the article How To Apologize The Right Way: An Apology Actually Has Three Parts
Forgiveness Coaching

- Would you like personal coaching for finding forgiveness?
- If you are employed by the University of Southern California as a staff or faculty member, you are invited to contact the Center for Work & Family Life, to schedule a consultation with a member of our professional staff