

Forgiveness

Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than anything on which it is poured.

—Mark Twain

Why should I practice forgiveness?

Any negative emotion you hold onto can become toxic. For example, when you are angry with someone and want to get even, those emotions harm your mind, body, and spirit. It also gives the person you feel wronged by power over you.

Practicing forgiveness can help you let go of anger, sorrow, or other emotions that can harm you. Letting go of negative emotions is hard, and healing takes time. If you stick with it, forgiveness can also help you sleep better, give you more energy, and improve your overall mental health and satisfaction with life.¹⁻⁵

What is forgiveness?

There are many ways you could define forgiveness. In this handout, forgiveness means releasing anger and resentment toward someone or something that has hurt you. The hurt can be physical, verbal, mental, emotional, or spiritual. Forgiveness is a process that takes time and dedication. Very rarely is true forgiveness decided and acted upon quickly. Part of that process is identifying what happened, how you were hurt, how it affected your life, and how it changed you.

If I forgive someone, am I saying that what he or she did to me was OK?

No, although at times it may feel that way. Let's talk about what forgiveness is **NOT**. If you forgive someone, it does **not** mean the following:

- You do not have to forget. Despite the saying "forgive and forget," when you forgive someone, you do not have to forget that he or she has hurt you. Hopefully, what forgiveness means is that when you remember the event, strong emotions like anger, hate, sorrow, regret, fear, and anxiety do not overwhelm you.
- You do not have to be friends with the person or have contact with him or her. In fact, it may be in your best interest to stay far away from the person, even if you forgive them.
- You do not have to confront anyone if you feel uncomfortable.
- You do not have to excuse someone or his or her behavior. You can forgive someone and still pursue justice. It may be within your right to pursue charges for some other legal action. If someone has wronged you, he or she is responsible for his or her actions. Your forgiveness does not relieve someone of that responsibility.

Forgiving someone can mean something different for you, your family, and your friends. That is OK. You get to define what forgiveness means to you.

How do I prepare for a forgiveness practice?

Make sure you are in a safe place with people you trust such as a family member, a friend, a therapist, a doctor, a social worker, or a religious leader. It is important to feel comfortable and supported because the process of forgiveness can cause previous traumas to surface.

Have a journal close by in case you find it useful. Journaling can help you to sort out and process your thoughts and feelings. You might also use journaling to prepare and plan. There's no wrong way to journal. If you would like more guidance, then consider reading the [handout "Using Journaling to Aid Health"](#) on the [University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program website](#).

I am prepared and ready. What do I do?

There are many ways to practice forgiveness. Your process may have mental, physical, and spiritual components that are unique to you. You can start and stop the process as often as you need to. You can also try techniques that others find helpful. For example, you could break the process into the four phases Dr. Robert Enright outlines in his book, *Forgiveness Is a Choice*.

1. Uncovering phase. Start by trying to uncover your feelings about what happened and what might happen by asking yourself several questions.

- How did the event change you?
- What has it cost you? (Think about your health, time, energy, happiness, and relationships).
- How is it still affecting you?
- Do you carry the event in your body causing you pain or tension?
- Does the event still cause you to feel sadness, anger, anxiety, and/or shame?
- Is it weighing on your spirit?
- Is it hurting your relationships with family, friends, coworkers, or others?
- If you decide to continue holding onto your feelings, what might happen?
- Do you have the time, energy, and support to practice forgiveness now?

2. Decision phase. You have to be willing to accept the outcome, which may be different than you expected. A key part of this phase is to put aside any feelings of wanting harm to come to the person who hurt you.

3. Work phase. This is the hard part. In this phase, you work on trying to understand the person who hurt you. Through understanding, you can start to foster tolerance or compassion for that person. This does not mean you are excusing the person or his or her behavior. It is also OK if you simply cannot reach a point of understanding. Use this phase to work with the pain or negative emotions caused by what happened. Can you release the pain without wishing it back on the person who caused it? Can you forgive the person? Forgive him or her not just by saying it, but actually feeling it?

4. Outcome/deepening phase. In this part, you reflect on what has happened since you have gone through this process.

- What happened?
- Are you relieved of any suffering?
- Can you find meaning or purpose in the suffering?
- Are you healed?
- Can you help others heal?
- Have your relationships changed?

Remember, forgiveness can be hard. The process is not always linear or orderly. You might have to go back to an earlier phase. For example, if you're still struggling after the outcome phase, then you might have to return to the work phase, or even to the uncovering phase. Having support from others will empower you to move through the process as many times as you need to.

The Whole Health "[Compassion Practice](#)" handout is another resource to help you through the process, especially the work phase.

For you to consider:

- Do you feel you were wronged by someone or something and it continues to bother you? If so, how much is it affecting your life?
- Do you feel like someone hurt you? Do you feel like you hurt someone?
- Do you feel ready to start the process of forgiveness to help free yourself from the past? Who could provide you with emotional support through the process of forgiveness?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health	Patient handout "Using Journaling to Aid Health"	http://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout_journaling.pdf
International Forgiveness Institute	Website content What is Forgiveness How to Forgive	https://internationalforgiveness.com/



American Psychological Association.	Book: Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope by Robert D. Enright. Published in 2001 by APA LifeTools	
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This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Eugene Lee MD, RYT Assistant Professor in the Department of Family Medicine at Loyola University Medical Center. It is based in part on two documents for clinicians: 1) "Forgiveness: The Gift we Give Ourselves," written by Janice Singles, PsyD and Shilagh Mirgain, PhD and 2) "Passport to Whole Health," written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD.

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