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## Walking in Your Shoes, Sleeping in Your Bed: How I Found Forgiveness

There is so much that's unexpected on the road from foster care to adoption. As anyone who has ever been down that road can tell you, nothing can fully prepare you for all the twists and turns. I thought we had been through it all along our five-year path from foster care placement to adoption . . . until I found myself spending the night in the childhood bedroom of the woman who had *so hurt my child*.

My son's maternal grandparents invited my son and me to visit them out of state. His birth mother, their only daughter, was herself adopted. She had passed away the year before after a long battle with drug addiction that started in her teen years. It was a battle that my son bore scars from. This was an opportunity for my son to meet family, and perhaps for all of us to find something we were looking for. I reluctantly agreed.

They invited us to stay at their home; insisted really. They were also keeping their granddaughter for the weekend and thought it would be fun for the kids to spend time together. The day was filled with lots of family introductions and activities: swimming, a picnic, a visit to a kid's bookstore that had roaming cats and chickens, and an ice cream parlor. My son, then seven years old, took it all in stride with no thought to who these people were or what this stop in his journey meant. Throughout the day, his grandmother and I had whispered snippets of conversation as he played. She asked questions about the struggles my son had been through, and what impact her daughter's actions had on him. She asked what his future might look like in light of it all. I tried to be reassuring, to tell her he would be fine. But the truth was, I didn't know any more than any parent knows what direction their child's life will take. And his history certainly made his future much more uncertain.

She told stories of the girl her daughter used to be - popular, an avid reader, an excellent student, an active and engaged high schooler. The stories were woven with self-doubt and threads of "I don't know where we went wrong..." and "I wonder if it would have been different if..." She questioned if a different adoptive family would have given her a happier life. She told me how dearly loved her daughter had been.

There were also apologies. They claimed responsibility, that I was certain was not theirs, for the woman their daughter had become.

Throughout the day there were moments when I wanted to scream, "I don't want to hear about *her!* Do you know how hard his life has been because of *her?*" But to be honest, a bigger part of me *did* want to know about the woman who gave birth to my son. Part of me really wanted to understand who she was and why she did what she did. I wanted to be ready with her stories and the truth when the inevitable day would come that my son would ask about her. I wanted to be able to explain. And I wanted to be a good person, to find forgiveness, and perhaps lend comfort to a grieving mother.

## From the Corner Office

### Dear friends,

In this issue of *Partners*, we chose to write about one of the more challenging topics related to adoption and foster care: the topic of “forgiveness.” It is something we all know is needed and necessary to create peace for ourselves and others; however, when hurts and disappointments run deep and over several years, it can be very tough.

I have felt the effect of my inability to fully forgive this spring, when I lost my mother, and even more so when, just five weeks later, I lost my grandmother, as well. So, what does forgiveness have to do with the great losses in my life?

My mom and I did not have the simplest of mother-daughter relationships. We started our life together in March 1969 in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she was ready to do what most unwed pregnant women of that time did: make a plan for adoption. She didn't follow through and chose to parent me. Over the course of childhood, Mom made lots of decisions that not only affected her living situation, but mine and my sister's, as well.

Our silver lining was our grandparents and extended family. We were often able to escape during school breaks or for long weeks in the summer to stay with them, and they always provided a foundation of safety and well-being in our lives. Despite these great moments, my sister and I carried resentments, anger, frustration, and disappointments with us well into our adult lives.

This January, my mom lost her battle with an incurable lung disease that she had been diagnosed with in 2012. My sister and I did what we could to support her, but we never had the forgiveness discussion. No one really taught us how and the opportunity never seemed to present itself.

In the midst of all of this, my sister and I scrambled to find safety for Grandma, who was 88 and living alone. But our challenge to do so meant we usurped my uncle in order to advocate for and protect Grandma. My uncle felt hurt and I found myself facing an opportunity to bring forgiveness into the light.

Just prior to my Grandma passing (five short weeks after my mom), I knew we all needed to find peace and we needed to forgive each other. Ultimately, we did, after tears, hugs, and acknowledgement that holding on to anger was not worth it.

Why share all of this? I wish I would have been able to have that last forgiveness conversation with my mom; I wish there had been more opportunities to make peace with so many others in my life. I know and believe that, as adoptive and foster parents, you want the best for your kids. I want to ask you and advocate for you to help your family learn about forgiveness. Begin now and continue with time, so that you can all find peace much sooner than I did.



Oriana Carey, CEO

# What Does It Mean to Forgive?

The world of adoption is full of joy, but also has plenty of opportunities for anger, sadness, or frustration. A birth mom abuses drugs and her baby is born addicted to heroin. An adoptive family promises to maintain an open adoption, but then fails to keep in touch with their child's biological family. A child who was adopted suffers from reactive attachment disorder and punches a hole in his bedroom wall. How would you react to these situations, or other challenges that arise in your life?



One way to prevent yourself and your family from being overwhelmed by painful events is to practice forgiveness. Although forgiveness looks different for all of us, most experts agree that it involves letting go of resentment and thoughts of revenge toward someone who upset or hurt you. Jonathan Lockwood Huie, known as “The Philosopher of Happiness,” sums up forgiveness like this: “Forgive others not because they deserve forgiveness but because you deserve peace.” You may have had no control over the hurt and pain you experienced, but opting to forgive provides you with the ability to choose how the situation impacts you.

Emotions like anger and hatred can be a burden on us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We often do not realize how much they affect us until we let them go. When you hold a grudge, you can be so wrapped up in it that it is difficult to enjoy the present. This can impact your relationships with friends, family, colleagues, and other important people in your life. Over time, choosing not to forgive can cause health problems and trigger the body's stress response, potentially leading to anxiety and/or depression.

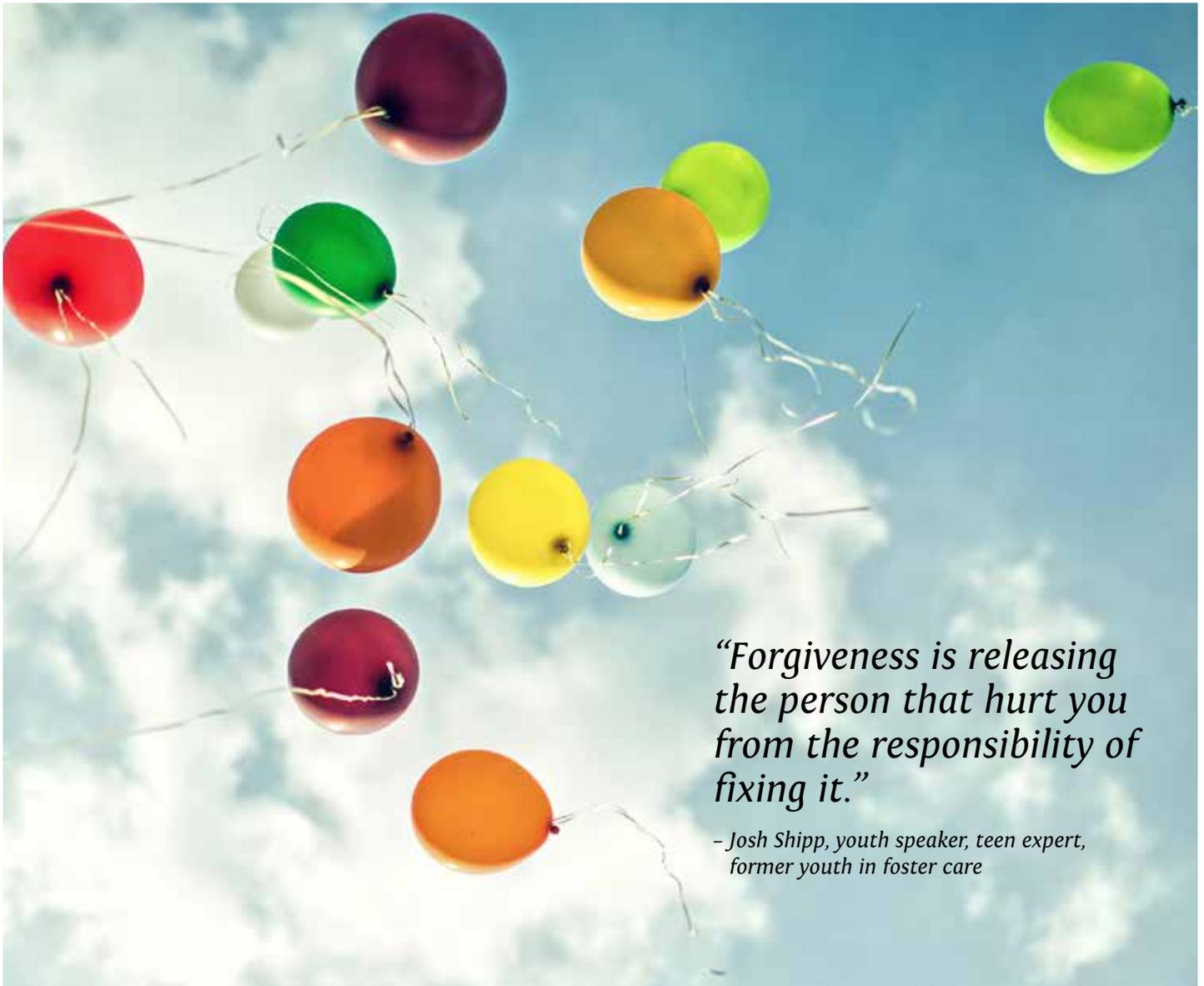
On the other hand, practicing forgiveness can have a lot of positive benefits, including:

- Reduction in symptoms of stress, anger, anxiety, and depression
- Lower blood pressure and heart rate

- Better anger management skills
- Less hostility
- Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Reduction in physical symptoms of pain such as stomach problems, headaches, and back pain
- Stronger immune system
- More friendships and healthier relationships
- Greater psychological, religious, and/or spiritual well-being

These benefits may seem appealing, but that does not mean that forgiveness is easy to practice or achieve. Forgiveness is not a one-time event, but rather a process that takes time and a lot of work. Choosing to forgive does not mean that you are condoning bad behavior, or that you need to reconcile with the person who hurt you. In fact, you do not even need to speak with the person who hurt you or let them know that you have forgiven them. Forgiveness is about YOU, not them. Keep in mind that forgiveness is a choice, not a necessity, and should never be forced on someone who is not ready or does not want to forgive.

What does forgiveness mean to you? How can it benefit your children and other important relationships? We encourage you to start your journey of forgiveness by learning more about how you can make it a part of your life.



*“Forgiveness is releasing the person that hurt you from the responsibility of fixing it.”*

*– Josh Shipp, youth speaker, teen expert, former youth in foster care*

## Helping Your Child Forgive

**Forgiveness is a familiar idea for all of us; easy to understand, but often challenging in practice. Forgiving is not a single event; rather, it is something that a person needs to actively practice. And, while it may not be easy, practice is often necessary to help heal one’s soul. Forgiveness is not about the person who wronged you, it is only about you.**

As human beings, we can sometimes show compassion, understanding, and empathy toward those who have wronged us more easily than other times. In some cases, compassion may come quickly, and other days we might be triggered by a memory or feeling that makes forgiveness seem just out of our reach, even if only for a moment. All of this is completely normal – and is also why forgiveness is something one has to practice, often over and over again.

So, knowing how challenging it can be for us, as adults, to practice forgiveness, how do we go about teaching and modeling forgiveness for our children?

Children who spent time in out-of-home care did so often because an adult, who they trusted, put them in an unsafe situation. One place to begin may be in helping your child recognize, talk about, and understand the feelings he or she has. Our emotions and our feelings often control our thoughts and our actions. By talking about what he or she is feeling, you can help your child gain a better understanding of what they are feeling inside – and assure him or her that his or her feelings and emotions are completely normal. Moreover, talking about, exploring, and helping children understand their feelings gives them a voice – and can help take away the power from negative thoughts and emotions.

Not being able to find forgiveness can eat away at us. You may have heard the expression that, “holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” When it’s hard to forgive, you may want to try the following activity with your children. Have your child write down on a piece of paper what the other person did or said that was hurtful or harmful. Then, have him or her tear the piece of paper up into tiny pieces, or bury it in a secret place in the garden, or think of another creative (and safe) way for them to destroy the piece of paper. The act of writing down how someone has hurt them and how it made them feel, and then destroying the paper, is symbolic of how to let go of hurt and anger and practice forgiving. (Source: [http://www.truthforkids.com/forgiving-others/#.VyEjU\\_krK72](http://www.truthforkids.com/forgiving-others/#.VyEjU_krK72). Though this site has a religious theme, the activity can be applicable to all, regardless of your religious background or belief.)

Another way to practice forgiveness is by practicing gratitude; by focusing on the good, you can more quickly see the good surrounding you. This can be something that is practiced daily: each person in the home can share something they are grateful for, or something that made them happy that day. It could be getting a good grade on a test they studied for, enjoying playtime with a sibling, or getting special time with a caregiver, to name a few. This could even be something practiced become part of your family routine; doing so helps children focus on what is good in their lives, not what is negative.

Helping a child understand the person who wronged them can also be helpful in helping them find forgiveness for another person. For example, you may talk about your child’s birth parent, explaining as best you can, what may have led him or her to behave in the way he or she did, such as an addiction or a mental illness. Conversations like these may help your child separate a person’s behavior from the person—the individual did a bad *thing*, but is not a bad *person*. You might also use this as an opportunity to focus on and remember the good and fun things that your child experienced with or about his or her birth parent, as well as teaching and modeling compassion and sympathy.

These are just a few ideas to help you teach your children about forgiveness. For more ideas on how to teach children about forgiving, check out our tip sheet, *The Journey of Forgiveness: How to Teach Your Children*. You can also find some websites and additional resources that may be helpful later in this newsletter.

While forgiveness does not necessarily take the hurt away, the lesson of forgiveness can help children and youth refocus negative thoughts, feelings, and energy into something more positive and productive. It is not something that can be rushed, but forgiveness can be learned, practiced, and modeled—even when it feels hard to do.

## What forgiveness is – and isn’t

Forgiveness is a verb, an action.

Forgiveness is not condoning or even forgetting what another’s actions were.

Forgiveness is not reconciling with a person who wronged you.

Forgiveness is accepting what has already occurred, learning to let go of feelings of anger, resentment and hurt, and moving past those negative feelings.

# No One's Perfect – Forgiving Yourself

So, you're raising your child. You might read parenting books and blogs, talk to other parents, attend trainings, and generally strive to be the best parent you can be. Those things alone make you a great parent. Hopefully you pat yourself on the back occasionally. But, do you also put a fair amount of pressure on yourself? Do you sometimes sabotage your positive self-image when you don't live up to your own wildly unrealistic parenting standards? Do you beat yourself up when you say or do the "wrong" thing with your child?

Parenting is an art, a science, and, most of us would say, a bit of a mystery. Add to that the ingredient of adoption. Your child, by the very nature of having been adopted, has experienced some level of trauma. All the normal bumps and hurdles are often sharper and steeper for adoptive parents. Through it all, you've worked hard on mothering or fathering skills, and have continued to raise the bar for yourself. So, naturally, at times, you've fallen glaringly short. Do you find yourself saying, "that was dumb," "why did I say that?" or, "what was I thinking?" when reflecting on a situation with your child? A fair amount of that is normal. However, if you find yourself thinking badly about your parenting frequently, you've likely packed your bags for the same guilt trip many other adoptive parents find themselves on.

Feeling guilty in and of itself is not a bad thing. If we've yelled at our kids or said something in anger we'd like to take back, we appropriately feel shame. It may nudge us to do better in the future. It's when we really wallow in guilt that it can have damaging effects. By wrapping ourselves in self-punishing thoughts, we spend more energy and emotion being stuck than in doing something to make amends. We're less able to think clearly and problem solve. We suffer, physically, as well. Over-focusing on guilty feelings dumps chemicals into our bloodstream that cause such negative symptoms as increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, and disruption of digestion.

It's not just about you, either. Misery loves company. So if you've decided to beat yourself up on a regular basis, those around you suffer, as well. Getting hung up in guilt means you'll be cranky, negative, withdrawn, and more critical. That will spill over onto the ones you love.

Bottom line: forgive yourself! Even if you were the thrill-seeking, gray-hair-producing, black sheep of your family growing up, it's pretty likely you didn't challenge your parents the same way your children are challenging you now. So be realistic—while your parents' path through your childhood may have taken some interesting twists and turns, you may sometimes feel you're now navigating

the world's largest maze—with no map. At times you'll feel downright lost. Be patient with yourself.

If you're feeling stuck on the guilt trip train, try these exercises<sup>1</sup>:

- Identify what actually went wrong and analyze it a bit. Breaking it down and getting some distance from it begins the healing process.
- Be able to talk with someone (how about another adoptive parent!) about what you did and the harm you feel it caused. Sharing helps us avoid the trap of thinking we're the only one feeling this way.
- Understand how far the process needs to go. You might consider apologizing to your child. Saying sorry models good behavior. Acknowledge the hurt you may have caused. In some instances, you may need to simply hold yourself accountable, forgive yourself, and move on.
- Recognize any unrealistic expectations you have of yourself as a parent.
- If your emotional reactions to your transgressions as a parent are routinely becoming extreme, it's time to let that habit go. Also, if you're replaying the event in question over and over in your head, that's not helping. Stop the endless playback and switch your thoughts over to something more positive.
- Keep things in perspective. Recount all the positive things you've done as a parent. Remind yourself of how far you've come.
- Meditate with imagery. Close your eyes and begin with some simple deep breathing. Imagine a place in nature, like a beach or a path through a lush green forest, that feels calm and peaceful to you. Spend several minutes there. Then ask yourself what you could do to feel better. When answers come, gently leave your meditation and begin to put those plans into action.
- Make amends. If you've done something to hurt your child, take action and replace the feeling bad with doing something good.

The adoptive parent's journey has many challenges. Don't create one more for yourself by getting hung up on your mistakes. We all stress to our children the importance of forgiving themselves when they mess up. Hold yourself to the same ideal, and remember, your kind and loving acts as a parent have already made you an amazing Mom or Dad.

<sup>1</sup> Can You Ever Forgive Yourself? by Ellen Michaud, with Fred Luskin, Ph.D., Stanford University Forgiveness Project

## Resources

### Tip Sheets

[wiadopt.org/resources/tipsheets](http://wiadopt.org/resources/tipsheets)

- **The Journey of Forgiveness: How to Teach Your Children**
- **The Journey of Forgiveness: Learning to Live a Life of Forgiveness**

### Additional Resources

- **International Forgiveness Institute**  
<http://internationalforgiveness.com/>
- **Forgiveness: Letting Go of Grudges and Bitterness**  
<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/forgiveness/art-20047692?pg=1>

### From Our Library

- ***Red, Blue and Yellow Yarn, A Tale of Forgiveness***, by Miriam R. Kosman
- ***From Anger to Intimacy: How Forgiveness Can Transform Your Marriage***, by Dr. Garry Smalley & Ted Cunningham
- ***Forgiveness is a Choice***, by Robert D. Enright, PhD
- ***The Waiting – The True Story of a Lost Child, A Lifetime of Longing, and a Miracle for a Mother Who Never Gave Up***, by Cathy LaGrow
- ***The Privilege of Youth: A Teenager's Story of Longing for Acceptance***, by Dave Pelzer



*Continued from front page*

At the end of a long and emotional day, we were shown to our room. *Her* room. The childhood room of the woman who had *so hurt my child*. The room had been left as it was when she left home at 18, shortly after addiction took over her life. I sang my beautiful boy to sleep under the same frayed patchwork quilt that once warmed the child version of *her* - the woman who caused my son's suffering. The faded stuffed animals on the bay window cushion once belonged to *her* - the woman I silently blamed each time a doctor said, "Your son will never be able to..." The photo album on the nightstand held Polaroids of *her* - a girl with smiling eyes twirling a baton. These were the same eyes that glared at me with such hatred at the Termination of Parental Rights trial, as if I had done something wrong.

How do I find forgiveness for the woman who denied any responsibility for all the "normal" things my son will miss out on because of her? How do I find forgiveness for the woman who abandoned him while his tiny body was going through violent withdrawal from the drugs *she* took? How do I find forgiveness for the woman who caused damage that

will impact the rest of his life? And what kind of life will he have? How deep are his wounds? What will they mean for the man he will become?

From the next room, I could hear my son's grandmother quietly singing her granddaughter a lullaby. I knew she had asked herself all these same questions about hurt and healing and forgiveness in her journey as an adoptive mother. I was reminded her own child's wounds ran deep. I was reminded of the tearful phone calls from my son's birth mother when she was in recovery and struggling with having to feel her wounds. I was reminded how she sounded like a hurt child. I was reminded we're each on our own journey and we do the best we can. As I looked at my greatest source of joy, sleeping peacefully in his birth mother's bed, how could I not find forgiveness?



HOME TO STAY:

# Forgiveness is Universal

“I never knew that I would be right here. You couldn’t have told me this maybe twenty or thirty years ago . . . I was a person who would work a lot of hours, then get on the plane and go away for the weekend.”

Mr. Shelley Tucker began his foster care and adoption journey over 12 years ago. Initially, his goal was just to foster and become an advocate for children in out-of-home care. He never imagined he would end up adopting not once, not twice, but three separate times! Today, he is the proud adoptive father of three amazing, respectful young men ages 19, 17, and 16. And he continues to be a foster care provider in Milwaukee County.

Being a foster and adoptive parent has been a very rewarding experience for Mr. Tucker. He’s been able to touch lives and make lasting positive impressions on many who have walked through his door, from the youth placed in his care, to the birth family members of children he has cared for, to the endless child welfare professionals he has worked with through the years.

He was excited to report that one of the very first youth he cared for is currently studying at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to be a nurse, and keeps in contact with him on a regular basis.

But it wasn’t always rainbows and blue skies. Over the years, Mr. Tucker has experienced more than his fair share of challenges. Through trial and error, he had to learn to find the balance in setting appropriate boundaries when working with some of the children’s birth families. There were times he had to make decisions related to safety that meant limiting contact with certain individuals. Often, Mr. Tucker described having to take the heat from not just those individuals but

also from the children in his care, who gave him a hard time because they were unable to understand his decisions.

At other times, Mr. Tucker has experienced difficulty working with team members who held opposing views and perhaps did not agree with the way he chose to parent the children.

In even more devastating circumstances, Mr. Tucker has experienced being falsely accused of abuse and neglect, and having been physically and emotionally hurt by the ones he cared about and loved most. But, no matter how ugly or challenging things became, Mr. Tucker managed not to let a single one of these ill moments drag him down completely and defeat him. He continued to stand tall and did not waver in his commitment to being there for his children “no matter what.”

What’s his secret?

If you ask him, he will proudly answer with one word: forgiveness.

“When you forgive, you let go. You say everything’s okay. I’m not saying I like what you did or agree with what you did. I’m saying, I don’t like what you did, but it’s going to be alright . . . you just got to let it go and keep moving, keep living. Every day is a learning experience. These kids have taught me a lot, as well. I used to be selfish. I used to not care about anybody. I wanted to do what I wanted to do. But now I’m totally different.”

According to Mr. Tucker, forgiveness also comes much easier when you have strong support networks in place – both formal and informal. He is fortunate to have a mother, a sister, and other extended family that has been helpful. Mr.

Tucker also gets support from other care team members and his sons' therapists.

Despite all of this positivity, and even with the strongest formal and informal support networks in place, Mr. Tucker described moments during his journey when he felt resentment or thought about giving up. During our interview, Mr. Tucker demonstrated vulnerability and bravery by sharing with us details about some of his most intimate and challenging moments in life. He shared with us a story about his eldest son, who had gotten into some trouble with the law. His son had a court hearing on a day that Mr. Tucker was in school.

"I was going to MATC and court was right across the street and I said, I'm not sure if I'm going to go to court because I'm tired. But God was saying, you need to get up and you need to go and check on your son. If you didn't want him, you should have never adopted him."

At that point, it didn't matter what his son may have said or how bad he may have treated Mr. Tucker, he was willing to forgive his son and look past all of that as he had always done before - "no matter what." That day, he excused himself from class and went down to court; that's the day the judge said to his son, "If this man was not here today, you'd be going to jail."

Mr. Tucker insists prayer and self-care were key components in his regular routine that have helped forgiveness grow in his heart and be a natural part of his actions; "it just has to be in your heart . . . it really does."

He goes on to say, "Forgiveness is universal. It's all the way around for all of us. We're all learning. We all make mistakes. Just because I'm the father doesn't mean I'm right one hundred percent. I could be wrong."

Mr. Tucker understands forgiveness to be a journey of healing that does not come naturally, but takes time to learn, practice, and become a part of everyday life. Understandably, there are some things that are much easier to forgive than others, but he is a firm believer that forgiveness is possible even in the most difficult of circumstances; the path on the journey to forgiveness might just look a little different.

"Forgiveness is a healing process. When you're able to forgive, the healing comes. If you're holding onto it, who can be healed? Nobody can. If you're still holding on to feelings of anger, you've got to let them out."

*Mr. Tucker took part in our Jockey Being Family® Home to Stay™ program. If you have recently completed an adoption from the child welfare system and would like to take part in the Home to Stay program, please contact us at 414-475-1246 or 800-762-8063.*



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