

The Journey of Forgiveness: Learning to Live a Life of Forgiveness

Forgiveness can be especially difficult to grasp when you're caring for a child who has lived through trauma and carries a complex history. People say, "You need to forgive ..." or, "I can't forgive and forget ...". All of this may be true at any time. But forgiveness is not for the other person; it is for you and your well-being.

Studying Forgiveness

The field of forgiveness is attracting more research, including some well-regarded studies at the University of Wisconsin.

- Dr. Robert Enright of UW-Madison has implemented his child forgiveness curriculum at some schools in Northern Ireland. He found that people who are taught how to forgive are less angry, less hurt, more optimistic, more forgiving, more compassionate, and more self-confident.
- Dr. Richard Davidson is doing extensive research on the effects of compassionate meditation at the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Tim Markle, Outreach Manager for Children's Resource Center-South, believes deeply in the power of forgiveness. His passion led him to found Forgiveness Factor. His teachings are based on the work of Dr. Robert Enright, noted above. He has been on his forgiveness journey for a long time and is a writer and speaker on the topic.
- Additionally, Dr. Fred Luskin of Stanford University has studied forgiveness and found that those who have practiced forgiveness show a reduction in stress and an increase in energy.

Defining Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a personal experience, and each person will have their own definition of it. When forgiveness is discussed here, we define it as the process of making peace with yourself—especially for those events that you can't control.

The decision to forgive someone or yourself is a choice you make to improve your life and live free from that situation. Often, when you choose forgiveness, you will not receive an apology, an admission of guilt, or forgiveness in return. Ideally, the process is all about you and your journey, not the other person.

For adoptive and foster parents, as well as relative caregivers who are navigating trauma's ripple effects, forgiveness often carries added layers, but it remains a gift you give to yourself.

Physical Benefits of Forgiving

For parents and caregivers walking with children through trauma, forgiveness can nurture your own health and well-being along the way.

Living a life of forgiveness affects people on a physical level; those who even think about forgiveness improve their overall health, as well as cardiovascular and nervous system functioning. Dr. Davidson, of the Waisman Clinic, discovered many benefits of forgiveness, including:

- Lower blood pressure
- Stress reduction
- Less hostility
- Better anger management skills
- Lower heart rate
- Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Fewer depression and anxiety symptoms
- Reduction in chronic pain
- More friendships and healthier relationships
- Greater religious or spiritual well-being
- Improved psychological well-being

Ultimately, when adults choose forgiveness, it nurtures the resilience and balance needed to show up fully for the children we care for.

The question remains, however—how do we forgive and what is the process to getting there? We first need to define and understand forgiveness.

Donna's Journey

Donna, a Wisconsin adoptive parent, shares her journey to forgive a birth mother. She adopted three beautiful daughters from foster care. She had read the files and heard her daughters' stories of abuse and neglect. It hurt her deeply to imagine someone harming her daughters, but she also knew that holding onto the resentment would only continue to hurt both her and her daughters.

Donna started her journey of forgiveness by pointing out the wonderful things in her daughters that they inherited or learned from their birth mother. She would also say bedtime prayers with the girls for their mom.

This ritual of recognizing the positive aspects of her daughters helped Donna to let go of her anger toward their birth mom. There is no contact with the birth mother, for reasons of safety and trauma, but Donna and her girls have learned to live a life of forgiveness.

As with Donna's situation, forgiveness has little to do with continuing your relationships, seeking

revenge, or finding fault. Forgiveness is for your benefit, so you can move on with your life and let go of the past. Reaching a place of forgiveness does not mean you forget. You can live in forgiveness and continue to protect yourself from repeated hurt or an unsafe situation.

Nine Steps to Forgiveness

Dr. Luskin wrote the book *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*. In his book, he lays out nine steps to forgiveness, summarized here.

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not okay. Then tell a trusted friend about your experience. Remember to keep it specific to the situation and not about the person.
2. Commit yourself to doing what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else. This may mean taking a specific time to deal with your feelings.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the people who hurt you or condoning their actions. You want to find peace and perhaps give yourself some space from the offender.
4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Try to recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, and not what offended you or hurt you two minutes—or ten years—ago. When someone has hurt us in the past, we sometimes turn the offense into an ever-growing snowball and look at every offense that person has ever done to us, instead of focusing on the situation at hand.
5. The moment you feel upset, practice simple stress management techniques to soothe your body's fight or flight response. Read our tip sheet, *Reaching Your Boiling Point*, for some more suggestions.
6. Give up expecting things from other people that they do not choose to give you. Recognize that you cannot control how other people behave. Remind yourself that you can work hard for health, love, peace, and prosperity. We have a very small circle of what we control in life: ourselves and our actions.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your goals met other than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt, seek out new ways to get what you want. Look to the future and how to fulfill your needs to live a healthier life.
8. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Forgiveness is about personal power. When you are living without forgiveness, you give your power away.
9. Amend your grievance story to remind yourself of the heroic choice to forgive. If and when you retell this story, focus on you and the forgiveness rather than on the other person and the offense.

Not a Direct Journey

The journey of forgiveness does not always follow a direct path and, in many ways, parallels the stages of grief. It weaves, turns, and sometimes even goes in reverse.

As adoptive parents, foster parents, and relative caregivers of children, our role is to make a concerted effort to live a life of forgiveness. It won't always be easy, but choosing forgiveness gives you the power

to direct your own life. It improves your own physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being and creates a healthier foundation for the children you support.

As the ancient Sanskrit poem of India explains, “There is only one defect in forgiving persons...that defect is that people take a forgiving person to be weak. That defect, however, should not be taken into consideration, for forgiveness is a great power.”

Each person’s journey of forgiveness is both deeply personal and unique. Although there is no single step-by-step program that will meet everyone’s circumstances, there are resources and people who can walk with you on your journey. There is always hope to live in the freedom of forgiveness.

This tip sheet is an adaptation from the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families’ Forgiveness Curriculum, © 2009.

Resources

Tip Sheet

- [Teaching Forgiveness for Big Hurts](#)

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Red, Blue, and Yellow Yarn: A Tale of Forgiveness*, by Miriam R. Kosman
- [Partners Newsletter: Forgiveness](#)

Additional Resources

- [Forgiveness Factor](#)
- [International Forgiveness Institute](#)