

## FORGIVENESS

By Mayo Clinic staff  
Katherine Piderman, Ph.D.

Nearly everyone has been hurt by the actions or words of another. Perhaps your mother criticized your parenting skills or your partner had an affair. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness and even vengeance — but if you don't practice forgiveness, you may be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy.

Here, Katherine Piderman, Ph.D., staff chaplain at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn., discusses forgiveness and how it can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

What is forgiveness?

Generally, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you may always remain a part of your life, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life.

What are the benefits of forgiving someone?

Letting go of grudges and bitterness makes way for compassion, kindness and peace. Forgiveness can lead to:

- Healthier relationships
- Greater spiritual and psychological well-being
- Less stress and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety and chronic pain
- Lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse

Why is it so easy to hold a grudge?

When you're hurt by someone you love and trust, you may become angry, sad or confused. If you dwell on hurtful events or situations, grudges filled with resentment, vengeance and hostility may take root. If you allow negative feelings to crowd out positive feelings, you may find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice.

What are the effects of holding a grudge?

If you're unforgiving, you may pay the price repeatedly by bringing anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience. Your life may become so wrapped up in the wrong that you can't enjoy the present. You may become depressed or anxious. You may feel that your life lacks meaning or purpose, or that you're at odds with your spiritual beliefs. You may lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others.

How do I reach a state of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. A way to begin is by recognizing the value of forgiveness and its importance in your life at a given time. Then reflect on the facts of the situation, how you've reacted, and how this combination has affected your life, health and well-being. When you're ready, actively choose to forgive the person who's offended you. Move away from your role as victim and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in your life. As you let go of grudges, you'll no longer define your life by how you've been hurt. You may even find compassion and understanding.

Forgiveness can be challenging. It may be particularly hard to forgive someone who doesn't admit wrong or doesn't speak of his or her sorrow. If you find yourself stuck, it may help to write in a journal, pray or use guided meditation. You may want to talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, or an unbiased family member or friend. You may also want to reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who've forgiven you. Keep in mind that forgiveness has the potential to increase your sense of integrity, peace and overall well-being. Does forgiveness guarantee reconciliation?

If the hurtful event involved someone whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness may lead to reconciliation. This isn't always the case, however. Reconciliation may be impossible if the offender has died or is unwilling to communicate with you. In other cases, reconciliation may not be appropriate, especially if you were attacked or assaulted. But even in those cases, forgiveness is still possible — even if reconciliation isn't.

What if I have to interact with the person who hurt me but I don't want to?

If you haven't reached a state of forgiveness, being near the person who hurt you may be tense and stressful. To handle these situations, remember that you have a choice whether or not to attend specific functions and gatherings. Respect yourself and do what seems best. If you choose to attend, don't be surprised by a certain amount of awkwardness and perhaps even more intense feelings. Do your best to keep an open heart and mind. You may find that the gathering helps you to move forward with forgiveness.

What if the person I'm forgiving doesn't change?

Getting another person to change his or her actions, behavior or words isn't the point of forgiveness. Think of forgiveness more about how it can change your life — by bringing you more peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing. Forgiveness takes away the power the other person continues to wield in your life.

What if I'm the one who needs forgiveness?

Consider admitting the wrong you've done to those you've harmed, speaking of your sincere sorrow or regret, and specifically asking for forgiveness — without making excuses. Remember, however, you can't force someone to forgive you. Others need to move to forgiveness in their own time. Simply acknowledge your faults and admit your mistakes. Then commit to treating others with compassion, empathy and respect.

Note: by Janet Lui...Add this to the Christian understanding of forgiveness and the core value that it holds and we can begin to understand why it is not a suggestion but a central theme in the Christian journey.