



the art of forgiveness

Letting go of that grudge can make you happier—and healthier

When Catherine O'Brien's husband asked for a divorce, she felt like her whole world had erupted. A video producer in a university media program, O'Brien vividly remembers careening through the full range of emotions that come with a traumatic divorce, from anger to loss to feelings of betrayal.

The newly single mother of two picked herself up and moved on—or so she thought. Seven years after the divorce papers were signed, she realized that the bad feelings were still there. "I just hated him," O'Brien says. "I was really angry. I felt like he had disrupted the normal progression of my life."

She realized her emotions were running high, but O'Brien says the anger wasn't just in her head. It felt like her whole body was taking a hit. "I was sick all the time," she remembers. "I seemed to get every little bug in the world."

THE DANGEROUS GRUDGE

When you feel you've been wronged, it's natural to be angry and hurt. But carrying that pain around can wreak havoc with your emotional well-being. People who have a tough time dealing with life's unkindnesses feel a lack of control, are less optimistic and face increased risk of depression. And stress can even put your physical health in jeopardy.

“Holding on to anger is simply another form of stress on the body,” explains Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., author of *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness* and director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, an innovative study that investigates the relationship between holding a grudge and wellness. “Every time you remember that ex-husband you’re angry with, your body releases stress hormones that can cause harmful alterations in your cardiovascular system, your neurological system and your immune system.”

Robert D. Enright, Ph.D., at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has been investigating the connection between forgiveness and human physiology for 15 years. According to his research, less-forgiving people suffer more from chronic illnesses. When you’re ramped up on anger-induced stress, for example, cholesterol gets pumped into your arteries, and that can cause harmful plaque to build up. Your blood pressure, heart rate and arterial-wall pressure head north, which can damage your heart and blood vessels over time. And if you have diabetes, stress signals the liver to release chemicals, depleting resources in other parts of your body. Ultimately, stress causes a gentle wearing down of the body’s systems over time.

LETTING GO

So what’s the first step in learning how to forgive? Revising the story you tell yourself about what happened is key. When you hold a grudge, you replay a tape in your head that can redefine your self-image. O’Brien says she remembers the moment she realized she had to rewrite her history. “I was at a party and a friend introduced

me to someone and said, ‘I want you to meet this person. Her husband left her too.’ It was really sobering. I had become that story.”

Feeling victimized and focusing your energy on blaming the offender only feeds the pain and robs you of your power. If you decide someone else is responsible for your suffering, then you become dependent on that person to make you feel better. But if you can take ownership of your feelings, learn to be less blaming and recast yourself as a hero who has overcome an injustice, a feeling of peace will begin to break through. Forgiving doesn’t mean you have to like what happened. Your goal is simply to release the bad feelings so you can start to feel better.

Forgiveness is a skill like any other, and the more you practice it, the easier it becomes. Of course, there will be times when the pain tries to make a comeback, but there are proven techniques you can use to quash it before it takes hold. Participants in the Forgiveness Project, for example, use guided imagery and the Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique (PERT) to keep anger and stress at bay. In the latter, the individual focuses on his or her stomach and first takes two long, deep breaths. Then, on the third inhalation, participants are asked to imagine someone they love or a peaceful scene. Practicing PERT is a useful way to get control over painful emotions and regain a sense of calm.

Dr. Luskin says it’s also important to focus on the positive by practicing gratitude throughout the day—thanking a friendly service person or stopping to appreciate a beautiful garden. If you take more time to treasure life’s gifts, he explains, you’ll simply end up with less time and energy for nursing grudges.

RESOURCES

FORGIVENESS IS A CHOICE: A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS FOR RESOLVING ANGER AND RESTORING HOPE, BY ROBERT D. ENRIGHT, PH.D. (SEPTEMBER 2001)

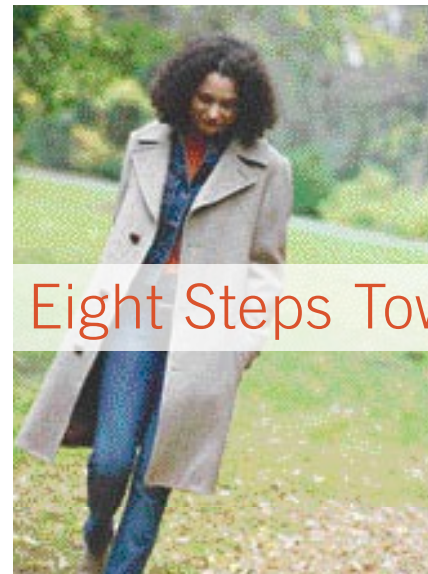
FORGIVE FOR GOOD: A PROVEN PRESCRIPTION FOR HEALTH AND HAPPINESS, BY FREDERIC LUSKIN, PH.D. (DECEMBER 2001)

www.forgiving.org and www.learningtoforgive.com

In the Stanford project, those who learned how to forgive showed a 70 percent decrease in feelings of hurt and a 27 percent reduction in symptoms of stress such as headaches, back-

aches, stomachaches, dizziness, tiredness and muscle tension.

As for Catherine O’Brien, participating in the project helped her realize she had control over her anger, and that was the first step to forgiving her ex-husband. “The only person I was hurting was myself,” she says. “If I hadn’t learned to forgive, I think the anger would have just gone on forever. But I was able to let go of everything and I just felt free. This is one of the best gifts I’ve ever received.”



Eight Steps Toward Forgiveness

Whether you’re trying to forgive a cheating spouse, a tyrannical boss or a meddling in-law, here’s how to let go:

1. TALK TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE.
2. UNDERSTAND THAT FORGIVENESS IS FOR YOU, NOT FOR ANYONE ELSE.
3. KEEP IN MIND THAT FORGIVING SOMEONE DOESN’T NECESSARILY MEAN RECONCILING WITH THEM OR CONDONING WHAT THEY DID. YOUR GOAL IS SIMPLY TO LET GO OF THE PAIN.
4. GET THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE. KEEP IN MIND THAT YOUR SUFFERING IS COMING FROM HURT FEELINGS YOU’RE EXPERIENCING NOW, NOT WHAT HAPPENED WEEKS, MONTHS OR YEARS AGO.
5. WHEN THE BAD FEELINGS COME, USE A SIMPLE STRESS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUE LIKE YOGA OR MEDITATION TO CALM YOUR MIND AND BODY.
6. AVOID REPLAYING THE HURTFUL INCIDENT IN YOUR MIND.
7. REMEMBER THAT LIVING LIFE WELL IS YOUR BEST REVENGE. RATHER THAN RELINQUISHING YOUR POWER TO THE PERSON WHO HURT YOU, TAKE POSITIVE ACTION BY SEEKING OUT LOVE, BEAUTY AND KINDNESS.
8. REMIND YOURSELF THAT YOU’RE NO LONGER THE VICTIM—YOU’VE MADE A HEROIC CHOICE TO FORGIVE.

SOURCE: WWW.LEARNINGTOFORGIVE.COM