

Forgiveness

In our work with relationship issues, we have noticed something striking: those people who we guided to include forgiveness of self and other in their process made the deepest and most complete resolutions of their issues. In thinking of these sessions and others with couples dealing with hurt, betrayal and dishonesty, we were struck by the incredible healing power of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a remarkable process that simultaneously engages the spiritual, emotional, psychological, mental and physical levels of being. All of the world's religions acknowledge forgiveness as one of the highest expressions of humanity. For example, Pastor John MacArthur says, "Forgiveness unleashes joy. It brings peace. It washes the slate clean. It sets all the highest values of love in motion." The Hindu Mahabharata says "Forgiveness is Brahma; forgiveness is holiness; and by forgiveness is it that the universe is held together. Forgiveness is the highest virtue."

The study of forgiveness has recently attracted great attention in the scientific community as well. The Stanford Forgiveness Project focuses on training forgiveness as a way to ameliorate the anger and distress involved in feeling hurt. The idea emerged from several studies clearly showing the harmful effects of unmanaged anger and hostility on cardiovascular health as well as on interpersonal relationships. For example, one study at Harvard School of Public Health found that men who scored highest on an anger scale were three times more likely to develop heart disease over a seven year period than low scorers.

But while everything acknowledges that forgiveness is a wonderful concept, very few people know how to practice it effectively. If you look inside and realize that you are harboring one or more resentments that cause bitterness in your heart, and would like to initiate a process of forgiveness, here are some tips on how to proceed. You may have to repeat this process several times, if it turns out you were not ready to fully release your hurt, and if you are still too consumed by anger.

1. Understand that forgiving does not mean forgetting, or giving permission for the behavior to be repeated. It does not mean saying that what was done was acceptable. Forgiveness is often needed for behaviors that were not acceptable and that you should not allow to be repeated.
2. Recognize that YOU are the only one who is being hurt by your non-forgiveness. You feel the anger, the tightness in your stomach. You are the one rehearsing in your mind what you would like to say or do to 'punish' them. When there is no forgiveness, the bitterness lingers -- and when you could be enjoying today's pleasures, you are upsetting yourself with yesterday's injustices. You give control of your emotions to the person who hurt you. It's been said that the best revenge is your own calmness.
3. Make a list of what specific actions you need to forgive. What was actually done that caused your pain?

4. Acknowledge your part in each of the items on your list. Did you stay when you could or should have left? Did you draw this energy to you in some manner? If so, then you, too, have some responsibility. Seeing this lets you move away from a pure victim stance.

5. Realize that the other person(s) did the best that they could have done. Why did the person hurt us? They like you are an imperfect human being. Instead of thinking that you would never do such an offense, realize that if you had been that person (with his or her karmic situation), you could have done exactly the same thing. The incident was not about you; it was about the wrongdoer's misguided attempt to meet his or her own needs.

6. Realize the futility of "grudges." Sometimes we hold a grudge as if that would punish the person, but it rarely has that effect. Nor does it assure that he or she will behave considerately in the future. Many persons actually prefer holding on to resentments because of the hidden "fringe benefits" or payoffs. Examine what your possible pay-offs may be in playing the victim or martyr roles.

7. Acknowledge to yourself in writing or out loud what you have ever gained from the relationship with the person(s) who hurt you.

8. Center yourself, and verbally forgive yourself first for anything you might have done, on any level, to contribute to this hurt and resentment. You might say, "I completely forgive myself for anything I have done to contribute to _____."

9. In a similar manner, express forgiveness for the hurts on your list, one by one. Allow yourself to experience the full range of feelings that emerge.

10. It may also be helpful to create a ceremony in which you get rid of your resentments, symbolizing the ending of the link between you. You may choose to visualize placing them on a raft and watching it drift gently away down a river. You may prefer to burn them and scatter the ashes of your resentment list.

11. Visualize the person you are forgiving being blessed by your forgiveness and, as a result, being freed from continuing the behavior that hurt you.

Right now as you think of a hurt or resentment inside, remember that you have a choice. You can decide to be responsible for what you are feeling. Use these guidelines to resolve and release the bitterness, hurt and resentment that is clogging up your heart and life, so that the aliveness and love which is your birthright can again flow through you, and through everyone else you come in contact with. It will also open up the possibility of greater love and intimacy for you as well.

If resentment or other unresolved hurts is eroding your ability to find peace within yourself or your relationships it may be time to seek guidance from a professional. Call us at **(337) 315-3816** for a phone assessment or e-mail questions to millsjerome@bellsouth.net.

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