

Forgiveness revisited

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

Preparing for the holidays with forgiveness an important theme, now's a great time to examine yourself and your behavior and reflect on who you are and who you'd like to be. Always a work in progress – while you'll make mistakes, hopefully you'll learn a lot along the way.

In order to forgive others, you must be able to forgive yourself. This becomes more difficult when you feel you must always be perfect, perhaps demanding this from others, too. Sadly, this need for perfection can lead to serious anxiety and cause much unhappiness for you and others. Sometimes by neglecting to look at your role within a relationship, you may point a finger at the other, insisting that they must be the one to change or give in, while you are infallible.

When two people come to see me because they are not getting along, I often show them a diagram of a circle with two x's inside. These x's within one circle represent a good relationship: what I assume the "couple" (two adults, a parent and child or two friends) are striving for. I then show them a circle with one x in the circle and one outside, as well as an empty circle with both x's on the outside. I point out that those x's outside the circle have a choice – they can stay out of the circle for two hours, two days, two weeks, two years or forever. How long would the couple like to remain outside of the relationship in which they're experiencing conflict? The choice is theirs. Only they can answer that and only you can answer that question within any of your relationships.



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pain. It may be in your head, chest, gut or shoulders. You may feel tired, upset or resentful.

Why do you need to hold onto these feelings and why are you invested in not letting them go? Does it really help you to hold onto them? If so, what's the payoff? How do you justify your anger? Are you proud of your actions? Does it honor the person that you strive to be?

While there may appear to be benefits, usually the cost to your relationships is far greater. Be honest with yourself. How does holding on and being resentful adversely affect you as a person? What will happen if you let go of this heavy load? What will happen if you re-enter the circle, once again try harder, today, for you, for your relationship and for others you care about?

Good relationships require hard work and change on your part. This involves noticing the good in others and not passing judgement even when you're in pain and that seems difficult, if not impossible. It requires judging others favorably even when you feel they are wrong, being more respectful and more sensitive to their needs when you may not agree with them. It is never easy to look outside your own value system and recognize that others may do something differently even when you think that your way is the best.

HERE ARE a few strategies for trying not to judge others, practice forgiveness and work toward reconciliation in your relationships.

Never respond in the moment. Take a step back and ask yourself how you would like to be judged in the same situation.

Open up your ears and your heart to listen and hear what someone has to say. There is always another side to a story and it may differ from yours. That can be okay.

Engage in conversation. Find out how others are feeling. Try and understand why they responded as they did.

Can you make space for those with differing viewpoints and values, instead of labelling "others," rather seeing the person underneath?

When you are having a hard time forgiving your partner or family member, don't forget to ask yourself how long you'd like to stay angry with them. Hours? Days? Years? Now's the perfect moment to seek reconciliation.

In the same way that you would treat your best friend with kindness, learn to look at yourself as a human who sometimes errs. Allow yourself not to have to be perfect and you will be happier.

Forgiveness goes hand in hand with gratitude for all that you have in your life. What are you grateful for?

The more violence and ugliness you experience in your world, the more you have to give of yourself to "do good." You can show others that there is a better way by providing hope and in reaching out to others with love.

Real forgiveness is refusing to hold onto your ill will even when that's extremely difficult to do. Letting go of the grudges and resentments, the righteous indignation, the ill will and your need to punish the other person for their actions frees up your energy to move on, past the pain. This empowers you and allows you to heal. The past is behind you and can't be changed, but you can create a better future. Life is short and you never know what tomorrow may bring. Do you really want to go to bed angry or close the door without trying to work things out? Now as the holidays are at your doorstep, are there people who you want to reach out to, relationships that you want to work on and a hand that you want to extend to bring important people back into your life? If so, decide what you want your relationships to look like and then work at achieving that vision. ■

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Forgiveness is something you do for yourself

While it's possible that it is the other person who has opted to remain outside and not work enough on the relationship, where do you stand in terms of making it easy for them to enter the circle and be accepted as part of the relationship? What role do anger, pain, shame or hurt play in maintaining a status quo that's unacceptable with respect to what you want in a relationship? In other words, if you want to have a better, closer, warmer and more loving relationship, you, too, have an equal, if not more important, role to play.

FORGIVENESS IS something you do for yourself. If you don't learn to let go of your grievances, they'll get in your way, preventing you from moving forward in a relationship. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, condoning or excusing poor behavior; nor does it mean that you're minimizing your own pain. It's never easy to let go and forgive because it has the potential to open you up to further pain. However, not forgiving can be equally, if not more, painful, leaving you with the heavy baggage that you carry around daily, but often fail to see.

It isn't easy to forgive someone, especially after they've hurt you so deeply. It's not easy to go back into the circle. Initially, you may say that you opt out forever – you're done with the relationship. If it's that easy and you can simply dispose of the relationship, it may not have been as important or meaningful to you as you thought. Even when declaring that this is it, you're finished, you may be left with a nagging pain that keeps you questioning, "How could they?" or "Why did they?" You may be sad that you've let go of the relationship, but you have not let go of your anger around it. This lodges itself within you and impairs your actions, thoughts and how you physically feel. You may feel a heaviness accompanying your