



Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a hugely important psychological concept. The act of forgiving can help us to reconcile within a relationship and to attain closure, move on, and overcome the hurt of a wrongdoing. Forgiveness can help us to flourish spiritually as it is a human need to give and/or seek forgiveness—but only when appropriate. Forgiving someone is a way of freeing oneself from anger and retribution and harnessing inner mercy and generosity to give to the wrongdoer; to be forgiven is also freeing from shame and exclusion and harnesses own self-worth and humility.

The process of the act of forgiveness can depend on the frequency, intensity, rate, and type of wrongdoing and it could take a long time (if ever) to forgive the perpetrator. Naturally, just as the seriousness of the offence would increase the pain, so too would forgiving too soon or too late. Misunderstanding forgiveness, not seeing it role modelled, it being given with manipulation (e.g., control or moral superiority) can further block the process and harm all parties involved. Forgiveness is not condemning or condoning the offense, blocking ways of justice being enacted, or blocking true feelings as a victim; furthermore, it neither rules in nor rules out requirements of the offender to apologise, atone, compensate, or in any way behave a certain way—what if they won't? what if they're dead? Such would block a victim's ability to move on. Importantly, whilst forgiveness can help reconciliation (which can be great), it is not essential; forgiveness can be given but re-engaging in certain relationships might be unsafe.

The Four Phases of Forgiveness

1. The Uncovering Phase: one gets understanding into whether and how the offense has hindered one's life. A phase of uncovering and clarifying the nature of the offense and its consequences; a part of this could be looking at how not forgiving is further affecting oneself, e.g. layers of pain and righteous anger, shame, guilt, obsessive thinking of offense/offender, life and belief changes due to the offense

2. The Decision Phase: one gets a true knowledge of the nature of forgiveness then chooses and commits to forgiving. Un-forgiveness can come with many painful states of being (e.g., anger, shame) which can eventually push one to the option of forgiveness to be released from this pain.

3. The Work Phase: one gets to work on forgiving which involves gaining new insight about the offense and the offender and seeing, in less extreme terms, the person and/or the offense and instead reframing with more nuance and perhaps realistic empathy (e.g., product of the time or circumstance). For some people, a lessening of resentment of the wrongdoer is as far as they can go.

4. The Deepening Phase: one gets meaning in the suffering, harnessed empathy with fellow survivors, and decreased negative affect and increased purpose in life. One is freed from the bonds of un-forgiveness, anger, resentment and may increase their own ability to seek forgiveness for their own wrongdoings if apt.

Hurdles: Sometimes, people forgive prematurely as they skip the Uncovering Phase due to their own beliefs, e.g., (i) wanting to be compassionate towards the offender as they are a "good" person of faith, son or daughter, partner, or so on or (ii) not wanting to explore their feelings of hurt, resentment, anger because it is difficult or "not allowed".

Sometimes, people get stuck and overwhelmed in the Uncovering Phase as the true magnitude of the offense is revealed. Indeed, one might have believed they were out of this phase and into the Decision or Work Phases only to find that strong pain remains and they return to the Uncovering Phase. The pain of being offended can be so overwhelming that one abuses drugs to cope and thereby numbs one's true feelings and not effectively deal with them. Alternatively, one might over-identify or see "benefits" (e.g., pity, support from others) in the role of "victim". It might be difficult to relinquish the certainty and attention that comes with this role despite that being counter-productive and hard to face.

Reconciliation: requires two (or more) parties to unite in shared trust and respect to re-establish an ongoing mutually acceptable relationship. Such can happen after parties have respectfully given and received forgiveness. However, sometimes, reconciliation may be risky, imprudent, or indeed impossible. Being hurt again (emotionally, physically, financially, and so on) can be a realistic possibility and direct contact with some offenders might best be avoided.



Requesting and Receiving Forgiveness: Phases for seeking forgiveness mirror the phases of seeking to forgive above. Offenders who seek forgiveness must:

- ❖ face the aspects and consequences of their wrongdoing and their own guilt and shame of it and do so for themselves and the one they hurt;
- ❖ accept the need to ask for forgiveness and be willing to humbly receive it if offered;
- ❖ try to understand how their actions affected the one they offended and do whatever they can to reconcile with/compensate the offended if appropriate, possible, and acceptable (for the offended) to do so;
- ❖ find meaning in their failure and take steps to learn, change, and overcome these failings and to explore the feelings of shame, guilt, remorse, weakness, and so on as appropriate.

Helpful Questions for Forgiveness

Uncovering Phase:

1. In what ways have I denied/"forgotten" that I was offended and the resulting suffering?
2. In what ways have I avoided feeling and managing my anger and suffering?
3. In what ways do I experience, or avoid uncovering, any shame or guilt?
4. In what ways does my unresolved anger affect my physical, emotional, social, and work lives?
5. In what ways am I preoccupied with how I was offended and/or with my offender?
6. In what ways do I compare my own life situation with that of my offender?
7. In what ways has the offense caused permanent or difficult change(s) in my life?
8. How has the offense changed my worldview, faith, beliefs of people?

Decision Phase

1. What is and what isn't forgiveness?
2. In what ways do I realise that, despite my best attempts, I haven't emotionally forgiven?
3. In what ways do I stop myself from confronting my offender's unjust actions toward me?
4. In what ways do I "idolise" or "demonise" my offender, e.g., evil, doesn't need it?
5. In what ways have I failed in trying to forgive my offender?
6. In what ways have I decided or committed to forgive?
7. Am I willing to consider forgiving my offender?
8. What stops me from being (or becoming more) willing to try to forgive now?

Work Phase

1. In what ways have I developed understanding of the offense and its consequences, and a deeper self-compassion?
2. In what ways have my previous attempts to explore, create compassion for and forgive my offender, made it harder for me to realise and feel the consequences of the offense?
3. In what ways (if any) can I seek restitution, i.e., resolve past/protect from future offenses.
4. What stops me from seeking restitution for past offenses and/or protecting myself (and others perhaps) from future offenses by the offender?
5. What can I do now to accept and resolve the pain and consequences of the offender's behaviour?
6. How might I grieve my sadness and pain and use my anger to assertively care for myself?
7. How safe (or possible) is any direct contact with my offender now?
8. What "gift" (specific word, action, gesture) might I give to the offender (even if deceased) as an expression of my intent of mercy or compassion?

Deepening Phase

1. In what ways have I developed through my efforts to feel and manage my anger and suffering, and to act with compassion and mercy toward the offender?
2. In what ways have my efforts to forgive set me free?
3. In what ways do I recognize that I am not alone in my suffering?
4. To what extent do I need to be forgiven, to seek and ask for forgiveness (perhaps even from my offender)?
5. What meaning did I get through my suffering and my trying to forgive (or to be forgiven)?
6. What am I learning about my purpose in life and how I may be called to serve others?