

## Embracing Forgiveness and letting go of bitterness



**When someone you care about hurts you, you can hold on to anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge — or embrace forgiveness and move forward.**

Who hasn't been hurt by the actions or words of another? Perhaps a parent constantly criticised you growing up, a colleague sabotaged a project or your partner had an affair. Or maybe you've had a traumatic experience, such as being physically or emotionally abused

by someone close to you. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger and bitterness — even vengeance.

But if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

### What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness means different things to different people. Generally, however, it involves a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge.

Research shows that people who forgive are happier and healthier than those who hold resentments. All world religions include teachings on the nature of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the act of untying ourselves from the thoughts and feelings that tie us to the offence. It can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

It is not the same as forgetting as the offending act may remain a part of our life. Or excusing the harm done to you or making up with the person who caused the harm. Forgiveness. But forgiving can lessen the event's grip on us and help us move away from the role of victim and can bring a kind of peace that helps you go on with life

An important premise in forgiveness is to accept that at times we are all imperfect, weak, operate out of self-interest and are likely to hurt other people. If we can accept that, there is less to get upset about.

### What are the benefits of forgiving someone?

Letting go of grudges and bitterness can make way for improved health and peace of mind. Forgiveness can lead to:

- Healthier relationships
- Improved mental health
- Less anxiety, stress and depression
- Lower blood pressure and improved heart health
- A stronger immune system
- Improved self-esteem

## Why is it so easy to hold a grudge?

Being hurt by someone, particularly someone you love and trust, can cause anger, sadness and confusion. If you dwell on hurtful events or situations, grudges filled with resentment, vengeance and hostility can take root. If you allow negative feelings to crowd out positive feelings, you might find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice.

Some people are naturally more forgiving than others. But even if you're a grudge holder, almost anyone can learn to be more forgiving.

## What are the effects of holding a grudge?

If you're unforgiving, you might:

- Bring anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience
- Become so wrapped up in the wrong that you can't enjoy the present
- Become depressed or anxious
- Feel that your life lacks meaning or purpose, or that you're at odds with your spiritual beliefs
- Lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others

## How do I reach a state of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a commitment to a personalized process of change. There's no magic formula but these steps may help:

### ■ Steps towards forgiveness

- 1 Identify exactly what the other person did that caused you pain and hurt.
- 2 Acknowledge the effect on yourself. How did it make you feel? What thoughts surround the incident? What did it mean to you? What 'buttons' did it press for you?
- 3 Consider if you have responsibility for any part of it. If so, identify any factors that you may have contributed.
- 4 Consider the other person's situation, intentions and weaknesses. Identify factors in them that may have led to the action.
- 5 Are there any aspects of the behaviour that you are unable to forgive?
- 6 Decide whether forgiveness is appropriate. If the answer is yes, one way forward might be to create a ceremony where you can get rid of your anger. For example, write it all down in a letter or on a sheet of paper and burn it.

## What happens if I can't forgive someone?

Forgiveness can be challenging, especially if the person who's hurt you doesn't admit wrong. If you find yourself stuck:

- Practice empathy. Try seeing the situation from the other person's point of view.
- Ask yourself why he or she would behave in such a way. Perhaps you would have reacted similarly if you faced the same situation.
- Reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who've forgiven you.
- Write in a journal, pray or use guided meditation — or talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, or an impartial loved one or friend.
- Be aware that forgiveness is a process, and even small hurts may need to be revisited and forgiven over and over again.

## Does forgiveness guarantee reconciliation?

If the hurtful event involved someone whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness can lead to reconciliation. This isn't always the case, however.

Reconciliation might be impossible if the offender has died or is unwilling to communicate with you. In other cases, reconciliation might not be appropriate. Still, forgiveness is possible — even if reconciliation isn't.

## 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 peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing. Forgiveness can take away the power the other person continues to wield in your life.

## What if I'm the one who needs forgiveness?

The first step is to honestly assess and acknowledge the wrongs you've done and how they have affected others. Avoid judging yourself too harshly.

If you're truly sorry for something you've said or done, consider admitting it to those you've harmed. Speak of your sincere sorrow or regret, and ask 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. Whatever happens, commit to treating others with compassion, empathy and respect.