



Forgiveness

Maybe it's time to give yourself one of the most important gifts - the gift of forgiveness!

Here's some useful information from a variety of sources, as well as a plan of action -courtesy of PSN and one of the leaders in the field, Robert Caldwell, M. Div., CPC, LPC, who for more than twenty-five years has practiced individual, group, and couple psychotherapy in Bethesda, MD and Washington, DC. He has also been president of the Maryland Mental Health Counselors Association.



[1]As we live, we accumulate experiences - some leave permanent wounds and handicaps. We store many of these as resentments and develop a repertory of coping programs: going numb, denying, forgetting, dissociating, or getting even: overtly by direct action, or covertly by fantasy reprisals called resentments.

All of these defenses enable us to avoid forgiveness. According to Dr. Caldwell, "forgiveness is hard to do and hard to sustain. To a considerable degree **we take an easier path: we live by the energy of our resentments and the power we gain by refusing to forgive.**"

Sometimes, after an injury to our psyche there is a period--from a few days to beyond this lifetime--in which we don't forgive, because we are neither able nor ready. We feel hurt, confused and smarting from being hurt. **We don't know what will happen next or exactly what we should do.**

Instead of stepping up to a course of action, we give puffed-up pleasure to our egos, making ourselves the "good guy" even at the cost (alienation) of assigning the 'bad guy' role to the other person." **There is a bonus for self-righteousness -- we ignore flaws in ourselves,**" according to Caldwell.

"We save ourselves from facing our vulnerabilities . . . maintaining a kind of tense, mechanical balance--formalistic and non-empathic. For many, this is as close as we come to keeping an inner and outer peace."



Our refusal to forgive becomes a part of our self-definition. While we become accustomed to a style of not forgiving, thinking it has given us power, we have, in fact, lost a functional awareness that life has any options other than holding on to grievances. When possessed by an incapacity to forgive, we are more alone and alienated from others. **We often continue to work and play with the unforgivable, "but everything in our own lives is diminished in zest and focus and effectiveness."**

Caldwell says, "in refusing to forgive others . . . we "let ourselves off-the-hook by keeping them on it, but we are really failing to forgive ourselves." **What we're really doing is shunning any awareness of our own deficiencies and antisocial behaviors, because we lack the skills and compassion to build self-forgiveness.** "We have trapped ourselves into believing that our unhappiness originates outside ourselves--in what another did to us, rather than within, in our reactions to what was done to us, in our own pain, and rage, and hopelessness."

The beginning of learning to forgive means taking seriously our own experiences of our hurts and our complicity in how we have shaped and experienced life's happenings. **We need to retrain our focus away from what had been done to us by others. What has happened to us, has indeed happened--and the way we see these things, and feel about them, and seek to act about them, the way we mold and hold them is who we are.** "To allow ourselves to experience and acknowledge our pain, as indeed belonging to us, is the beginning of a path of self-awareness that can lead to healthy forgiveness."

Instead of seeing yourself as a victim, try to re-picture yourself as the strong and unthreatened one. It's time to understand that you can protect yourself from hurt, and you have within yourself, the powers of self-healing, and the capacity for honest forgiveness.

Dr. Caldwell says, "when we begin to claim our powers, to shift from a victim stance to being in charge of our own experience, a fundamental movement into strength occurs. . . . **We become aware of how the development of our personal power is what changes our world, and not vice-versa.**"

Take a look at your strength. **Try to combat an attempt to see the world as filled with dualities: either weak and strong, beautiful and ugly, good and bad, lovable and unlovable, winner or loser.** "This leads us to see ourselves as strong as we see others as weak, we are good as we see others as bad. This is the path which sustains not-forgiving, for to forgive would be to weaken ourselves and become vulnerable to others."



[2]Give yourself a "gift" - look at your strength another way!

While it may sound esoteric - try to see all of life's events as fluid possibilities for creativity. Move away from seeing the interactions of your life - not in an "I win" means "you lose" context.

This will help you draw closer to the idea that forgiveness is learning to identify, to empathize with others. "An "us" and "them" approach to relationships simply will never allow us to experience ourselves as forgiving people, says Caldwell."

Remember: Acceptance does not imply that we approve of all behaviors either in ourselves or others!

Forgiveness is a life journey. Forgiveness cannot be forced. Forgiveness is part of a life development process that values your courage to be happy and belong creatively to others. It is a move away from valuing being "right" or "getting even."

Forgiveness is a pro-active enterprise. Forgiveness takes great courage and assertiveness, for in forgiving we do not react to what others think or do, but act out of our own desires to make our own world more stable.

Confront selected offenders. If the person is available, and within your orbit of interaction, you may move a great psychic distance toward forgiving them, if you let yourself make known your feelings toward them. Since forgiveness is fundamentally about personal power.

It's tough. But **nothing is more empowering than engaging the one who has hurt you in some sort of acknowledgment of your feeling.** The point is to come out of hiding, flex your body/mind, risk taking your space, claim your right to respect and consideration, and offer to the other an opportunity to exchange feelings and to apologize. This action establishes you in the world; the response you receive is secondary.



[3]Forgiveness is not forgetting. What has happened, happened. It was painful. **Forgiveness has to do with learning not to be controlled by feelings of resentment and revenge.** Our memories contribute to helping us guard against damaging experiences being repeated.

Don't expect perfection. We are ever vulnerable to have old hurts recalled as well as being injured anew. We will sometimes be able to forgive, but you may maintain grudges.

The new possibility is to know you may have the wherewithal to give yourself the option to accept the

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other and interact with the other--to the degree you are able--in spite of being wronged, for the "wrong" does not have a great an emotional hold or power it once had.

Remember, only the strong can forgive, and though none of us reach an ideal strength, all of us can become stronger. Forgiveness and strength always travel together!

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