



Forgive and Remember — for Inner Healing

Working with individuals on the issue of anger control, I realised that while some responded positively and quickly to the theory and practical application of the Anger Cycle, others had difficulty.

In many such instances the underlying problem was rooted in resentment and bitterness caused by a previous hurt: the unresolved hurt fuelled a seething anger that burned beneath the surface, sustaining a volatile emotional environment that was easily inflamed by new hurt — real or imagined.

My first awareness of a supplementary approach to working with the more challenging cases of anger control came during my preparation to lead a DivorceCare© seminar. I was struck by the connection made between forgiveness and the control of anger. The DivorceCare© presentation was made within a Christian context, but my own subsequent experience — like that of other therapists — has demonstrated that the focus on forgiveness can be a successful treatment mode in non-religious settings as well.

Why Forgive?

While the concept of forgiveness has generally been viewed as a spiritual matter — as obedience to God — there is credible evidence that there are many practical benefits of forgiving. Rev. Doug Easterday, PhD, minister and clinical psychologist, speaks of forgiveness as the antidote for resentment and anger. The DivorceCare© presentation cites a 16-year research study at Duke University, which concluded that being unforgiving is a health hazard, of particular danger to the heart and the immune system.

According to Dr. Tom Valeo, while it is not always easy to forgive, the benefits of forgiving can be powerful.

He states, “If you can bring yourself to forgive and forget, you are likely to enjoy lower blood pressure, a stronger immune system, and a drop in the stress hormones circulating in your blood...Back pain, stomach problems, and headaches may disappear. And you’ll reduce the anger, bitterness, resentment, depression, and other negative emotions that accompany the failure to forgive.”

Obstacles to Forgiving

One of the major obstacles to a person's ability to forgive is the time-worn but unfortunate pairing of 'forgive' and 'forget'.

Since it is virtually impossible to forget, the tendency is to assume that to forgive is also not feasible. By accepting the suggestion of a 'forgive and remember' approach, individuals, couples, and families have been able to view the challenge of forgiving more positively.

Charlotte Witvliet, PhD writes: "Forgiveness does not involve a literal forgetting. Forgiveness involves remembering graciously. The forgiver remembers the true though painful parts, but without the embellishment of angry adjectives and adverbs that stir up contempt."

The following anonymous comment also puts the idea into clear perspective: "Forgive and forget is a myth. You may never forget; you can choose to forgive. As life goes on and you remember, then is the time to once again remember that you have already forgiven. Mentally forgive again if necessary, then move forward."

Ignorance of what forgiving is and is not also stands in the way of people accepting the efficacy of going that route. Practitioners vary in their descriptions of forgiveness; Rev. Dr. Easterday prefers the following:

Forgiveness Is Not

- a feeling;
- pretending that you were not hurt;
- saying that what the person did was not wrong;
- having to trust the other person again, without it being earned;
- primarily for the benefit of the other person;
- relieving the other person of responsibility for their action;
- assuming that reconciliation must follow.

Forgiveness Is

- a decision — one that only you can make;
- a process;
- primarily for your benefit;
- a way toward inner healing.

Steps in Forgiving

The practice of forgiving is open to various approaches, but we commend this two-step approach:

Step 1. The decision: made after facing the pain and grief and after understanding and accepting the need and benefits of forgiving. This may be a one-time occurrence or, in more difficult situations, a repeated choice.

Step 2. The process, the real work, takes time: depending on the extent and/or duration of the hurt, this may range from several weeks to several years. The important factor here is that the action continues, in support of the decision. As therapists regularly bear witness, a sense of peace will be the clue that you have really forgiven.

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For Further Reading:

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