

Is Forgiveness Therapy for You?

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We all have ideas of what forgiveness is and what it isn't. The most common of these in American society is the saying, "forgive and forget." But forgetting has very little to do with forgiveness. In fact, forgetting can be a very unhealthy response to injustice.

To define forgiveness, it can be helpful to first look at what forgiveness is not. It has already been stated that forgiveness is not forgetting. It is also not reconciliation or trusting the offender again. In fact, a person can forgive without ever experiencing reconciliation with the offender. This may be because the offender does not want to reconcile or because it would be unhealthy to reconcile with him or her.

Forgiveness is also not pretending as if nothing happened. It is not letting the offender off the hook. It is not denying the hurt. It is not condoning or excusing the injustice. It is not merely calming down. It is not pseudo-forgiveness (using forgiveness as a tool to manipulate). And it does not equal trust.

Instead, Dr. Robert Enright, a pioneer in forgiveness therapy, writes this definition:

"When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence and love; as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts.

"Forgiving begins with pain and that we have a right to our feelings. First, we are acknowledging that the offense was unfair and will always continue to be unfair. Second, we have a moral right to anger; it is fair to cling to our view that people do not have a right to hurt us. We have a right to respect. Third, forgiveness requires giving up something to which we have a right — namely our anger or resentment."

Enright goes on to say that forgiving someone amounts to an act of mercy. While mercy may not be well-deserved, those who forgive are actively changing the relationship between themselves and the offender. They may still feel angry, but when they forgive, they free themselves from being controlled by anger. In this way, they are promoting the idea that all human beings are worthy of respect, even those who wrong us.

In other words, forgiveness is more than accepting what happened, ceasing to be angry, being neutral toward the offender or making oneself feel good. It conversely frees the victim of the injustice to no longer be a slave to the feelings of anger, depression and pain. Forgiveness is, instead, a process that does not remove pain, but makes the pain bearable. As an alternative, individuals are free to express their anger in healthier ways.

Forgiveness is an important skill that imparts a freedom that can never be found through other avenues. Some motives that can spur a journey toward forgiveness include:

- I am tired of feeling this pain and want it to stop.
- I don't want to go on letting this person hurt me.
- If I forgive, I will feel better.
- If I forgive, maybe I will become physically or psychologically healthier.
- I don't want to give this person the satisfaction of hurting me.
- I need to forgive as part of my faith.

Forgiveness has been found to result in a significant decrease in anger, depression, anxiety and other negative feelings. It has also been linked with a marked increase in hope and general well-being. It has even been correlated with lower blood pressure!

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