

Too Sexy for That Grudge and Other Reasons to Practice Forgiveness

“It is much more agreeable to offend and later ask forgiveness than to be offended and grant forgiveness.” (Friedrich Nietzsche). Most of us can relate. Sometimes we mistake forgiveness with forgetting and hold on to grudges to protect ourselves from being hurt again. Sometimes holding on to a grudge makes us feel like we have more power or control. Sometimes we think revenge would make us feel better. And sometimes it’s easier to stay angry than it is to explore the hurt and fear that often underlies the anger.

But the science is in. Forgiveness makes us happier. Note that forgiveness does not mean forgetting or condoning an offense or absolving someone of responsibility for his or her hurtful actions. Forgiveness simply involves letting go of resentment turning off the desire for revenge, and finding compassion for the person who harmed you. The upside is that people who have forgiven others report more life satisfaction and less psychological distress, anxiety, and sadness.

On the other hand, unforgiveness -- holding onto grudges or ruminating about frustration towards someone -- has a negative impact on our emotional and physical wellbeing. It’s stressful and unpleasant. Think about someone who hurt, mistreated, offended or betrayed you. Give yourself a moment to ruminate on what they did and fantasize your revenge. How do you feel while you are doing this? You probably feel some combination of anger, sadness, and anxiety. Most people do.

Holding onto grudges also impacts us physically. Not only does unforgiveness make us sweat more and increase our blood pressure and heart rate, it can make us fat. Unforgiveness increases our baseline levels of cortisol. Cortisol metabolizes fat for quick response to stress and when the stress ends, redeposits the fat around the waist so that it is easily accessible.

Unforgiveness also wrecks relationships. Partners in relationships that are centered on the desire for revenge rather than on forgiveness experience more conflict and are not as able to compromise as partners who are more focused on forgiving. They become more competitive, more focused on getting even and on being right than on compromising and working with each other.

And at the end of the day, we’re only hurting ourselves putting all that energy into holding on to a grudge. While we’re sitting around feeling angry at the awful thing someone did to us, they are eating a sandwich or playing golf or doing whatever it is that they do. They probably aren’t thinking about us at all. So why set yourself free and forgive them?

Five steps to forgiveness:

1. Remind yourself that you are doing this for yourself, not for anyone else.

2. Journal or talk about what happened so that you can articulate how what happened wasn't OK and let yourself get in touch with how the offense made you feel. If you feel angry or frustrated about what happened, go deeper. Feel the fear, hurt or sadness that drives the anger or frustration. If you still feel a lot of anger, write out all the angry words you can think of (but should never say) on a huge piece of paper. Pretend as if you are doing graffiti. (Note that it's best to rip this up when you are done.) Stomping on bubble wrap while you think about the issue might also help.

3. Reframe the incident. Even though the offense feels like it was about you, it wasn't. It was about them – their thoughts, their feelings, and their dysfunction.

4. Try compassion. Think about whatever factors in the offender's past may have impacted their hurtful behavior towards you. Perhaps they were abused or never felt loved by their parents. Perhaps they have been hurt in the past or were having a rotten, no-good, very bad day. Perhaps they are miserable or afraid or just stressed out of their minds.

5. Finally, try silently directing this mantra towards them, "I forgive you for anything you've done that's caused me harm and ask you to forgive me for anything I've done that's caused you harm." You should say it at least three times a day for however long it takes.

6. Tune in to your body and see if this feels better than holding a grudge.

*For a short review of the research on forgiveness and happiness, see *The New Science of Forgiveness* by Everett L. Worthington Jr. in Greater Good – an online magazine from U.C. Berkely.

This column originally appeared in Outlook.