

6 Steps Toward **FORGIVENESS**



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This picture is used for illustrative purposes only.

Any person shown is a model.

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Are you struggling with how to forgive someone?

Did you experience something so devastating that you can't seem to forgive the person who did it? Maybe you've tried to just forget about it, but the pain still lingers. Maybe this painful event makes you angry, or maybe depressed, and you can't let go of these intense emotions. You may not believe the person deserves forgiveness, so you carry this resentment around with you. Does this person even know you are still angry?

Maybe you know what should be forgiven and are scared of how this will go. Maybe it will mean exploring childhood experiences that you want to leave in the past. Or, perhaps you experienced something as an adult that you never thought you would have to endure at the hands of someone you once cared for. Have you considered forgiving this person because the weight of your anger affects you so much? Or, maybe you have tried to forgive, or thought you already forgave him/her, but the emotions continue to creep back up. There tends to be confusion around what forgiveness is and what it is not. Who does forgiveness benefit?

Forgiveness Means Emotional Freedom For YOU!

Forgiveness is the act of working through hurt caused by another person, seeing the other person's perspective and not holding onto strong negative emotions regarding the incident or the person who committed the hurtful action(s).

There are surely benefits to forgiving someone. You may believe that if you forgive, you are letting the person who did wrong get off the hook. However, that's not the case. Each person is accountable to him/herself with every decision s/he makes. Holding a person accountable by continuing to feel strongly about the mistake s/he made only impacts your emotional and mental well-being and maybe even your relationships. If you are still upset, the emotions that are tied to the event – the anger, sadness, regret, discomfort, etc – likely affect you a lot more than the person who made the mistake. It's healthy for you to let go of these emotions so that you can live with the freedom to feel naturally, rather than feeling something because of past experiences. Forgiveness reduces the intensity of past emotional experiences and helps you feel lighter on your feet.

Forgiving Someone Is Too Difficult. Why Should I Forgive When I Was Wronged?

You're right! Forgiving someone is very difficult, and you were wronged! Your experience is important and valid. However, forgiving someone can actually help you far more than it can impact the other person. Do you want to continue to carry around the pain from this experience? Do you notice that the pain affects you in other areas of your life, making it difficult to engage fully with your current experiences? Chances are that this hurt impacts your relationships, the decisions you make and even how you handle triggering situations. But, you don't have to let the hurt control your life.

Is The Pain From Being Hurt Affecting You Today?

The following 6 steps can help you move past your anger, depression and any other residual feelings you have toward a challenging person.

6 Steps Towards Forgiveness

1 - Consider if You Are Really Ready to Forgive

It's okay if you are not ready. Determining readiness is an important part of the process. Letting go means finding acceptance and acknowledging that the way you thought things to be or the way things were may not be as true today. Being ready means looking at all aspects of what happened and identifying any hidden meaning in your painful experience, even the good that may have come from it.

An experienced therapist can help you with this step by listening to how you talk about the situation. A objective therapist can see the emotions you carry with you and reflect back to you what you are saying. During therapy, you can come to see how your emotions may be impacting your life through your decisions, your relationships and your overall mental health.

2 - Reflect & Feel the Pain

Once you are ready to forgive, the first step is to identify how the situation makes you feel (e.g. – angry, sad, scared, rejected, betrayed). Once you have acknowledged your emotions, then allow yourself to really feel the pain, without pushing away the discomfort that it brings. In this step, ask yourself those questions you have for the person who wronged you. Consider getting out your emotions in healthy ways. Whatever you need to do to experience the pain, it is okay as long as it is not revengeful or hurtful to

anyone or anything. It needs to be productive and respectful of yourself and others. Get support from loved ones who can validate your feelings from the situation.

One reason people don't allow themselves to feel the pain is because it may seem too difficult emotionally. It certainly can be an uncomfortable experience. However, the relief you experience afterwards will allow you to move forward from the pain and toward emotional freedom. Chances are that the main feeling you experience (anger, fear, sadness, etc) is very present in many of your life struggles, and by releasing this emotion, you will have more choices in your response to other situations that life presents.

Maybe you worry that something bad will happen if you allow yourself to experience the pain, or maybe you worry that others around you will judge you for how you feel. Therapy can offer a safe environment where you can fully experience and express emotions of any kind without judgement. An experienced therapist can help illicit your emotions, allow you to feel the intensity, and help you let them go as well.

3 - Acknowledge & Accept That Everyone Is Human

This step is crucial in moving forward because it allows you to better understand why the person did what s/he did that caused you pain. It even allows for the possibility that the situation was accidental and that harm was not intended at all. Accepting others will help you see the fact that all human beings make mistakes and that not everyone may choose to learn from their mistakes. We have no control over how others respond to the situations that hurt us. We are all accountable to ourselves only, or to a higher power if you hold such beliefs. Finding perspective for the other person's situation will allow you to understand which emotions are yours for you to worry about and which belong to that person. This process can help you let go of your intense emotions attached to the painful situation.

To complete this crucial step, allow yourself to think about the person who wronged you. Try to see him/her as a whole person, one who has strengths as well as weaknesses, just as everyone else. Think about his/her life circumstances that make him/her the person he/she is. Consider how you can develop empathy for his/her situation. S/he likely has had life struggles, just as you have, and perhaps s/he has not quite figured out how to work through them. Perhaps this is what contributed to the way s/he wronged you. Can you think of something you ever did and later had regret over? Can you relate to feelings of remorse? Even if s/he does not have regret, that is for him/her to worry about. You can only worry about your life and how you overcome life trials and tribulations. While you're not responsible for what happened, seeing the other person's point of view can begin to change your perspective.

Be careful with this step that you do not assume the other person's perspective. Our emotions can often put words, beliefs, or motives, (etc.) in place for the other person without realizing that our own emotions are influencing our negative beliefs about the situation.

Talking with a trained professional can help in what sometimes can be a long process for this step. A therapist is objective and can see both sides of the situation more easily than those directly involved. Therapy can help you get the support you may need to truly accept the person who wronged you as a whole, fallible human being. A therapist can help you see the possible strengths and weaknesses of the person and try to find an understanding as to how the negative situation evolved in the first place, if that's applicable.

4 - Release The Victim Role & Find Meaning

Listen to yourself talk when discussing your experience. What kind of language do you use to describe this situation? Do you take on the victim role? While what happened is not your fault and not something you chose, consider what you can learn from it. Is there something you can take away to reduce the chances of this happening again?

Ask yourself the following...

- How was this situation helped me?
- What is the meaning of this event in my life's bigger picture? Can I bring myself to believe that the situation was meant to occur?
- What are the life lessons I am suppose to learn?

Sometimes going through the previous steps can help this step happen naturally. This process helps you look at the underlying residual feelings that may continue to present themselves through how you talk about the situation overall. If you hear yourself talking as though you were a victim to the circumstances, then you may still have lingering, unresolved pain. Finding meaning in the situation will help you see that the situation was not all bad, even when a lot of "bad" may have resulted from it.

This can sometimes be a difficult step to take because it assumes a level of acceptance of the painful event. You may even find that this step comes naturally for you after you have worked the previously identified steps. If you are unable to do this on your own, then choosing to come to therapy may be what you need. A therapist can help look at the bigger picture with you and identify what a potential meaning could be. Hearing an objective perspective from a professional can often help you see things that may be cloudy for you since you were directly impacted.

5 - Be Thankful

Perhaps if you could turn back time, you would not want this situation to occur. It's okay to feel this way. No one wants to have unnecessary difficulties. But, maybe you can be thankful that you survived the challenges of this event. Or, maybe you can be thankful for the situation itself because you learned so much or because it brought you closer to your

loved ones. Whatever it is, find something to be thankful for, without holding resentments.

This step also helps you keep a positive outlook on the situation and helps you prevent any residual negative feelings from creeping back up. It's true that your emotions may come and go at times – that is to be expected. However, when those emotions arise, it is good to have a balanced perspective so that those feelings do not overwhelm you.

Depending on your situation, you may find that it's impossible to be thankful for any part of what happened. I can understand how this may be the case, especially if the circumstances seem unforgivable. As a trained professional, I can help you find something to be thankful for, even if just the smallest aspect. Together, we can reflect on your life's bigger picture and see how your situation, as horrible as it was, may in fact have had some good with it too.

6 - Forgive

Decide whether or not you need to talk with the person who wronged you to gain closure. Give this a lot of thought, because you cannot control how s/she will respond to you. You can only control how you will present yourself to him/her. If you decide you need to do this, then be ready for a wave of emotions, perhaps even new emotions.

Ask yourself...

- Do you really need to talk with him/her?
- Are you really ready for this?
- What is your intention in doing this?
- Do you need anything from this person...ie.) acknowledgement, an apology,?
- Will s/he be able to give you what you need?
- Would writing a letter that goes un-mailed help you gain closure?

Confronting someone that has hurt you will not always give you what you are looking for. Keep in mind that forgiving someone is intended to help you move forward in life so that your life is not restricted by previous situations. There's a strong chance that this person is not hurting the way you are and therefore may not be able to give you what you are looking for.

Forgiving someone in this step means to let go of the hurt. It will give you the closure you are longing for by helping you to not have your life restricted by this situation that hurt you. This closure will help put an end to this pain-filled chapter in your life, and help you open the next chapter. It can allow you to accept things as they now are and not remain in the past. You can gain a sense of emotional freedom and will find happiness in your future.

You Don't Have To Hang Onto The Resentments Any Longer

Forgiveness can be a difficult process to go through on your own. Often times, talking with an objective professional can help. Doing it on your own can seem like you are on a Merry-Go-Round, going in circles, unable to stop the cycle of emotions. It's also okay if you need help along the way.

I Can Help You Forgive

Having worked in the mental health field since 1999, I have come across many people of all ages who reaped the benefits of forgiveness. Some people did not realize they needed to forgive someone until entering into therapy and recognized how patterns in their relationships stemmed from past hurts by another person.

While in therapy with me, I want you to feel as though you are free to share as much as you feel necessary, without fear of judgment, so that I can help you get to where you want to be in life. Everyone's experience is real for that individual, and I would not want you to feel anything but validated in your journey towards forgiveness.

I have helped many people explore their path towards forgiving. For example, I have worked with many adult clients in forgiving their parents for childhood circumstances. One woman* comes to mind who struggled with the way in which her parents disciplined her and the overall level of anger in her childhood home. She always knew that this was something that angered her, but she never realized it was still active in her current life until she came in for therapy to work on co-parenting with her husband. She noticed that she, too, was losing her temper with her kids, while her husband seemed to take the opposite role with the children and over-compensate for her temper.

While working on areas in her current life with her husband and their co-parenting, we began to explore her own childhood. As she listened to herself described her childhood home, she noticed the similarities. Together we processed what information she knew to be true for her parents' childhood to give her a new perspective. With time of processing her situation, she was able to find forgiveness toward her parents, which in turn helped her with her marriage and co-parenting. She was able to better align herself with her spouse and be more of a parent to her children so they can learn from her rather than fear her.

Many times, clients have been able to forgive something they once believed to be unforgivable. Once they worked through this process of forgiveness, they noticed a sense of relief. You may experience similar relief over time or even quickly. It all depends on your particular situation and your willingness to move forward. People who forgive will likely be able to find connections from their past hurt to their current life. This, in turn, helps them have more of an informed and insightful way of responding to current life situations and not reacting out of emotion. Gaining insight into yourself will help you learn all about who you are as a whole person (including your strengths and weaknesses), why you do things that you do and why you choose to have connections to certain types

people. As you gain greater insight into yourself, your relationships can start from a healthier place and continue to be healthy and fulfilling.

MLB THERAPY CAN HELP

If you would like help in going through the process of forgiveness, feel free to contact me at (703) 554-2882. I am happy to provide a free 15-minute phone consultation to go over your specific situation and how I may be able to help in your journey. You can ask your questions about how therapy can help in your journey towards forgiveness, or about my practice in general.

Michelle Bogdan, LCSW entered the mental health field working with Severely Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents post graduation with her Bachelor's Degree in Human Development and Sociology Minor from Binghamton University in 1999. She later graduated with her Master's in Social Work (MSW) with an academic concentration in Alcohol and Other Drugs in 2003 from the University of Buffalo, in Buffalo, New York. While her private practice, MLB Therapy, PLLC, opened in 2012, she has been providing therapy since 2003.

*The person referenced in this report is not a real person, rather a fictitious person, made from many clinical experiences. This example is strictly intended to help you understand how therapy can help someone with forgiving others.