

## Forgiveness

One of the thorniest and most difficult things we humans are ever called upon to do is to respond to evil with kindness, and to forgive the unforgivable. We love to read stories about people who have responded to hatred with love, but when that very thing is demanded of us personally, our default seems to be anger, angst (dread or anguish), depression, righteousness, hatred, etc. Yet study after study shows that one of the keys to longevity and good health is to develop a habit of gratitude and let go of past hurts.



Want to live a long, happy life? Forgive the unforgivable. It really is the kindest thing you can do for yourself. Your enemy may not deserve to be forgiven for all the pain and sadness and suffering purposefully inflicted on your life, but *you* deserve to be free of this evil. As **Ann Landers** often said, "hate is like an acid. It damages the vessel in which it is stored, and destroys the vessel on which it is poured."

### 13 Steps to forgiveness....

1. **Realize that the hate you feel toward your enemy does not harm him or her in the slightest.** Chances are, your enemy has gone on with life and hasn't given you another thought. "Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for it to kill your enemy." spoken by Nelson Mandela.
2. **Understand that the best revenge against your enemies is to live a successful and happy life.** Want to get even with someone who tried to destroy you? Show them and show yourself (and the world) that the obstacles they tried to create were not significant enough to disable you and/or destroy you.
3. **Realize that the second best revenge is to turn the evil into something good, to find the proverbial silver lining in the dark cloud.** Think of your enemy as someone who has helped you to grow. Even though unfortunate things happen to us, the best thing we can do is take those opportunities as tests that will either destroy or strengthen us. If you've been *through* something, it didn't destroy you - take what you learned and become a better person because of it.
4. **Make a list of the good things that emerged as a result of this awful experience.** You've probably focused long enough on the negative parts of this experience. Look at the problem from a completely new angle; look at the positive side. The first item on that list may be long overdue because you have focused on the negative for so long. See if you can identify 10 positive outcomes of this experience.
5. **Look for the helpers.** Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers) related that, as a little boy, he'd often become upset about major catastrophes in the news. His mother would tell him, "look for the

helpers." In your own nightmarish experience, think back to the people who helped you. Think about their kindness and unselfishness. Practice what you have learned from them.

6. **Look at the bigger picture.** Was someone your "Good Samaritan"? In this biblical story, a traveler happens to come across a poor soul who was beaten up on the road to Jericho and left for dead. It's a lot easier to play the part of the Good Samaritan than to be the poor soul who is left bleeding and bruised on the side of the road. Perhaps this isn't all about you. Perhaps your trial provided an opportunity for others to rise to an occasion to provide you with help and support.
7. **Be compassionate with yourself.** If you've ruminated over this problem for a long time, steering this boat into a new direction could take some time, too. As you try to make a new path out of the dark woods of this old hurt, you'll make mistakes. Forgive yourself. Be patient and kind to yourself. Extreme emotional pain has a profound effect on the body. Give yourself time to heal - physically and emotionally. Eat well. Rest. Focus on the natural beauty in the world. Give yourself permission to feel the emotions and process them. Don't bottle up the pain.
8. **Learn that the Aramaic word for "forgive" means literally to "untie."** The fastest way to free yourself from an enemy and all associated negativity is to forgive. Untie the bindings and loosen yourself from that person's ugliness. Your hatred has tied you to the person responsible for your pain. Your forgiveness enables you to start walking away from him or her and the pain. Forgiveness is for you and not the other party. Freeing yourself through forgiveness is like freeing yourself from chains of bondage or from prison.
9. **Learn how to balance trust with wisdom.** It's a fact that *not all of our fellow humans are trustworthy*. Painful memories can serve to protect us from future hurts. As author Rose Sweet writes, "A lack of trust is sometimes simply recognizing another's limitations".<sup>[1]</sup>

Forgiveness is not acceptance of wrong behavior. If you must continue to interact with someone who has wronged you, who has offered a lame apology only to follow it up with more bad behavior, nothing requires you to trust such a person. This person isn't likely to ever be trustworthy -- you must keep a distance. While it's fruitless to torment yourself over this person's actions, you should not be his or her willing victim. Acknowledge; move on.

An offender who wants reconciliation must do his or her part: offer a sincere apology, promise not to repeat the offense (or similar ones), make amends, and give it time. If you don't see repentance, understand that according forgiveness to that person is a benefit to yourself, not to the offender.

Unless those who have harmed us have truly repented of whatever they have done, we need to use wisdom in avoiding repeating the hurt. This may require avoiding those who are unrepentant of the harm that they have inflicted upon us. It would be wise to balance forgiveness against the certain knowledge that evil exists, and some people enjoy harming others.

10. **Stop telling "the story."** How many times this week did you tell "the story" about how badly you were hurt and how horribly you were wronged? How many times a day do you think about

this hurt? It is a stake driven into the ground that keeps you from moving away from this hurt. Rather, forgive your enemy because it's the kindest thing you can do for your friends and family. Negativity is depressing - physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally.

11. **Tell "the story" from the other person's perspective.** Actually imagine that you are the other person (the one who offended you) and use the word "I" when saying what that person would say. You, most likely, don't know exactly what s/he was thinking when this event unfolded but pretend that you do, and just go with the story that comes up in your head. Sit down with a friend, or maybe even the person you are trying to forgive, and tell the story as though you are that person. It is important to do this verbally and not just in your head. Realize in advance that this is not an easy exercise, but it holds great power. Your willingness to tell the story from the offender's perspective requires an effort at forgiveness. Also, realize that this is not a contradiction to the preceding paragraph since this perspective will change *your* story.
  
12. **Retrain your thinking.** When your enemy and his or her evil actions come to mind, send him or her a blessing. **Wish your enemy well.** Hope the best for him or her. This has two effects. One, it neutralizes that acid of hate that destroys the vessel in which it is stored. The evil we wish for another seems to have a rebound effect. The same is true for the good that we wish for another. When you make yourself able to return blessing for hatred, you'll know that you're well on the path to wholeness. The first 15 - or 150 - times you try this, the "blessing" may feel contrived, empty, and even hypocritical but keep trying. Eventually, it will become a new habit and soon thereafter, the anger and pain that has burned in your heart will evaporate, like dew in the morning sun. This technique forces your mind to overcome the cognitive dissonance between hating someone and acting with compassion toward him or her. Since there is no way to take back the kind gesture to agree with your hatred, the only thing your mind can do is change your belief about the person to match. You will begin to say to yourself, "S/he is deserving of a blessing, and indeed, must need one very much."
  
13. **Maintain perspective:** While the "evil" actions of your "enemy" are hurtful to you and your immediate surroundings, the rest of the world goes on unaware. Validate their meaning in your life, but never lose perspective that others are not involved and do not deserve anything to be taken out on them. Your enemy is someone else's beloved child, someone's employee, or a child's parent.