

Forgiving Primary and Secondary Offenders

Who is the offender?

An offender is someone who has wronged us through their actions or inaction in such a way that the offense causes us ongoing pain, eliciting feelings of defeat and powerless.

The reason forgiveness is sometimes difficult is because the focus is on a person who is identified as committing the wrong but who is actually not the only offender. The secondary offender can be a person who did not directly commit the most painful action but may have contributed by enabling the offense through collateral actions or inaction. If this person is a significant other or someone you trusted to protect you, the emotional impact may be far greater than other parties involved. Often, the feelings toward such secondary offenders are minimized because of intense emotional investment. For lasting forgiveness, issues with both the primary and secondary offenders must be addressed.

For a better understanding of this concept, take a look at Shari's story.

Shari's Story:

Shari has felt hurt and angry for years because her mother-in-law treats her in a cold and indifferent manner. Throughout her marriage, Shari has been ignored by her husband's mother at family functions except for the occasional condescending, disrespectful remark. When this happens, her husband says nothing to his mother and makes no effort to defend his wife. Shari has discussed her feelings with her husband, Greg but he typically ignores her requests to intervene and defends his mother by saying "That's just the way she is. She's not going to change." Even after repeated requests to address the problem with his mother, he has refused.

Shari spent considerable time working a forgiveness plan with her mother-in-law identified as the offender. She identified at length her mother-in-law's numerous offenses but seemed to be stuck and unable to move forward. Finally, she realized that her husband's mother was not the primary offender. The primary offender was her husband whom she loved and wanted to be her protector. It was necessary for her to forgive Greg in order to forgive her mother-in-law.

Greg was a man who had provided well for the family and strived to be a good husband and father. When Shari asked him to tell her about his childhood and his early relationship with his parents, she discovered that Greg's sisters were the favored children. His mother generally treated him in a cold, unaffectionate manner.

She continually criticized Greg and compared him unfavorably to his sisters. He grew up believing there was nothing he could do to please her.

With renewed insight, Shari realized that she had been unwittingly "sold out" by the man she loved because of his own childhood issues. Greg was too afraid to rock the family boat in hopes of still capturing the love and affection of his mother. He loved Shari, trusted that her

love was secure and reframed the problem so he would not have address it with his mother and risk a negative, critical response.

Consider these questions:

Who is the primary offender? Why?

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Are offenders always “bad” people? Why or why not?

Why is the identification of the primary and secondary offender important to the forgiveness process?

What should Shari address in her forgiveness plan in order to forgive her husband?

What should be included in her plan to facilitate forgiving her mother-in-law?
