

## The Forgiveness Process

Everyone forgives at a different pace and in different ways. God can forgive in an instant but we in our humanness need time. Lewis B. Smedes, the author of *The Art of Forgiving* responds to this issue by quoting C.S. Lewis who wrote just before he died: “I think I have at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it.” Had he lived longer, it is likely that he would have had to do it again. Forgive as often as God forgives us—over and over again (Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18: 21-22).

### **Aren't we supposed to “forgive and forget”?**

Forgiving others does not require forgetting what happened. Amnesia is not a realistic requirement for forgiveness and would certainly put us at risk for repeated offenses. Remembering is important so we can grow from our experience and avoid similar situations in the future. Forgiveness is a complex, ongoing process that requires grieving the situation and facing feelings in order to move past it. It is not a one-time event where the pain vanishes forever.

God remembers our deeds and misdeeds for the day of judgment ways (Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:10) but will not count them against us if we ask for forgiveness and make every effort to change our ways (1 John 1:9; Ephesians 1:7-8). God's forgiveness is still freely given even though he remembers what we have done (Acts 13-38; Colossians 1:12-14).

### **How Can I Forgive Others?**

A forgiving person avoids obsessing about the wrongs of others. The definition of forgiveness is “to give up resentment of”. Appropriate and healthy anger can be used to distance from the event and move on; ongoing bitterness and resentment can be toxic and emotionally paralyzing. True forgiveness requires honesty, accountability, and persistence. It means letting go in order to gain control of your life. Forgiveness is typically not a one-time event but a multi-step process that takes time and work. The journey is often difficult but one that brings the freedom to enjoy life and experience joy.

Again, forgiveness is a process. Here are some of the critical steps to recovery and experiencing the freedom of forgiveness. You can use the Personal Forgiveness Plan worksheet to work through specific offenses.

### ***Step 1: Carefully and critically examine the circumstances surrounding the offense***

Consider these questions when someone wrongs you:

1. Clearly and specifically identify the offense. This is a necessary part of the forgiveness process. It's important to know exactly what you are forgiving. A vague or overly

generalized identification of the inappropriate behavior can leave you working to forgive peripheral aspects of the offense and not the real issue.

2. Determine the degree of the offense in terms of impact. Charles Stanley in his book *The Gift of Forgiveness* suggests that we ask ourselves if the offense is a nickel wound, a \$5 wound or a \$5000 wound? Nickel wounds are frustrating and irritating but may not be as painful as a \$5000 wound and easier to forgive. Or is it a cluster of repeated nickel or \$5 wounds which have compounded over time? Repeated relatively minor wounds can often be as difficult to forgive taken collectively as more serious offenses.
3. Was the offender's behavior a response based on his or her personal issues, a reaction to you or a combination of both? Avoid taking responsibility for the behavior and the issues of the other party.
4. Is your reaction to the offender's behavior based on your own issues, past history unrelated to the offender, the offender's actions alone or a combination of both? Decide what part of the problem belongs to the offender and what may belong to you.
5. Did the situation trip some "hot buttons" from your past experience with family or other relationships?
6. Can you understand and possibly empathize with the other person's viewpoint even though you don't agree with his or her behavior?

***Step 2: Courageously do some self-reflection.***

Did your actions contribute to the situation in any way? This of course does not apply in cases of child abuse or neglect. However, it may include lack of appropriate boundary setting, inappropriate response to conflict or letting childhood issues and the past become an obstacle to emotional intimacy. If so, you can still hold the offender accountable for his or her behavior while taking responsibility for yours. The bible says "Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us (Romans 12:3). However, being wronged is no justification for either party to act inappropriately. Forgiving self is just as important as forgiving others and often is just as difficult. Read Paul's words in Philippians 3:12-16.

Also explore and identify any feelings you are having about the offense. Some common feelings that occur when someone hurts us are sadness, anger, rejection, abandonment, hurt and confusion. Many other feelings can accompany inappropriate behavior from another person.

***Step 3: Challenge the person who wronged you in order to hold him or her accountable.***

People who have difficulty forgiving and giving up resentment still view themselves as powerless. Setting the stage for forgiveness includes holding the offending party accountable for his or her behavior. Relationships cannot typically be reconciled without challenging the offender with the troublesome behavior. However, consider this option only if it is physically and emotionally safe for you to do so.

The offender and the behavior can be addressed in person, in a letter, or by phone. The important thing is to let him or her know you have been hurt. Challenge with the expectation that the offender may not own the behavior or make changes. The primary purpose of an accountability challenge is to help you regain the power the offender has over you, let go and move on. If the offender is too threatening or unsafe to address personally, write a letter and read it aloud as though that person was present. If the offender has died, write a letter and read it at the gravesite. You can also read the letter while visualizing him or her in the room or read it to a trusted friend who can play the role of the offender.

***Basic rules of an accountability challenge include:***

- Staying appropriate and calm even if the offender becomes upset.
- The accountability challenge should not involve anyone outside the circle of the offense. In other words, relatives, friends or coworkers not involved directly in the incident should not be drawn into the resolution. Counseling or mentoring with a trusted party is appropriate in order to process feelings or to develop a forgiveness plan.
- Focus on the subject at hand without sidetracking when talking to the offender. If necessary, use the broken record technique; regardless of what the offender says, stay focused and keep repeating what you need to say.
- Redirect the offender if he or she changes the subject or puts the responsibility for the offense on your shoulders in an effort to divert the focus away from him or herself.
- Avoid the use of sarcasm, verbal attacks or emotional outbursts.
- Keep your voice appropriate without yelling or screaming. Such behavior makes it easier for the offender to make you the problem.
- Write out a script in advance so you can organize your thoughts; if necessary, read the script when challenging the offender.
- Role play the accountability challenge with someone you trust, coaching him or her to play the role as the offender.
- Don't be defensive. This will only pull the focus away from the offender's behavior and allow him or her to turn the focus on your behavior.
- If the offender becomes verbally abusive and retaliatory, quickly say what you need to say (if it is safe) and exit. If it is not safe, exit without continuing.
- Challenge the offender in neutral territory if possible (not in either home); use a public place such as a restaurant if appropriate.
- Take someone with you for support and to witness the discussion if necessary.
- Avoid challenging the offender in front of your children or others not directly involved in the situation.
- Document the accountability challenge in writing; include the time, date and content.
- Never confront an offender who might be dangerous to himself or others. If the situation becomes volatile when challenging someone, exit immediately. Call 911 if you believe the other party is a danger to self or others.

**Step 4: Set clear appropriate boundaries.**

Forgiving someone does not mean you continue to allow yourself to be reoffended or mistreated. It is important to protect yourself from abusive, violative and inappropriate behavior. The residual emotional and physical toll from such experiences can be devastating. Allowing such behavior to continue robs you of self-worth and confidence. When we set limits and boundaries with those who are inappropriate, it can empower us even if the other party does not have a positive reaction. If you have difficulty setting and maintaining healthy boundaries, read *Boundaries* by Henry Townsend.

**Step 5: Deal with the anger and grief associated with the situation.**

Take care of any unresolved feelings that stand in the way of your recovery. Emotional baggage can negatively impact your health and emotional well-being. Process feelings of anger and hurt with a trusted friend, spiritual mentor or counselor so that you can let them go. Healthy ways of dealing with feelings include:

- Set aside some time when you can be alone to grieve or feel the anger about what happened.
- Spend time in prayer asking for help in understanding and dealing with the emotions and the healing process.
- Look for scriptures that bring you comfort during troubling times. Write them out on a sheet of paper and read them out loud.
- Keep a journal of your feelings and what precipitates them. Date each entry and write as often as you can about the times your feelings interfered with your life and relationships.
- Make a collage of pictures depicting the offending situation and the resulting feelings. Cut pictures from magazines or newspapers and arrange them on tagboard or cardboard. Show the collage to a trusted friend or counselor for discussion.
- Write a letter to the offender expressing your feelings. You may or may not choose to mail it. If you don't mail it, read it out loud as though the offender is in the room.
- Compose a letter of apology from the offender using words you would like the offender to write. Understand that remorse, apology or the offender's acceptance of responsibility is not a prerequisite for forgiveness. However, writing the letter can help you express what you may need in terms of accountability. Remember that effective apologies are specific, naming the offending actions without excuses or justification.
- Role play with a trusted friend who is willing to play the part of the offender. Express your anger and hurt as emphatically as your need to so you can let the feelings go.
- Establish a ritual that will help you let go of the past, release the anger, pain and bitterness and move on. Some examples of healing rituals include: inflating helium balloons, writing on them feelings you want to surrender and releasing the balloons into

the air; writing a letter to the offender, putting it in an envelope and shredding it; drawing or painting the offense to be forgiven and burning it.

- Seek the help of a counselor if you feel “stuck”, experience disabling depression, anger or other feeling that interfere with daily activities.

***Step 6: Try to understand why the offender acted inappropriately without excusing the behavior.***

Examine why the offender wronged you and the underlying causes. Look at the offender’s history including major life crises, family history and feelings. Make a list of the factors you believe contributed to his or her behavior. Look for reasons, not excuses. You are not excusing the behavior, just trying to understand why the inappropriate behavior was an issue. The offender is ultimately responsible for his or her actions.

***Step 7: Turn it over to God.***

Pray for Him to grant you a forgiving heart, heal the pain, and give you and the wisdom and strength to move on. Turn your anger and hurts over to Him. 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 tells us “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled.” God will respond to those who continue to mistreat others and remain unrepentant. Abusive mistreatment may be emotional, physical and/or sexual. Romans 12:19 says, “Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, ‘I will take revenge; I will pay them back,’ says the Lord”.

If you are able, ask God to change the offender’s heart and heal his hurts (Matthew 5:44). If your wounds prevent you from doing this, God understands and the Holy Spirit intercedes (Romans 8:26). Until we are able to accept God’s unconditional goodness and forgiveness, we will have a difficult time forgiving others.

***Step 8: Fake it until you make it.***

Act in a forgiving manner even if your journey of forgiveness is not complete. Sometimes behavior change precedes a change of heart. If you practice having a forgiving heart while working the rest of the plan, the feelings and emotions will follow.

***Step 9: Develop and work a personalized forgiveness plan for yourself.***

Make a plan with specific steps that can help you through each stage of forgiveness. See the “My Personal Forgiveness Plan” sheet that provides an outline to guide you through the plan.