The Healing Power of Forgiveness:

A Heart Centered Approach

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“What could you want forgiveness cannot give?
Do you want peace? Forgiveness offers it.
Do you want happiness, a quiet mind, a certainty of purpose
and a sense of worth and beauty that transcends the world?
Do you want a quietness that cannot be disturbed,
a gentleness that never can be hurt, a deep, abiding comfort,
and a rest so perfect it can never be upset?
All this forgiveness offers you, and more.”

A Course in Miracles
CHAPTER I
AN INTRODUCTION TO FORGIVENESS

As a psychotherapist specializing in health psychology for over twenty years, I’ve come to understand that in order to live fully and joyfully in the present, it is absolutely necessary to release the pain that we all carry with us from the past. Without the power of forgiveness to help us heal, the past has the potential to destroy our present lives. Giving up the past is not easy -- but it is one of the keys to a rewarding life.

*When you release the past you reclaim your power.*

We’re all wounded. People who have lived life with any depth have experienced loss and disappointment. We all have limited life-energy. When our life-energy is directed to the past, we have less energy to live in the present. When we release the past, we have more power to heal, to self-actualize, to become whole – to live a full and satisfying life.

I have yet to meet the person who hasn’t experienced some kind of hurt or painful trauma during their lifetime. But why would any of us want to forgive someone who had deliberately hurt us? What would be the benefit? How does the lack of forgiveness harm us?

*The experience of being wounded, and what happens to one as one responds to the wound, gives us the wisdom to heal our selves and one another. --Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen*
Scientists tell us that emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt and resentment, if chronic, can damage us mentally, physically and spiritually. They can interfere with our relationships at work and at home. They can affect our overall sense of well-being.

I’ve been investigating the topic within the fields of psychology and spirituality for over two decades. I began my interest in forgiveness to achieve peace of mind. Only later did I learn the powerful healing effects of forgiveness on the body, mind and spirit. Not only will forgiveness offer peace of mind and improve your physical health, but learning to forgive contributes to your level of consciousness and self-awareness by bringing high frequency subtle energies into your heart center.

The lack of forgiveness is dangerous. Current research shows that negative emotions can trigger an avalanche of stress hormones that can accelerate heart rate, shut down the immune system, and increase our chances of developing serious illnesses. An abundance of research documents the harmful effects of anger and resentment on the body. Someone once said that “holding a grudge is like taking poison and expecting your enemy to get sick."

“By far the strongest poison to the human spirit is the inability to forgive oneself or another person. It disables the person’s emotional resources.... When we refuse to forgive we sit in a prison of toxic emotions”. Carolyn Myss

Since 1997 I’ve conducted numerous forgiveness workshops for individuals from all walks of life. Some came to learn self-forgiveness.
Others worked to forgive loved ones, friends, co-workers, caregivers, deceased family members and even God.

Their grievances ran the full gamut—betrayal, marital infidelity, violence, incest, verbal and emotional abuse, and the existential feelings of regret that come with catastrophic illness and end of life. But, research has shown that no matter how awful the offense, the ability to forgive can be learned.

Practically all of us have the capacity for forgiveness. We can all see ourselves forgiving some small slight, some little offense or misunderstanding. We tend to think that major offenses are “unforgivable.” But our ability to forgive is much greater than we think.

I’ve watched as clients moved from hurt and anger to compassion and peace. I watched them work through guilt and regret and develop pride and self-acceptance. I’ve watched numerous individuals with the self-image of Victim become spiritual warriors and Victors as they continued to work with the process of forgiveness.

It’s understandable that we’re fearful of giving up our wounds, because it means change. But remember: we can’t be a victim and also be empowered. We can’t live our lives filled with guilt or in hope of revenge, because this fills us with negative emotions and continues the other person’s power over us. We can’t burden ourselves with chronic sadness, anger, resentment and guilt, and still expect peace of mind. We can’t be embittered and expect healthy, successful relationships.

Although we may not be responsible when a bad thing happens to us, we are in control of our long-term attitude about what happened. It is really
our choice. Forgiveness does not “undo” the actions of the past – but it does recognize that we can use the past to grow.

Forgiveness is a personal act. It is a sign of strength – of our inner power to turn our hearts from malice to love, from resentment to understanding – and then to move on. When we decide to forgiven, we begin to learn that when we or others behave badly, it is because of deep feelings of pain.

And when we learn to understand the pain and forgive the transgressions of others, we can forgive ourselves more easily. To forgive is not to excuse hurtful behavior; it is to recognize that despite hurtful behaviors, the person who behaved badly still has intrinsic worth just by virtue of the fact that he/she is a human being and that at the soul level – we are all brothers united in the Source of life itself.

“Forgiveness is giving up the possibility of a better past.”

CHAPTER II
WHAT IS REQUIRED TO FORGIVE?
Researchers and writers on forgiveness generally agree that we must be willing to undertake five mental tasks:

(1) **We must understand the true meaning of forgiveness.**

Forgiveness is **not** about...

- who is right or wrong;
- condoning hurtful behavior;
- forgetting the offense;
- surrendering our right to justice;
- being a victim;
- absolving the hurtful behavior;
- pretending the hurtful behavior didn't occur;
- loss of power;
- getting the other person to do something different;
- self-righteousness, superiority or pity.

Forgiveness is **is**...

- a gift we give ourselves to achieve peace of mind;
- freedom from the past;
- a decision to live in the present moment;
- recognition that we have a choice about our thoughts;
- self-respect;
- strength and empowerment
- connecting to our spiritual, loving self.

Remember, our act of forgiveness doesn't mean that we condone or absolve the hurtful behavior -- or that we're forgetting about it. Forgiveness doesn't require us to reconcile with the offender or to get him or her to do something different.
Forgiveness does mean recognizing that we have a choice about our perceptions and our thoughts -- and that we are choosing peace of mind. Forgiveness means freeing ourselves from the past and choosing to live in the present moment...choosing empowerment over victim-hood...and choosing to connect to our spiritual, loving selves.

(2) We must be willing to let down our defenses.

It’s difficult to experience the full intensity of our feelings. Of course, none of us like to feel vulnerable -- but we can’t let go of emotions that we haven’t first acknowledged.

(3) We must be willing to give up the need for vindication or revenge.

It's natural to want retribution, and we usually don’t give up the need for revenge until we realize that it hasn’t worked -- and is not going to work.

*Old Chinese Proverb*

“The one who pursues revenge should dig two graves.”

Sometimes we hold on to hurt and anger in the hope that we will ultimately get the offender to admit wrong or to change. We must give up that hope if we are to achieve the peace of mind that comes with forgiveness.

When we are working to forgive ourselves there are many challenges to be faced. In order to admit wrong, we must let down our defenses, and feelings of vulnerability may arise. All of us are generally protective of our self-image. Giving up a self-image of innocence can feel threatening. We may erroneously believe that to admit wrongdoing will jeopardize our sense of worth – and we may defend against it.
To admit to another that we are wrong may result in a loss of status or power in the relationship. And, we may avoid admitting wrongdoing in order to avoid humiliation. Finally, we are challenged because with forgiveness we risk change in our relationship and in our life.

(4) We must be willing to shift our view of the offender.

We cannot forgive unless we develop empathy and compassion. It's important to understand that people commit painful acts under the influence of their own personal pain. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said it best: “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find, in each person’s life, sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” It's easier to forgive if we can ask ourselves, "What must have happened to the offender to cause this behavior?"

(5) Finally, we must change our story.

We all construct a story that we tell about ourselves in order to give our lives meaning. And giving an experience structure and meaning makes its emotional effects more manageable. But if we are truly committed to forgiveness, we must change our story. We can no longer see ourselves as a victim. We must create a new story to tell about ourselves – a story of empowerment.

Once you’re willing to undertake these five mental tasks, you’re ready to forgive. Although letting go of the pain from the past can be difficult, the rewards of forgiveness are powerful. Liberating yourself from the past will help to bring you closer to peace of mind and true inner healing.

CHAPTER III
GETTING STARTED
I’ve said that forgiveness can be learned, and the process is the same, no matter how severe the offense. Of course, the worse the offense, the harder one must work to achieve forgiveness.

Forgiveness training first involves having a clear understanding of forgiveness. Once again, you must remember that forgiveness is not condoning, pardoning or excusing the offender. It is acknowledging that although you may not be responsible for what happened, you are fully responsible for your long-term attitude.

In Chapter V you will find the most frequently asked questions. Refer to this chapter if you need a more intellectual understanding of forgiveness.

In-depth forgiveness is not an epiphany or a one-time event. It takes practice and patience. But the rewards are powerful. Research has shown that just having an intellectual understanding of forgiveness is not enough. Mind-body practices such as journal writing and visualization help to calm and reorient the mind, body and emotions.

The following Five Steps will help you begin the process of forgiveness by developing self-awareness and sorting through your emotions.

Forgiveness is a brave choice. Congratulations as you begin your quest!

Chapter IV

Five Key Steps to an Open Heart

Those who cannot forgive others break the bridge
Step 1    Deciding to Forgive

Allow yourself to be honest: you may not be ready to forgive. You may need more information about forgiveness to determine if you are ready to begin the process.

First, realize that forgiveness can be either an altruistic act or a gift to yourself. Forgiveness does not require that you reconcile with the offender. It does not require that you pardon, condone or excuse the offending behavior. It does require that you are willing to assume responsibility for your own behaviors and emotions.

If you have made the choice, write down your willingness to have forgiveness as a goal. Just making the decision that “I need to stop being furious with ____________________________” is a powerful beginning.

You can also write your intention on a 3x5 card and refer to it during the day as a reminder.

Step 2    Acknowledging Painful Emotions

To really let go of your grievance, you need to release not only the memory of what happened, but also the feelings that you had at the time.
try to let go of the memory without getting in touch with the feelings, your forgiveness will only be intellectual. You can’t achieve peace of mind without first admitting to, then letting go of the actual feelings.

Fully acknowledge the painful emotions caused by the grievance. Forget the advice about “forgive and forget.” Trying to forget is a form of denial that doesn’t work. A crucial step in healing is actually allowing yourself to fully feel your pain. Think about how you were hurt and how you feel right now. In order to forgive, you have to remember. Confront your resentment, pain and anger. This isn’t easy – but you can’t let go of emotions that you haven’t first fully owned.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What did the offender do?
- If you are forgiving yourself, what did you do?
- How did you feel at the time it happened? Be brutally honest with yourself. Go beneath the surface. If you just remember feeling anger, can you identify that there was hurt and sadness beneath the anger? How about shame and feelings of worthlessness? If you’re forgiving yourself, did you feel jealous or inferior at the time?
- How has the grievance affected your life?
- How does the grievance affect you today?

What were some of the ways you attempted to remedy the problem.

- Did you express your feelings to the offender?
- Did you take action to keep yourself safe if necessary?
- If you are forgiving yourself, how did you attempt to take responsibility for your action and make amends? (You can’t
begin to forgive yourself if you’ve never attempted to make amends.)

Step 3  Uncovering Resistance

In order to forgive, you must fully evaluate what you stand to lose if you let go of your grievance. When people come into therapy, I generally tell them that there is risk involved in developing self-awareness. The more self-aware we are, the more we know we must change. Change can often be frightening – but it leads to growth. But remember, unless you learn to let go of the pain from the past, you continue to give the offender the power to control you – and your life and well-being.

Begin to uncover your own resistance to the forgiveness process. You may believe that if you forgive the offender, it is a sign of weakness, and you will experience a loss of control or power. Or you may not be ready to give up your desire for vindication. You may want to retaliate and cause the person who hurt you to suffer as much as you.

If you feel resistance; here are some helpful questions to explore.

• Do you use anger as a way to make you feel safe?
• Do you use guilt or anger to control or manipulate others?
• Do you use the grievance as a way to avoid communication?
• Do you use silence as a weapon?
• Do you hold onto the pain from the past as an excuse for not taking charge of your life today?
• Do you secretly wish to punish the offender?
Empathy is essential for forgiving others. Compassion is essential for forgiving the self. When a person is able to have an open heart – empathy and compassion are natural. In fact, empathy and compassion are natural states of being when we are connected to our Spirit and The Source of life.

Empathy involves seeing things from another person’s point of view, feeling the person’s feelings and identifying with the pressures that made the person hurt you. To develop the empathy to forgive someone else, begin to imagine walking in the offender’s shoes. Try to understand the offender in the context of the whole of his or her life.

Compassion is when the same understanding is turned inward. Remember this does not mean that you are condoning hurtful behavior. It does mean that you understand how the behavior happened.

- Is there anything in the other person’s background that could explain the offensive behavior?
- What was his/her life like growing up?
- What do you think may have been happening at the time of the offense?
- What was the offender’s self-image at the time?
- How would your offender explain the harmful acts?
- Try to figure out what the motivation might have been.
Remember, when people act badly, their behavior is always coming from a place of internal pain. A person who has an open and loving heart does not hurt others. And as you begin to empathize, your own heart will soften, and it will be easier to develop the compassion that forgiveness requires.

“If we could read the secret history of our enemies; we would find in each person’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Self-Forgiveness

We learn self-compassion by remembering that when we behave badly, it is because of deep feelings of pain. Remember, we forgive ourselves for doing wrong—not being wrong. If you are forgiving yourself, consider your responses to these questions:

• Was the offense an accident?
• Were you negligent or did you offend on purpose?
• Is there anything in your background that would explain your hurtful, inconsiderate or otherwise poor behavior?
• What feelings and pressures made you behave badly?

Begin by trying to view the situation differently. See yourself as having done the best you could under difficult circumstances (remember: you didn’t know then what you know now). Perhaps you had no power to change the situation. Or maybe you were bound by other obligations. What meaning, other than the offense to you, can you find in what happened?
“Compassion breeds understanding, which in turn invites forgiveness. Compassion is the antitoxin of the soul.”
   Father Paul Keenan

Step 5  Using the Mind-Body Connection

The decision to forgive isn’t enough. Forgiveness must be learned via an ongoing process. Journal writing, guided imagery, dream interpretation, the arts are all examples of mind-body strategies to help the forgiveness process.

There is another category of interventions that seem very powerful but have not yet been fully researched. These are non-local healing strategies such as prayer, energy medicine, Thought Field Therapy, the power of intention, and consciously using the energy around the heart. I use these strategies in my private practice and in my forgiveness support groups. Many of these exercises can be found in this book.

CHAPTER V

MIND-BODY EXERCISES

Journal Writing
One of the most helpful mind-body strategies for making change is journal writing. Dr. James Pennebake found that writing about important personal experiences in an emotional way for little as 15 minutes over the course of three days brings about improvement in mental and physical health. This finding has been replicated across age, gender, culture, social class and personality type.

Journal writing is more than a chance to vent emotions. Research has shown that emotional venting without cognitive processing has little value. For healing to occur, you have to begin to tell a different story about yourself. Once you give the experience structure and meaning, the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable.

**A Forgiveness Letter:** Write a letter (that you don’t send) in which you express your feelings to the person you are forgiving or asking forgiveness from.

**Write a New Story:** Write a new narrative about yourself where you go from being a victim to a spiritual warrior on the hero’s journey. The story always ends with you as a victor: you have fought your way to a new understanding of your life and the other person, and through forgiveness, you have mastered your emotions, cleansed yourself of pain, and determined that it is you who are in control from now on!

**Affirmations**

Write a daily affirmation that states your decision to forgive. To create a personalized affirmation:

- Write a positive statement of an outcome that you want.
- Make the statement short.
- It is important to feel strongly about the statement.
• The statement should be in the present tense. Remember to ask for what you want – don’t ask for what you don’t want. For example, It is more powerful to say “I forgive myself for hurting my husband, than to say “I won’t be angry at myself for hurting my husband.”
• Repetition is the key to the power of affirmation. Repeat the statement often, either verbally or in writing.

Example Affirmation: Every day, affirm in writing your decision to forgive (e.g., “I am letting go of the past and I forgive __________”).

Mindfulness

Monitor the silent conversations that go on in your head. Are you still replaying the grudge in your mind? Do you hear yourself having angry, resentful thoughts about the offender? Do you still hear yourself blaming? You can challenge this self-talk by asking yourself, “Would I rather be right or would I rather have peace of mind?”

When you find anger and resentment building focus on your breath. Notice the physical sensation of breathing in and out, and mentally recite words such as peace or love with each breath. Or you can take a walk listen to soothing music, remember pleasant memories, and enjoy the beauty of nature.

Cultivate Gratitude

Remember that no matter what happened in the past, you still have much to be thankful for.

Devote a section of your Forgiveness Journal to gratitude. Before you go to bed each night, list five things that you are grateful for. You may even be grateful for learning to forgive. Remember, the more you learn to forgive others, the easier it becomes to forgive yourself!
Guided Imagery and Creative Visualization

Anyone can use their imagination to promote change. With guided imagery and creative visualization, you enter a relaxed state of heightened awareness, and then use your imagination to move beyond old patterns and beliefs that are limiting. A forgiveness exercise that utilizes imagery, attempts to activate both unconscious and pre-conscious processes to aid in accomplishing the conscious goal of forgiveness.

Although everyone has the capacity to imagine, we each may experience guided imagery or creative visualization differently. Some individuals are able to imagine an object by creating a picture in their mind and then they “see” colors and shapes. Others are able to imagine and then describe an object without actually “seeing” colors or shapes when their eyes are closed. Both styles are effective.

In order for the imagery to be the most effective – it is necessary to have a positive expectation about the exercise. You can create your own imagery, adapt suggested imagery that others have created, or use a trained therapist to help you create a personal and unique imagery that will effectively reinforce your goal of forgiveness.

Following are two short and one long example of visualization exercises.

**Short Visualization to Forgive an Offender**

*Sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Take a few deep, cleansing breaths. Relax your body, starting with your feet and moving up to your head. Imagine that you are breathing in and out through the heart and allow the spaciousness of your heart to expand.*
Visualize the person you have decided to forgive, and bring the image of the offender into your heart. Imagine that an energy cord connects you both. Wish the person well and then affirm, “I am releasing the pain from the past.” And then cut the cord.

Short Visualization for Self-Forgiveness

Sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Take a few deep, cleansing breaths. Relax your body, starting with your feet and moving up to your head. Focus your mind so that you concentrate on the center of your being. Allow the spaciousness of your heart to expand.

Imagine that you and the person that you are asking forgiveness from are walking to meet each other at the center of a bridge of golden light. Ask that person’s “Higher Self” for forgiveness, and imagine a loving response.

Long Guided Imagery for Forgiveness

Years ago I attended a workshop at ECAP (Exceptional Cancer Patients) founded by Dr. Bernie Segal. This is my memory of a guided imagery that we experienced. It may be helpful to record this script or have a friend read it to you.

Take a moment to get comfortable. Close your eyes. Take a few deep-cleansing breaths. Let your out-breath, be a real letting go kind of breath. Begin to watch the inhalation and exhalation of your breath as you focus your entire being on this present moment.
And now, begin to relax your shoulders and arms, relax your stomach and gut. You may notice as your stomach relaxes, your breathing becomes even slower and deeper, the way you breathe in deep sleep. Relax your legs. If you are experiencing any tension, just let it go. Let your whole body become deeply relaxed. Continue to release and relax any tension you may feel anywhere in the body.

No place to be, but here – just keep letting go. You are feeling calm and relaxed, calm and relaxed, calm and relaxed.

And now with your mind’s eye, imagine that you are in a closet. The door is closed and the closet is empty. You are going to fill this closet with everything that you worked on here this evening.

Visualize that in your hands you have a blank CD. You are going to record the image of the person that you are forgiving. Record your memory of the grievance and put the CD on the floor of the closet.

Begin to imagine that the closet is filling up with everything that you intend to let go of.

Let yourself see your anger, your resentment, and rage. See them manifest in your closet. Fill the closet with any guilt, with sadness or hurt. Put any feelings of revenge that may still be there, into the closet. No need to hold on to these feelings any longer.

Let all of these feelings fill up in the closet. All of the feelings that have kept you from feeling peaceful, you don’t need to hold onto any longer. Free yourself. Just keep releasing all of your toxic feelings into the closet. See all that you’re letting go of, building up around you in this closet.
It’s beginning to feel uncomfortable to be surrounded by everything that keeps you from feeling good, keeps you from feeling at peace, and keeps you from feeling joyful. You want to be free of these limitations and you are ready to let go.

And now, look down at your feet and you will see a magical cloud that begins to lift you gently up and out of the closet. The cloud is safe, it’s strong, and it supports you.

It feels so good to get out of this closet. Once your cloud is out of the closet, get comfortable on it. Spread yourself out on it; relax on it. Don’t be afraid. It holds you quite comfortably. Feel the gentle upward motion as the cloud lifts you up higher, out of the closet, out of this room, and up into the beautiful sky above us.

Imagine that it’s a sunny day, the sky is blue, and the temperature is just right—just the way you like it. Feel yourself drifting on upward until your cloud stops. Look down over your cloud and see that there is an energy cord that holds you to your closet. That holds you to your past.

Now take a magical scissors out of your pocket and cut that cord that would hold you and keep you from being even freer, going even higher. And now the cord is cut. Feel yourself lifting on upward—higher and higher, until you come to a place that feels comfortable to stop.

Look around you and see the circle of many clouds. Now peer back over the edge of your cloud again and look down at all of the closets that you’ve left behind. See that all the closets are full—nobody’s closet is better than anyone else’s. Everyone has hurts, grievances; memories from the past that we need to let go of.

Now come back to your cloud. Notice in the center of the cloud a beautiful golden, healing rainbow. Feel the golden light from the rainbow coming towards you. Feel the golden energy permeating your skin, touching every cell, every muscle, and every bone in your body, penetrating right into the center of your being. Let it
move to that part of your body where you have carried your grievance. Feel it begin to heal you of the any remaining memory or pain from the past. Let the golden energy permeate that part of your body, as you let go any tension that may still be there from the past.

Now bring the golden energy into your heart. Let it tear down the wall that keeps you from loving and being loved. Feel the energy healing all of those wounds, any hurt, guilt, anger or resentment that remains, leaving your heart vibrant and new and open.

And now as your heart continues to expand, allow your mind with the help of God or your own Higher Self or Inner Healer, to bring into focus the memory of the person you have chosen to forgive or whom you are asking forgiveness from. As you look at him or her, allow yourself to see beyond the personality; see beyond the inner pain that causes us to behave in hurtful ways. Allow your Higher Self to see even deeper - into the soul.

Affirm to this soul that you are calling your spirit and your energy back into the present. Affirm that you are closing the door on this grievance. Affirm that you forgive him/her (or your self) for being limited, for being flawed. And finally, affirm that you are going to let them go, so that you can move forward, with freedom, with greater health and vitality, and with peace of mind.

And say to yourself:    May I have peace of spirit.  
                     May I have peace of mind.  
                     May there be peace everywhere  
                     May there be peace between us.

Let the energy of your healed and open heart fill you with loving energy. Allow yourself in this moment to feel the healing power of forgiveness.
Very gently you begin a very comfortable descent back into the room. As you gently drift down, think about why you are here and what you need to take from this experience. As you continue to slowly drift down, remember that forgiveness is a process. It is not a one-time event. Create an intention for yourself to continue to work with forgiveness until you have achieved the health and peace of mind that you deserve.

And now, begin to feel the things that support you – the chair, the floor. Begin to become aware of your body, and when you’re ready bring your awareness back into the room…. open your eyes.

**Meditation/Prayer**

Asking God or a Higher Power for help can support your desire for forgiveness.

A wonderful technique for opening the heart is the Tibetan custom of **Metta**. The word Metta is from Pali, the language of the earliest Buddhist texts, and means "love," "friendliness," or "loving-kindness."

Metta Meditation is a practice in which you repeat intentions of good will toward yourself, others and the world at large. Its power comes from repetition. The intentions are repeated as phrases to….

1. Yourself
2. A benefactor
3. A dear friend
4. A neutral person
5. A difficult person
6. All living beings

**Examples of phrases are:**

*May I have an open heart.*

*May I be free of suffering.*

*May I have peace of mind.*

*May I be healed and whole.*

**Practicing Metta to reinforce forgiveness:**

*Begin by closing your eyes and bringing an image of yourself into your heart.*

*Now repeat the following phrases to yourself:*

*May I have an open heart.*

*May I be free of suffering.*

*May I have peace of mind.*

*May I be healed and whole.*
Then, bring an image of the person you are forgiving into your heart and then repeat the following phrases to yourself:

- May you have an open heart.
- May you be free of suffering.
- May you have peace of mind.
- May you be healed and whole.

If this exercise is done daily – it can greatly enhance your commitment to the process of forgiveness and can help you to achieve peace of mind. Since we also extend Metta towards ourselves, its use can help us to experience less internal conflict, and learn to appreciate ourselves more.

Chapter VI

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is forgiveness so hard?

Forgiveness may be hard because of such factors as….

- type and length of relationship
• history of hurtful behavior
• perceived intentionality of the offender
• elapsed time
• the risk of change
• biological deficits

What is the difference between interpersonal forgiveness and intrapersonal forgiveness?

When we practice interpersonal forgiveness, the goal is reconciliation; both parties must be involved.

“It takes one person to forgive. It takes two to be reunited.”

Lewis Smede

Intrapersonal forgiveness takes place only within the individual. It does not require the interaction between two parties, and reconciliation (although it may happen) is not the goal.

“For giving happens inside the person who does it.” Lewis Smede

How can I reconcile with my spouse after a betrayal?

Forgiveness generally consists of three stages, each of which has cognitive, behavioral, and affective components. Furthermore, these stages seem to parallel a person's natural response to traumatic stress.

• We respond to the initial impact.
• We attempt to give the event some kind of meaning.
• Finally, we begin to move forward and readjust.

“Moving forward and readjusting” means, we....
• develop a realistic, nondistorted, balanced view of the marital relationship,
• are no longer controlled by negative feelings toward our partner,
• have a lessened desire to punish our spouse.

“We can forgive a person who never says he is sorry.

We cannot be truly reunited unless he is honestly sorry.”

Lewis Smedes

If I practiced forgiveness, would I be healthier?

It’s very likely that you would. Bearing a grudge and refusing to forgive can cause chronic stress to the body as well as the mind. “

Our capacity to make peace with another person and with the world depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

Lack of forgiveness can create an avalanche of stress hormones and impact us in other important ways….

• It increases production of cortisol and epinephrine, which leads to changes in heart rate and blood pressure.
• It raises levels of catecholamine and CD8, which suppresses the immune system thus increasing the risk of viral infection.
• Leads to the release of histamines, which can trigger severe broncho-constriction in people with asthma.
• Alters insulin levels.
• Alters the acid concentration in the stomach.
• Causes plaque buildup in the arteries.
• Causes or intensifies aches and pains.
• Raises anxiety levels.
• Causes depression.
• Interferes with intimate and social relationships.
• Affects sleep and appetite.
• Affects job performance.

**What are the biological factors in forgiveness?**

Brain imaging technology has shown that an unhealthy anterior cingulate gyrus and basal ganglia can cause…

- problems in shifting attention
- worrying, rumination
- holding on to hurts from past – inability to relinquish grudges
- cognitive inflexibility
- conflict avoidance

These problems can greatly reduce an individual’s ability to forgive.

Also, researchers have associated the temporal lobes and the deep limbic system with spiritual behavior and spiritual experiences. These parts of the brain can affect…

- personality and mood stability
- accurate reading of social situations
- control over temper
- access to spiritual experience
- positive mood and emotional tone
These factors can make it easier for an individual to forgive.

**Are there psychological factors that influence the ability to forgive?**

Not surprisingly, people who are inclined to forgive tend to be more **emotionally stable**; they are easy-going, less moody, more agreeable, and better able to handle negative emotions and criticism.

People who are inclined to forgive have a high capacity for empathy, whereas a narcissist is least likely to be able to forgive.

**Narcissism** is present in everyone to varying degrees. A certain degree of self-focus and self-regard is healthy. But a truly narcissistic individual – someone with a personality disorder -- lacks empathy, is hypersensitive to criticism, has a sense of entitlement, and is insensitive to the needs of others. These are the individuals who, when they experience an injury, use vengeful fantasies in order to repair their self-esteem.

**What are the areas that have been researched in the field of forgiveness?**

- Incest
- Rape
- Betrayal
- Parental Neglect
- Marital betrayal
- AIDS in context of relationships and in society
- 6th graders and anger
- PTS after criminal assault
- Adjustment to physical disability
War Traumas

- Genocide in Rwanda
- Campaign for Forgiveness (Desmond Tutu in South Africa)
- War refugees living in Chicago
- Northern Ireland
- Overcoming trauma from military service in Vietnam

The body of research on forgiveness continues to grow. The results demonstrate that anyone can be taught forgiveness. But, the more heinous the crime, the greater the work is required to truly come to peace with the past.

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”

“If we practice an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon the whole world will be blind and toothless”

Mahatma Gandhi

CHAPTER VII

MOVING FORWARD

Holding Onto Forgiveness

Holding onto forgiveness is an on-going process. Dr. Everett Worthington, Jr., states that “When you forgive you eventually doubt that you have forgiven.” When people remember a previous injury or offense, they often interpret it as evidence that they must have not forgiven. If you make your
forgiveness tangible, you are less likely to doubt it later. Tell a friend, a partner, or a counselor that you have forgiven the person who hurt you. Write a “certificate of forgiveness,” stating that you have, as of today, forgiven.

When you have doubts about whether you have forgiven, refer to your certificate of forgiveness, and tell yourself that a painful memory does not disqualify the hard work of forgiveness that you have done. Instead of trying to stop thoughts of unforgiveness, think positively about the forgiveness that you have experienced.”