

Forgiving Others

When someone has deeply or repeatedly hurt us, anger can last a long time. Ongoing anger can eat away at our spirit and prevent us from experiencing happiness and joy. In this case, finding a way to let go of anger may be worthwhile. Forgiving others who have hurt us can help us let go of anger and hurt. If the person who hurt us is sorry and apologizes, forgiveness is a bit easier. However, if the person is not sorry for what has been done or said, then forgiveness is often more difficult. It is helpful to keep in mind that forgiveness is about relieving ourselves of the burden of anger. It does not mean overlooking the actions of the other person; it means looking at those actions in a different way. For example, we might accept that the person who hurt us is troubled or has his or her own issues to work out.

Sometimes we may decide not to forgive someone, such as when someone continues abusing us or those we care about. In this case, the only way to let go of anger may be to accept that the other person is abusive, be clear in our own minds that we are not to blame, and figure out ways to protect ourselves from future abuse. Action Plans, can help us design a series of actions and responses to protect ourselves from abuse. Sometimes this includes putting distance between ourselves and the abusive person.

If you decide you want to forgive someone, here are two approaches that can help. Remember that you can engage in this process of forgiveness for your own sake, and not for the benefit of the other person. In fact, you do not even need to communicate your forgiveness to the other person. Option 2 below (writing a forgiveness letter) can foster forgiveness even if you are no longer in contact with the person who hurt you.

1. Directly tell other people how they have hurt you, in order to help them understand why you are angry. If you use "I" statements as described in the section on assertion above, the other person has a chance to consider your perspective and respond. For example, you might say to a spouse or a good friend, "I feel like an outsider when you don't introduce me to your friends. When you continue to do this, even though we have talked about it many times, I get the message that you really don't care about my feelings." If the other person apologizes, you can decide either to forgive the person or to talk about what future changes you need in order to forgive. For example, you might say, "I want to believe you and forgive you. If you introduce me to some of your friends over the next month, this will begin to show me that you really do care, and it will make it easier for me to stop feeling hurt and angry."

2. Write a forgiveness letter describing the hurt or damage that was done to you. This is a letter that you are not going to send. It is important not to censor your thoughts as you write the letter. Also, do not think about how the other person would react if she or he ever read the letter. This letter of forgiveness is for you - not for the person you are forgiving. Therefore, you can write the letter with full freedom, because the person who hurt you is never going to read it.

EXERCISE: Writing a Forgiveness Letter

Use Worksheet 15.4 (Look for "Writing a Forgiveness Letter" on my website which should follow this, or ask me for the hand-out) as a guide to help you write your forgiveness letter. It is not easy to forgive those who have mistreated us, but it can be instrumental in healing deep wounds and letting go of anger. If you are not ready at this point to write a forgiveness letter, that is fine. Just skip over this exercise and section, and perhaps come back to these pages at another time - if you choose to do so.