

Self-Forgiveness

Being a good person doesn't mean that you will never do bad things. Part of being human is making mistakes. If, after careful evaluation, you conclude that you have done some things wrong, then self-forgiveness may help alleviate your guilt or shame.

No one is perfect. All of us, at one point or another, have violated our own principles or standards. We feel guilty and ashamed if we believe that what we did means that we are bad. But violations do not necessarily mean that we are bad. Just as in Petra's case, our actions may have been linked to a particular situation or to a specific time in our lives.

Self-forgiveness can lead to a change in interpretation of the meaning of the violation or mistake we made. Our understanding may change from "I made this mistake because I'm an awful person," to "I made this mistake during an awful time in my life, when I didn't care if I behaved this way."

Just as in the forgiveness letter you wrote to someone else in Worksheet 15.4, self-forgiveness does not mean that you approve, forget, or deny whatever pain you have caused others. Instead, self-forgiveness involves recognizing your own imperfections and mistakes and accepting your shortcomings. It can also help if you see that your life has not been one mistake or harmful action after another. Self-forgiveness includes recognizing your good and bad qualities, your strengths as well as weaknesses.

EXERCISE: Forgiving Myself

Some people have great difficulty forgiving themselves; they may have harsh and critical internal voices. If you are able to forgive others for their faults, but you have a hard time forgiving yourself, you can benefit from practicing self-forgiveness. This involves learning to view yourself with the same kindness or compassion with which you view others. Worksheet 15.9 on the next page can guide you through this process.

WORKSHEET 15.9. Forgive Myself

1. This is what I need to forgive myself for:
2. This is the impact that what I did has had on me and others in my life:
3. This is how it continues to affect me and others:
4. This is how I imagine my life will be better if I'm able to forgive myself:
5. Forgiveness often begins with understanding. What life experiences have I had that might have contributed to what I did?
6. How would I think about someone else who did this?
7. What positive aspects of myself and my life do I tend to ignore when I'm feeling guilt or shame?
8. Forgiveness does not mean that you condone, forget, or deny what was done and the pain you have experienced. Instead, forgiveness means finding a way to let go of your guilt and shame, and understand your actions from a different perspective. Write with a kind, compassionate voice about how I can forgive myself for what I have done:
9. These are the qualities that I have that will allow me to move forward: