

As a therapist working with people who have had the whole range of traumas, it is inevitable that I run into the issue of forgiveness on a regular basis. Today I am not endeavoring to thoroughly explore the depth and breadth of the subject of forgiveness, but instead to focus on a user-friendly approach which is neither simplistic nor religious nor judgmental.

I would like to flesh out some context for my discussion by citing 2 forgiveness principles coming from very different philosophical underpinnings. First, early in my career in Illinois, I was still steeped in Christianity and had lots of clients with that world view. One of my clients from that time-period was working on a book about her trauma healing experience, so I will begin today by borrowing from some of her research from the Judeo-Christian perspective. In the Bible, there are actually 2 different words in the original Greek for forgiveness: Charizomai (used 8 times) and Aphiemai (used 50 times). Charizomai is similar to grace, to forgive without any requirement of merit or recompense. This is like the blanket forgiveness of the Christian God when one accepts salvation through Christ. The other word, Aphiemai, means: "the undeserved releasing of the man from something that might justly have been inflicted upon him or extracted from him." In other words, a laying aside, letting go, yielding up. So what are we laying aside really?: our desire and attempt to exert power for revenge or payback. The idea here is that vengeance is bigger than we can encompass on our own...that it requires a releasing to a "higher authority," whether we think of this as God or as "karma" or as acceptance that there will be some universal balancing of the scales beyond what we can imagine or know.

The second principle, from the fields of evolutionary biology and cultural anthropology, is evidence that we actually have a human instinct to forgive. Michael McCullough, a psychology professor at the University of Miami, has written a book about this subject. What he found is that the desire for revenge is a built-in feature of human nature, but so is the capacity for forgiveness. Evolutionary biologists who have studied 60 societies found that 95% showed evidence of blood feuds, capital punishment, or blood vengeance. They concluded this is part of what it means to be human. Whew! But why?: deterring would-be aggressors, and this is intensified when there are witnesses who might view us as weak, and deterring aggressors from trying again...historically, ostracism would end in death, so most were inclined to acquiesce to the group rules. Also punish those who are 'free riders.' This reinforced cooperation.

How about forgiveness? Well, there is evidence of that, too, in 93% of the studied societies and it is hypothesized that it is so natural in the other 7% of societies, it's taken for granted. Forgiveness is also ubiquitous in the animal kingdom. So the aggression part makes sense, but why would evolution wire us for forgiveness and reconciliation?

One reason is the “valuable relationship” hypothesis: repairing relationships damaged by aggression leads to more cooperation in the group, which leads to more safety and evolutionary fitness. For example, a study of Macaques showed it was better to reconcile with a valuable partner who harmed them than to hold grudges and go hungry.

So are there social conditions which can promote this instinct to forgive and how would that be useful? We are highly sensitive to context, so if we can change world situations to be more cooperative, then people will be more willing to forgive, reinforcing further cooperation. We are cultural learners, so in devising environments where we are dependent on complex networks of cooperative relationships, reliable policing, and fair justice systems, we can increase trust and willingness to forgive. Things like Truth and Reconciliation Committees and Restorative Justice programs move our context into a more forgiving cultural norm...trying to promote a tool, the forgiveness instinct, which already exists in the human psyche.

So that is the “macro” level analysis of forgiveness. What about in our individual circumstances? How do we get there?...to let go/release, as in my first example from the ancient biblical texts, and to harness our forgiveness instinct, as the cultural anthropologists suggest is possible.

Unfortunately, it seems there are cultural developments which tend to promote individualism and dissension much more powerfully than cooperation and reconciliation. But there are thinkers out there who are trying to shift us back toward a more interdependent mindset. In the area of forgiveness, I have become a huge fan of Fred Luskin from Stanford. He has written 2 books: FORGIVE FOR GOOD and FORGIVE FOR LOVE. Through research, he has developed a very elegant and doable 9 Steps to Forgiveness, which do NOT emphasize having to reconcile. This idea of not promoting reconciliation makes a lot of sense to me...I see so many people hurt by narcissistic and sociopathic individuals who are not willing or able to take responsibility. And I'm not just talking the “capital T” traumas of rape, incest, etc. There are “everyday” narcissists among us who repeatedly cause emotional pain. Though it can be a very helpful release to forgive them, are we required to reconcile? I say, in many cases, reconciliation only leads to more pain, not freedom.

So, back to Fred Luskin. He developed the 9 Steps to Forgiveness. Here is a summary:

1. Know exactly how you feel about how you have been wronged and share with a couple of trusted people.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to go through a process to feel better.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling and does not mean condoning. In forgiveness, you seek the peace and understanding of lessening blame and taking offenses less personally.
4. Get the right perspective...go for the hurt underneath the anger/resentment...and

recognize these feelings are in the NOW, not in the past.

5. When you are upset and triggered, practice techniques to calm your nervous system.
6. Give up expecting things from your life or from other people that they do not, or cannot, choose to give you. Remember you can hope for health, love, friendship, etc., but these are unenforceable rules. You will suffer when you demand that these things occur, since you are not always powerful enough to make them happen.
7. Shift your energies into looking for ways to get your needs and positive goals met through and beyond the experience that has hurt you.
8. Remember that a life well-lived is the best revenge...shift your focus onto the love, beauty, and kindness around you.
9. Amend the way you look at your past so you can remind yourself of how heroic you are to survive and thrive, including through your choice to forgive.

This may sound a bit overwhelming, but Fred Luskin has also distilled his ideas down to a relatively simple definition of forgiveness: the ability to make peace with the word “no.” Think about it. We can have a whole host of problems, but the essence of most, if not all, of them is: I didn't get something I wanted. I got “no.” He gives examples: I wanted my partner to be faithful; they weren't faithful...I got “no.” I wanted somebody to tell me the truth; they lied...I got “no.” I wanted to be loved as a child; I wasn't loved in the way I needed...I got “no.” You get the idea.

This can be a hard thing to wrap our minds around, but really it is important to understand that objecting to the way life is and substituting the way you want it to be as the “gold standard,” then getting upset when your substitution doesn't “take,” is not a realistic method to operate in relationships. Ouch! So the essence of forgiveness is to be more resilient when things don't go the way you want, to get to a place of more peace and acceptance that sometimes the answer we get is “no”...that there is risk and vulnerability inherent in life, and that when we are hurt and disappointed, we have to move forward without prejudice. What does prejudice have to do with it? Well, this is the recognition that no one owes you and you don't have to take the hurt you've suffered and pay it forward. For example, just because your partner betrayed you, doesn't mean you need to expect the next partner to do the same, hold them hostage to your past experiences, not trust, give them the “third degree,” etc. So, bottom line...forgiveness is about experiencing the hurt, releasing it, accepting it happened as a part of the messiness of life, and be willing to give the next moment a chance.

How do we do this? Certainly not by telling ourselves or others the trite phrases, like: “It's over, move on;” “It really wasn't that bad; others have it much worse;” “Don't hold a grudge, be a bigger person, let it go!” Those statements may technically have truth to them, but in the emotional terrain, they get us bogged down in the mud. We need to

acknowledge the depth of our pain, without judgment, and go through our own unique grief process, as long as it takes. Some people never let themselves grieve and some people can get stuck in their grief, wearing it like a badge of honor. A deep person feels pain and allows oneself to suffer because that is part of the human experience. A deep person also learns to let go of suffering, not using it as a weapon, excuse, etc. Grieving is essential before someone can truly forgive. Acknowledge the harm, experience the feelings, don't keep it a secret...the human connection is essential to healing. Resilience research shows that when you share your problems with a few select, caring people (not everyone and not no one), then you have the best healing outcomes.

Again, this may take time. Forgiveness is one of the hardest things in life. Fred Luskin gave a great example of a woman coming to his workshop wanting to learn to forgive when her son had been murdered one month prior. He told her to go home and come back in 2 years. First, she needed to do the unimaginably difficult work of grieving before even thinking about forgiveness. That makes sense. I worked with a client for 13 years, the same client who wrote the book I mentioned earlier, before she was able to somewhat forgive her mother for unspeakable horrors, and forgiveness was not something I required or even brought up. Her mother was dead, but my client came to the realization that she could respect the “office of Mother” which her mother held by birthing her, but she didn't have to respect her mother's behaviors, beliefs, lifestyle, etc. And she didn't need to feel guilty that she didn't reconcile with her mother while she was still alive or feel warmly toward her memory. She could let go of it all and focus on her own resilience, strength, bravery, abilities to write, teach, and be a terrific spouse and parent of 3 children, in spite of the trauma she suffered. Truly, forgiveness is about what we can learn, how we can grow, and how we can become unburdened and free to be our best possible selves.

Thank you.