

What Forgiveness Is and Is Not

What forgiveness is and is not: this article, by Richard and Sally Worthing-Davies, first appeared in their fortnightly newspaper column on Relationships. It was written before the Anger, Resentment and Revenge protocol existed. Had it existed, it would have been an obvious intervention in this case.

“You’ll always be a victim until you forgive” (Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*)*

Chris, Peter’s wife, left him for another man. Months later she phoned to say she wanted to come back and be forgiven. Peter was angry and in no mood to forgive. He came seeking advice. “How can I ever forgive her?” he asked, “I was a good husband, and she betrayed me. Before she left, I sensed something was wrong. I asked her if she was unhappy, but she told me everything was fine, that I was jealous. Then, one day she went to work and didn’t return! All the time I think of what she did.”

“What do you think Chris means when she asks for forgiveness?” we inquired. “She wants me to forget what happened. But the way I see it, if I forgive her it’s like saying what she did was OK and I was wrong. I’d feel like I was giving in, being weak. It lets her off the hook.” Whether or not Peter and Chris got back together, the priority was to help Peter deal with his anger. Otherwise he’d stay shackled to it, forever a victim in this sad situation.

We began to talk about forgiveness, discovering that Peter, like so many, was confused about its meaning.

- Forgiveness is not giving in, but letting go of the hurts and negative feelings.* Once you forgive, you are no longer emotionally tied to the person who hurt you. One girl who’d survived years of sexual abuse by her uncle eventually managed to forgive the mother who’d known about it but had never intervened. The girl explained that having at last managed to forgive, she was now able to live “without fighting my mother in my head, imagining my revenge. She was sort of with me all the time, even though I hadn’t seen her for ten years.”
- Forgiveness is not about letting someone else off the hook – it’s about getting yourself off the hook.* We may withhold forgiveness, thinking it feels like giving in. But by forgiving, we set ourselves free from tormenting thoughts and feelings. Forgiving is good for the body as well as the soul. Dr Redford Williams, co-author of *Anger Kills*, says that simply remembering an incident that made us angry is stressful to the heart. Reliving past hurts over and over again is bad for our health.
- Forgiveness is not about forgetting but being able to remember wisely.* It’s a mistake to assume that forgiving means we have to forget. We cannot forget hurts, nor should we. Such experiences provide us with the wisdom to avoid similar situations in the future.
- Forgiving is not a single event but a process.* Forgiving often takes time. Initially, we experience anger, sadness, and resentment. Then we try to make sense of what happened, sometimes finding reasons why the person concerned may have acted to hurt us. Then we may be able to come to a place where we see the person – and even ourselves - through different eyes, gaining new understanding of the part one or both of us played in the situation. Of course, some people may never reach the final stages of forgiveness – those

hurt in childhood by people they trusted often find it particularly difficult. Yet, even partial forgiveness can be beneficial.

- Forgiveness is not about being weak but about re-claiming the power to choose.* To say “I can’t forgive” is handing control over our lives to the person who hurt us. Choosing to forgive can create a sense of power.
- *Forgiveness creates an opportunity for the other person to change.* It opens channels through which trust and respect can be rebuilt, and love can begin to flow. Forgiveness also enables the person who has hurt us to admit error, to move on and to change for the better. If we refuse to forgive, we may erect a barrier to change by tempting them to defend and justify their hurtful actions.

Peter listened and thought it was worth trying. But how should he begin? We talked through a variety of ideas.

- Getting rid of bad feelings.* Anger releasing strategies, such as punching a bag, can be helpful. If you are sad or disappointed, keep a diary and track the circumstances that affect the intensity of your feelings - then do more of what helps. Talk to a counsellor or trusted friend about how you feel. Meditate and imagine that you exhale the “bad feelings” with each outward breath. As you breathe in, inhale opposite “good feelings”.
- Write a letter to the person who hurt you.* Write as you see it but without blaming the other person. Use lots of “I” statements: “I feel...” “I don’t understand...” Writing it can bring release. Perhaps send it to the other person if you think good may come of it, but don’t, if you simply intend to make the other person feel bad. If the other person is dead or cannot be contacted, you could burn the letter as a symbolic way of letting go painful thoughts and feelings.
- Start forgiving small hurts before moving on to bigger ones.* Be specific over what you believe you need to forgive. Forgiving becomes easier with practice. Say to yourself, for example: “I forgive “X” for hurting me by saying I was lazy when I know I’m not.” Because forgiveness is a process, you will probably need to say this several, even many, times.
- Don’t think a confrontation is necessary.* You can do forgiveness on your own. The person who hurt you doesn’t have to be involved. In most cases, forgiveness is something private. The person who hurt you may be unaware that they’ve done so, and will therefore never know you’ve forgiven them. It’s also true that there are many situations: domestic violence, incest, and others where confrontation is unwise for safety considerations.
- Don’t use forgiveness as a weapon.* Examine your motives. If you’re just going through the motions to make the other person feel bad, or to make yourself feel morally superior, or to manipulate the other into making changes, it won’t work – either for you or for them.
- Use meditation or prayer.* People who believe in the spiritual dimension to life find prayer and meditation helps. Indeed, many believe that forgiveness is impossible without access to a divine or spiritual resource. Christians have an obligation to try to forgive those that hurt them and are promised help from God to do so. They are taught to pray for those who hurt them. Islam also places on its followers to forgive, and Buddhists are encouraged not to hold grudges nor take offence, to act with kindness, and to speak truthfully towards those who have hurt them. The Buddhist practice of meditation, which helps develop self-awareness, facilitates the act of forgiving.

So, what did Peter decide to do? He borrowed his neighbour's dog and went walking where he could not be overheard. Though not a person of faith, nor interested in spirituality, he shouted his complaints – as if there was a God or Supreme Being willing to listen.

- As he felt some of the anger and bitterness go, he then repeatedly shouted out that he forgave his wife. Later, he told us his anger and resentment had mostly gone. He'd found a new inner peace. Forgiveness was instrumental in releasing Peter from being a victim of his failed marriage.