

How to Forgive Another Person for Past Hurts

No one gets through life without being hurt by another person. We all have experienced the pain of a thoughtless remark, gossip, or lie. If you have experienced an unhappy marriage, the devastation of infidelity, or suffered physical or emotional abuse, you know what it feels like to be hurt. It is tempting to hold on to these feelings and build a wall of safety around yourself, but the best way to heal is to forgive the person who hurt you.

What Is Forgiveness?

When you forgive another person, you no longer allow their behavior to cause you anger, pain, bitterness, or resentment. When you choose *not* to forgive, you make the choice to hold on to your feelings of resentment, anger, and pain.

Why Should I Forgive?

Think of forgiveness as a gift that you give to yourself. It is *not* something you do for the person who hurt you. It is a gift to yourself because it enables you to stop feeling painful feelings and pushing others away. Forgiveness frees you from anger and allows you to restore your ability to have close and satisfying relationships with others.

Anger is a poisonous emotion that comes from being hurt. When you are consumed with anger and bitterness, it hurts *you* at least as much as it hurts the person who has harmed you. It is as if you are filled with poison. If these feelings are not resolved, they can begin to eat you up inside. You have two choices: to stay connected to the person who hurt you by keeping these poisonous feelings alive, or to let the feelings go and forgive the person who harmed you. When you withhold forgiveness, think about who is actually being hurt. It is more than likely that the person who is filled with anger and anxiety is you, not the other person.

What Forgiveness Is *Not*

Forgiving another does *not* mean you will never again feel the pain or remember the thing that hurt you. The hurtful experience will be in your memory forever. By forgiving, you are *not* pretending the hurtful behavior never happened. It *did* happen. The important thing is to learn from it while letting go of the painful feelings.

Forgiveness is *not* about right or wrong. It doesn't mean that the person's behavior was okay. You are not excusing their behavior or giving permission for the behavior to be repeated or continued.

When you forgive another, it does *not* mean you wish to continue your relationship with them. This is a separate decision. You can forgive a person and live your life apart from them.

Forgiveness can only take place because we have the ability to make choices. This ability is a gift that we can use it whenever we wish. We have the choice to forgive or not to forgive. No other person can force us to do either.

Steps to Forgiveness

The experience of forgiveness is a process. Since each situation is unique, it is impossible to predict how long it will take or which steps will be the most important to carry out. Here are some ideas for beginning the process:

1. Acknowledge your feelings of anger and hurt. Sometimes it seems like it might be easier to deny the feelings or push them back down, because it hurts to feel them. In the long run, denying these feelings only causes you more pain and actually *prolongs* the hurt.
2. Express your feelings constructively. No matter how badly you were treated or how angry you are, it is never acceptable to harm anyone else. You may need to find a neutral third party to talk to until you feel calmer toward the person who hurt you.
3. Depending on the situation, the person who hurt you may still be a danger to you, physically or emotionally. It is important to protect yourself from being harmed again.
4. At some point, you will see that you are harmed by holding on to feelings of hurt and anger. These feelings can take up space in your psyche and intrude on your sense of well-being. You may feel physically ill. This is when you will be ready to make the decision to stop hurting.
5. Be willing to see the situation from the other person's point of view. This will help you develop compassion, which will eventually replace the feelings of anger. One helpful technique is to write a letter to yourself as if you were the other person. Use his or her words to explain the hurtful things that were done to you. This takes you out of the victim role and helps you restore your power.
6. It is not necessary to know why the hurtful behavior happened. Even if you do learn the reason, you probably won't feel any better. Chances are the person who harmed you isn't sure why they did it either.
7. Think about the part *you* played in the situation. Don't blame yourself; rather, forgive yourself for the role you played.
8. Recall a time when you caused harm to another person and that person forgave you. Remember what the guilt felt like. Then, remember what you felt when the other person forgave you. You probably felt grateful and relieved. Remember how this felt and consider giving this same gift to the person who hurt you.
9. Make a list of the actions you need to forgive. Describe the specific actions that caused you harm. State what happened, as objectively as possible.
10. Make a list of the positive aspects of your relationship with the person who hurt you. There must have been something positive, or you wouldn't have participated in it. This helps you regain some perspective and not paint the picture in completely negative terms.
11. Write a letter to the person who harmed you. This letter is for your healing; you do not need to mail it. Describe the positive aspects of the relationship and express your forgiveness for the hurtful behaviors. Express all of your feelings, both positive and negative.
12. If you have decided to end your relationship with the person you have forgiven, have a ceremony to symbolize it. You may wish to burn the letter and the list, or you may visualize some kind of ending.
13. Sometimes the person you need to forgive is *you*. You can begin to forgive yourself by realizing that when you made the mistake, you did not set out deliberately to hurt another person. If you had known how to make better choices, you would have. You did the best you could at the time.
14. Make the forgiveness tangible. You may choose to send the letter to the person you are forgiving or tell a trusted friend what you have done.

Once you have let go of the pain and released yourself from past hurts, you will most likely feel a greater sense of freedom and well-being. Now you are free to move on with your life without bitterness and resentment. You no longer need to look back on your past with anger.