

Features

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Nine Steps to Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a spiritual activity supported by all major religions and wisdoms. But scientific evidence now shows that forgiveness is just plain practical. It improves our health and the quality of our lives.

At Stanford University, Dr. Luskin has been conducting pioneering studies on forgiveness, where volunteers with unresolved, long-term anger were trained to think and feel in new ways about interpersonal hurt (situations that included physical or sexual violence were excluded from the study). Most of us will harbor, or are harboring right now, feelings of pain, anger, resentment and hurt against someone we feel did us wrong. If the feelings are not released by way of forgiveness, these negative emotions will slowly drain your energy and cause negative consequences for your physical and mental health.

What exactly is forgiveness? According to Dr. Luskin, “forgiveness consists primarily of taking less personal offense, reducing anger and the blaming of the offender, and developing increased understanding of situations that often lead to feeling hurt and angry”. He has developed a nine step process for learning how to forgive:

1. Determine what about the situation was not OK with you. Talk about this with a few close friends;
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else;
3. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting, condoning, reconciliation or pardoning. Instead, seek peace and understanding by: viewing the life experience less personally, attributing less blame to the offender, and changing the story to reflect your heroic choice to grow and prosper;
4. Recognize that your distress is coming from hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset, not from the actual offensive event that occurred in the past;
5. At the moment you feel upset, practice a simple stress management technique to soothe your body’s stress response;
6. Let go of expecting things from people or your life that they choose not to give you.
7. Rather than mentally replaying the hurtful event, focus your energy on finding alternative ways to get what you want;
8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Focusing on the hurt allows the person to have power over you, so instead, set your sights on the good things around you;
9. Change your grievance story so that it reflects your honorable choice to forgive.

So, basically, the first step is to change the kind of story you tell yourself when you describe your experience and your coping response. Most people tend to describe their experiences as awful and their coping responses as weak. Turn it around and focus less on what happened and more on what you can do, how you are learning to cope, and how you are growing.

Second, have a stress management practice. You need to have some kind of meditation, visualization, breathing technique, prayer, or something you can practice to dissolve the stress when it hits your body. Say to yourself, “oh, here I am experiencing the grudge again”, and then do some kind of spiritual, stress management discipline to work it through at the moment.

And, lastly, think more clearly. Most people are filled with really distorted thinking about how the world should be and what’s owed to them. Remind yourself that “you can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you may get what you need”.