The Choice of Forgiveness: Complexities and Strategies

There is an old saying that goes, “It is better to forgive and forget.” However, according to Hargrave (1994), forgiving and forgetting are two separate issues that are not connected by necessity. A person seldom forgets the action that damaged him or her in an unfair way, but the person does tend to forget the pain that is associated with the action after he or she has forgiven. The popular belief that if a person really forgives another, he or she will wipe the slate clean of all memories of the incident simply is not true. Even if it were neurologically possible to erase specific memory pathways in the brain, it would not necessarily be preferable. At the heart of the pain of being wronged is a violation of trust. Trust is not restored to a relationship when the person wronged acts as if no violation ever occurred; rather trust is restored when people choose to respond differently.

Another misconception associated with forgiveness is that it means saying that what was done was acceptable and what the other person did was OK. It’s important to recognize that forgiveness is not the same thing as condoning an event. We can forgive and still press charges. We can forgive and still say no. Nor does forgiveness necessarily mean reconciliation; we can forgive and no longer maintain a relationship with someone.

Some of us fool ourselves into thinking we have forgiven when we really haven’t. We can say we’ve forgiven long before we have explored our feelings or the consequences of what happened. We may try and transcend our feelings and to disrupt the impact of the event by “forgiving” rather than acknowledging and mourning the event. It is important that the wrong not be denied or minimized. Mature forgiveness has been defined as an integrated realistic view that contains both good and bad aspects of self and others (Gartner, 1988).

A number of controlled-outcome studies measuring the consequences of forgiveness procedures have documented not only more forgiveness but less anger, less stress, more optimism, and better reported health (Seligman, 2002). According to Seligman (2002), when people forgive, their basic motivation regarding the transgressor becomes more positive (benevolent or generous) and less negative (vengeful or avoidant). There is something freeing about deciding to forgive, and that in itself may be the critical factor.

If you feel you’re ready to or desire to forgive, here are some suggestions on how to do so. Everett L. Worthington (2001), psychologist and executive director of A Campaign for Forgiveness Research in Richmond, Virginia, developed the following five-step forgiveness process called REACH:

- **Recall** the hurt as objectively as possible. Avoid wallowing in self-pity or thinking of the other person as evil.
- **Empathize** with the person who hurt you; try to understand from their point of view why they hurt you.
- To help do this, remember:
  - people hurt innocents when they feel their survival is threatened;
  - people who hurt others are often in a state of fear, worry and hurt;
  - the situation a person finds him/herself in can lead to hurting;
  - people often don’t think when they hurt others; they are lashing out.
• **Altruism:** Give the gift of forgiveness. Recall a time you did something you felt badly about and were forgiven.

• Tell yourself you can rise above hurt and vengeance.

• **Commit** publicly to forgive in a letter, or a declaration to a friend. This is a contract of forgiveness that leads to the final step of maintaining a state of forgiveness.

• **Hold** on to forgiveness. When you have memories of the event, don’t ruminate on them; focus on forgiveness.

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*Forgiving is not forgetting,*

*It is letting go of the hurt. ~Mary McLeod Bethune*

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References:


