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**The Unburdened Heart Class offers support and direction for those wanting to move beyond the pain of wounds and hurts from the past.**





*The Unburdened Heart*  
KEYS TO FORGIVENESS

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## The Forgiveness Quiz

**Mark each item as true or false.**

1. To forgive is to forget. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Forgiveness is a one time event. \_\_\_\_\_
3. In order to be forgiven, the offender must be sorry and ask for forgiveness. \_\_\_\_\_
4. If one truly forgives, he or she reconciles with the offender. \_\_\_\_\_
5. We can forgive another person without their knowledge. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Forgiving means that we surrender our right to justice. \_\_\_\_\_
7. The act of forgiveness benefits the forgiver more than the offender. \_\_\_\_\_
8. We can forgive and still hold the other person accountable. \_\_\_\_\_
9. The only person who can forgive is the person who was offended. \_\_\_\_\_
10. When one is able to forgive, the feelings of pain will disappear. \_\_\_\_\_

**Thought questions:**

1. What is forgiveness?
2. What is required for forgiveness to take place?
3. What are some barriers to forgiveness?



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### **The Fallacies of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness has been long misused and misunderstood.

One often hears the phrase “forgive and forget”. Yet in true forgiveness, remembering the offense is actually essential to long term forgiveness. How does one forgive something that is beyond recall? To forgive, you must lean into the reality of what has happened. The offense must be clearly understood and identified in order to know what you are forgiving.

Forgiveness does not mean that the wounding behavior is tolerated or we avoid holding the person who wronged us responsible. It does not mean that we must socialize with that person or continue the relationship. It does require that we are reconciled in the sense that there is enough resolution within our own hearts to move on.

Forgiveness is a process, not a discrete event that occurs upon command or solely with the recognition that forgiving is necessary. One cannot forgive on command any more than one can fall in love because someone else demands it. It requires deep introspection and examination in order to come to terms with it. Without this process, forgiveness fades and resentment begins to bleed into our relationships and other aspects of our lives.

Seeking vengeance is a temptation when we are deeply hurt but retaliation always falls short of bringing necessary resolution and healing. Retaliation often escalates the behavior of the other party and reopens wounds. The satisfaction of “pay-back” is short-term and does nothing to assuage the feelings of anger and resentment that eats at the soul. Those who focus on vengeance will never be able to move beyond it.



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## What is Your Forgiveness Quotient?

**Mark each item as true or false.**

1. I think about the offending event and the offender most days or several times per week. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I find myself frequently talking to friends and acquaintances about the offender and/or the offending event. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I have a desire to get even with the offender. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I wish or fantasize that harm would come to the offender. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I often become angry over trivial matters without warning. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I frequently find myself directing anger toward someone or something else rather than reminds me of the offender or offending event. \_\_\_\_\_
7. I have ongoing physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pain or muscular/joint pain. \_\_\_\_\_
8. My feelings about the offending event and the offender has affected my relationships. \_\_\_\_\_

If you answered true to any of these items, you may want to consider working through the forgiveness plan on page 19. Forgiving someone who has wronged you is important to your emotional and physical health. It will increase your capacity to leave the past behind, stay in the moment rather than the past, and discover and experience positive experiences.



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### **What is Forgiveness?**

#### **Forgiveness is . . .**

- Letting go of resentment
- Moving ahead and letting go of the past
- Getting your power back; not letting the offender control your emotions
- A sincere, honest act
- Surrendering your need to get even
- Gaining clarity about the feelings of anger and hurt
- A complex, ongoing process

#### **Forgiveness is not . . .**

- Forgetting the offense
- Acknowledging the offender was right
- Allowing the offending behavior to continue
- An obligation to reconcile or continue contact with the offender

#### **Feelings of pain associated with the offense:**

- Do not magically disappear with forgiveness
- Must be acknowledged and addressed so healing and forgiveness can take place
- Usually subsides over time
- May come and go during the forgiveness process

#### **Forgiveness is sometimes difficult because:**

- Our anger and hurt may be overwhelming.
- Not forgiving gives us the illusion of power and control because we can hold the offender's actions against him or her.



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- Hanging on to the hurts and pain may become a defense that prevents us from dealing with the real issues; we may blame the offense for everything that has gone wrong
- Limiting contact with the offender may be difficult or impossible.



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### **The Forgiveness Process**

#### **Aren't we supposed to "forgive and forget"?**

Forgiving others does not require forgetting what happened. Amnesia is not a realistic requirement for forgiveness. Remembering is important so we can grow from our experience and avoid similar situations in the future. Forgiveness is a complex, ongoing process that requires grieving the situation and facing feelings in order to move past it. It is not a one time event where the pain vanishes forever.

#### **How Can I Forgive Others?**

A forgiving person avoids obsessing about the wrongs of others. The definition of forgiveness is "to give up resentment of". Appropriate and healthy anger can be used to distance from the event and move on; ongoing bitterness and resentment can be toxic and emotionally paralyzing. True forgiveness requires honesty, accountability, and persistence. It means letting go in order to gain control of your life. Forgiveness is typically not a one time event but a multi-step process that takes time and work. The journey is often difficult but one that brings the freedom to enjoy life and experience joy.

Again, forgiveness is a process. Here are some of the critical steps to recovery and regaining your personal power.

**Step 1: Carefully and critically examine the circumstances surrounding the offense.** Consider these questions when someone wrongs you:

1. Was the offender's behavior a response based on his or her personal issues, a reaction to you or a combination of both? Avoid taking responsibility for the behavior and the issues of the other party.
2. Is your reaction to the offender's behavior based on your own issues, past history unrelated to the offender, the offender's actions alone or a combination of both?
3. Did the situation trip some "hot buttons" from your past experience with family or other relationships?



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4. Can you understand the other person's viewpoint even though you don't agree with his or her behavior?

**Step 2: Courageously do some self-reflection.** Did your actions contribute to the situation in any way? (This does not apply in cases of child abuse or neglect.) If so, you can still hold the offender accountable for his or her behavior while taking responsibility for yours. However, being wronged is no justification for either party to act inappropriately.

**Step 3: Confront the person who wronged you with the offense in order to hold him or her accountable.** People who have difficulty forgiving and giving up resentment still view themselves as powerless. Setting the stage for forgiveness includes holding the offending party accountable for his or her behavior. However, consider this option only if it is physically and emotionally safe for you to do so.

The offender can be confronted in person, in a letter, or by phone. The important thing is to let him or her know you have been hurt. Confront with the expectation that the offender may not own the behavior or make changes. The primary purpose of the confrontation is to help you regain your personal power, let go and move on. If the person you need to confront is too threatening or unsafe to address personally, write a letter and read it aloud as though that person were present. If the offender has died, write a letter and read it at the gravesite. You can also read the letter while visualizing him or her in the room or read it to a trusted friend who can play the role of the offender.

***Basic rules of accountability confrontation include:***

- Keep your power by staying appropriate and calm even if the offender becomes upset.
- Stay on the subject at hand without sidetracking. If necessary, use the broken record technique; regardless of what the offender says, stay focused and keep repeating what you need to say.
- Redirect the offender if he or she changes the subject or attacks you in an effort to divert the focus away from him or herself.
- Avoid the use of sarcasm, verbal attacks or emotional outbursts.
- Keep your voice appropriate without yelling or screaming.
- Write out a script in advance so you can organize your thoughts; if necessary, read the script during the confrontation.



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- Role play the accountability confrontation with someone you trust, coaching him or her to play the role as the offender.
- Don't be defensive. This will only pull the focus away from the offender's behavior.
- If the offender becomes verbally abusive and retaliatory, quickly say what you need to say (if it is safe) and exit.
- Confront the offender in neutral territory if possible (not in either home); use a public place such as a restaurant if appropriate.
- Take someone with you for support and to witness the discussion if necessary.
- Avoid confronting the offender in front of your children or others not directly involved in the situation.
- Document the confrontation in writing; include the time, date and content.
- Never confront an offender that might be dangerous to himself or others. If the situation becomes volatile during a confrontation, exit immediately. Call 911 if you believe the other party is a danger to self or others.

**Step 4: Set clear boundaries and regain your personal power.** Forgiving someone does not mean you continue to allow yourself to be abused or mistreated. It is important to protect yourself from abusive, violative and inappropriate behavior. The residual emotional and physical toll from such experiences can be devastating. Allowing such behavior to continue robs you of self-worth and personal power. When we set limits and boundaries with those who are inappropriate, it can empower us. Lasting forgiveness cannot occur without a sense of personal power. If you have difficulty setting and maintaining healthy boundaries, read *Boundaries* by Henry Townsend.

**Step 5: Deal with the anger and grief associated with the situation.** Take care of any unresolved feelings that stand in the way of your recovery. Emotional baggage can negatively impact your health and emotional well-being. Process feelings of anger and hurt with a trusted friend or counselor so that you can let them go. Healthy ways of dealing with feelings include:

- Set aside some time when you can be alone to grieve or feel the anger about



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what happened.

- Keep a journal of your feelings and what precipitates them. Date each entry and write every day during times your feelings interfere with your life and relationships.
- Make a collage of pictures depicting the offending situation and the resulting feelings. Cut pictures from magazines or newspapers and arrange them on tagboard or cardboard. Show the collage to a trusted friend or counselor and discuss it with him or her.
- Write a letter to the offender expressing your feelings. You may or may not choose to mail it. If you don't mail it, read it out loud as though the offender is in the room.
- Role play with a trusted friend who is willing to play the part of the offender. Express your anger and hurt as emphatically as your need to so you can let the feelings go.
- Establish a ritual that will help you let go of the past and move on. Some examples of healing rituals include: inflating helium balloons, writing on them feelings you want to surrender and releasing the balloons into the air; writing a letter to the offender, putting it in an envelope and shredding it; drawing or painting the offense to be forgiven and burning it.
- Seek the help of a counselor if you feel “stuck”, experience disabling depression, anger or other feeling that interfere with daily activities.

**Step 6: Try to understand why the offender acted inappropriately without excusing the behavior.** Examine why the offender wronged you and the underlying causes. Look at the offender's history including major life crises, family history and feelings. Make a list of the factors you believe contributed to his or her behavior. Look for reasons, not excuses. This does not mean that you excuse the behavior—regardless of the contributing factors, the offender is responsible for his or her actions.

**Step 7: If spirituality is a resource for you, turn it over to God.** Pray for Him to grant you a forgiving heart, heal the pain, and give you and the wisdom and strength to move on. Turn your anger and hurts over to Him. (*God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled.—2 Thessalonians 1:6-7*)



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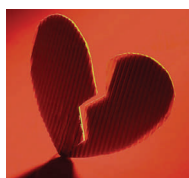
If you are able, ask God to change the offender's heart and heal his hurts. (*Pray for those who persecute you.—Matthew 5:44*) If your wounds prevent you from doing this, God understands. (*We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.—Romans 8:26*)

If you are angry with God, see the handout, *How Can A Loving God Let Bad Things Happen?*

Enlist the help of your church family for support if that spiritual environment is conducive to healing.

**Step 8: Fake it until you make it.** Act in a forgiving manner even if your journey of forgiveness is not complete. Sometimes behavior change precedes a change of heart. If you practice having a forgiving heart while working the rest of the plan, the feelings will follow.

**Step 9: Develop and work a personalized forgiveness plan.** Make a plan with specific steps that can help you through the stages of forgiveness. See page 19.



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### **Primary and Secondary Offenders**

#### **Who is the offender?**

An offender is someone who has wronged us through their actions or inaction in such a way that the offense causes us ongoing pain, eliciting feelings of defeat and powerless.

The reason forgiveness is sometimes difficult is because the focus is on a person who is identified as committing the wrong but who is actually not the primary offender. The primary offender can be a person who did not directly commit the most painful action but may have contributed by enabling the offense through collateral actions or inaction. If this person is a significant other or someone you trusted to protect you, the emotional impact may be far greater than other parties involved. Often, the feelings toward such primary offenders are minimized because of intense emotional investment. For lasting forgiveness, issues with both the primary and secondary offenders must be addressed.

For a better understanding of this concept, take a look at Shari's story.

#### ***Shari's Story:***

Shari has felt hurt and angry for years because her mother-in-law treats her in a cold and indifferent manner. Throughout her marriage, Shari has been ignored by her husband's mother at family functions except for the occasional condescending, disrespectful remark. When this happens, her husband says nothing to his mother and makes no effort to defend his wife. Shari has discussed her feelings with her husband, Greg but he typically ignores her requests to intervene and defends his mother by saying "That's just the way she is. She's not going to change." Even after repeated requests to address the problem with his mother, he has refused.

Shari spent considerable time working a forgiveness plan with her mother-in-law identified as the offender. She identified at length her mother-in-law's numerous offenses but seemed to be stuck and unable to move forward. Finally, she realized that her husband's mother was not the primary offender. The primary offender was her husband whom she loved and wanted to be her protector. It was necessary for her to forgive Greg in order to forgive her mother-in-law.

Greg was a man who had provided well for the family and strived to be a good husband and father. When Shari asked him to tell her about his childhood and his



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early relationship with his parents, she discovered that Greg's sisters were the favored children. His mother generally treated him in a cold, unaffectionate manner. She continually criticized Greg and compared him unfavorably to his sisters. He grew up believing there was nothing he could do to please her.

With renewed insight, Shari realized that she had been unwittingly "sold out" by the man she loved because of his own childhood issues. Greg was too afraid to rock the family boat in hopes of still capturing the love and affection of his mother. He loved Shari, trusted that her love was secure and reframed the problem so he would not have address it with his mother and risk a negative, critical response.

#### ***Consider these questions:***

1. Why is Greg the primary offender?
2. Who is the secondary offender?
3. Are offenders always "bad" people?
4. Why is the identification of the primary offender important to the forgiveness process?
5. What should Shari address in her forgiveness plan in order to forgive her husband?
6. What should be included in her plan to facilitate forgiving her mother-in-law?



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**Back to the Future**

Give a description of your five most significant memories before the age of seven:

**Memory 1:**

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**Memory 2:**

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**Memory 3:**

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**Memory 4:**

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**Memory 5:**

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1. Check any possible themes you believe these childhood memories represent:

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|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> abandonment        | <input type="checkbox"/> abuse         | <input type="checkbox"/> contentment         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loneliness         | <input type="checkbox"/> security      | <input type="checkbox"/> loss                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> insecurity         | <input type="checkbox"/> violence      | <input type="checkbox"/> marital discord     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dependency         | <input type="checkbox"/> marital unity | <input type="checkbox"/> alcoholism/drug use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sadness/depression | <input type="checkbox"/> anger         | <input type="checkbox"/> detachment          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> divorce            | <input type="checkbox"/> fear          | <input type="checkbox"/> health concerns     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> aggression         | <input type="checkbox"/> anxiety       | <input type="checkbox"/> joy                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____       |  |  |

2. Which of these items continue to impact your adult life?

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3. How have they impacted or interfered with your ability to forgive?

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4. How can you address these issues so they don't interfere with your ability to forgive?

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4. After examining the circumstances surrounding the offense, what was my contribution if any to the situation and what was the contribution of the offender? (If the offending event was child sexual abuse, this question does not apply because a child does not have the power or control to be responsible for the abuse.)

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5. What are some reasons the offender wronged me?

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6. What “hot buttons” did the offender trip from my past experience with family and relationships?

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7. What boundaries will I establish with the offender in the future?

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8. How will I hold the offender responsible for his or her actions?

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9. Do I need to confront the offender face to face? If so, how will I do it and what will I say?

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10. If it is not safe, appropriate or possible to do a face to face confrontation, how can I do it and what will I say?

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11. How will I know when I have forgiven the offender(s)?

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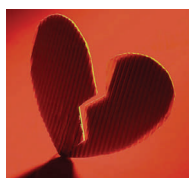
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### **Loving and Forgiving Yourself**

Sometimes it is easier to forgive others than ourselves. And self forgiveness is especially difficult when we don't love ourselves. When this is the case, we are more likely to allow others to define and control us or expect relationships and material things to make us feel good. The truth is, happiness and positive self-worth must come from within.

#### **How do I know if I love myself?**

One good indicator of your level of self-esteem is your comfort being alone. Persons who dislike being alone and avoid it at all costs usually don't like themselves very much. This intense discomfort with solitude can put a strain on relationships and make friends and family feel smothered.

On the other hand, some people with poor self-esteem never want to be with others. They isolate themselves and avoid contact with others. This isolation keeps them from developing supportive relationships. Obviously, persons who feel good about themselves have balance. They are comfortable with relationships but believe their self-worth does not depend on others.

#### **What Can I Do to Forgive Myself?**

- Treat yourself as you would someone you care about. Take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Set and maintain appropriate boundaries with others and avoid exposure to persons who treat you in a demeaning or abusive manner.
- Accept yourself as human and less than perfect, but loved by God anyway. People with poor self-esteem tend to beat themselves with their mistakes and expect more of themselves than they do others. Avoid catastrophizing or exaggerating your mistakes. Try not to over focus on a single negative detail and dwell on it until it overshadows the entire picture and you no longer see the positives. Not everything that goes wrong is due to some inadequacy on your part.
- Avoid cognitive distortions or faulty thinking. Be watchful for "all or nothing"



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thinking where you see yourself as a total failure if your performance falls short of perfection. Avoid jumping to conclusions, reading the minds of others, and predicting or anticipating the worst.

- Avoid the misleading assumption that your negative feelings about a situation reflect the way things really are. Just because you feel it doesn't mean it is true. Carefully examine the big picture and try to decide objectively whether your feelings match the reality of the situation. Make sure feelings are based on the current situation rather than your history.
- If there are factors that affect your ability to overcome distorted, faulty thinking or negative feelings, see a counselor or doctor to determine if depression, other mood disorder, anxiety disorder or other physiological or emotional issues are present. If these issues exist, their presence can make forgiveness of self and others very difficult.



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## **Forgiveness Case Study 1**

Married for 12 years with two young sons, Bryan finds himself in the middle of a difficult divorce. His wife, Sara, is angry and bitter about the demise of the relationship. Her view is that Bryan failed to meet her emotional needs and put his career above the family. Sara's bitterness spills over into her relationship with her children and she continually portrays Bryan to them in a negative light. As a result, the children act out their anger toward Bryan when in his presence and they are resistant to continuing the agreed visitation with him. One child told him on the last visit that he "hated" Bryan and wished he would "just go away." He believes that Sara is sabotaging his relationship with the children purposely.

Bryan is very upset over his wife's behavior but does not want his feelings of anger and frustration to affect how he acts around the children. What important elements should be in his forgiveness plan?



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## **Forgiveness Case Study 2**

Sherry and Tim married young and have been married for about 23 years. Sherry desperately wanted children but Tim decided that children would interfere with the lifestyle he enjoyed. After pleading with Tim for a number of years, Sherry finally acquiesced and compensated by becoming more involved in her career.

Last week, Tim announced that he was involved with someone else and wanted a divorce. Totally shocked, Sherry became deeply depressed. Then, during a chance meeting with a friend of her husband's new relationship, she discovered that the other woman was 10 years Tim's junior with three young children.

This news was devastating and Sherry is immobilized by her feelings of anger and betrayal. What crucial elements does Sherry need to have in her forgiveness plan?



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## Recommended Reading

***The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How*** by  
Lewis B. Smedes