

Forgive and Forget?
LifeLine Counseling Center
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“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”
-Lewis B. Smedes

It is not uncommon for individuals to come to therapy to work on forgiving themselves or someone who has hurt them. Forgiveness is a decision to let go of regret, resentment and thoughts of revenge. It is a sincere and honest, yet complex, process. It requires grieving the situation and facing feelings in order to move past it. Forgiveness does not mean excusing the act, or acknowledging that the offender was right. It is not about forgetting, and it does not obligate us to reconcile with the offender.

Not forgiving can give us the illusion of control because we can hold the offender's actions against him or her. By forgiving an offender, you are surrendering your need to get even. The resentment and bitterness we carry forward can be toxic and emotionally paralyzing. Healthy anger can be used to distance ourselves from the event, as it allows us to remember without being emotionally bound to the offender and the experience. A chronic state of anger and resentment interferes with life, because these emotions can be so overpowering that they limit our ability to experience positive feelings in the same concentration.

We only forgive the ones we blame, and sometimes that means forgiving ourselves. Because of our natural tendency to want to externalize blame, it can be especially hard for us to focus the responsibility on ourselves. Forgiving ourselves *should* be hard. If it comes easy, chances are we are only excusing ourselves, not forgiving ourselves. We forgive ourselves for what we have done, not for what we are. It is too easy to look back at things we did long ago and blame ourselves. We must remind ourselves that we make our decisions with the tools we have at the time.

Now that we have looked at what forgiveness is, let us look at what it is not. Forgiveness is not about reunion or reconciliation, as it takes one person to forgive, and two to be reunited. Forgiving happens inside the person who does it, while reunion happens in a relationship. We can forgive a person who does not apologize, but we cannot reunite unless he or she is honestly sorry. Forgiving someone may not mean that we can ever trust that person again, but in order to reconcile with our offender, we must trust they will not repeat their offense. Forgiveness, unlike reconciliation, has no strings attached and comes with no obligation.

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. In true forgiveness, remembering the offense is actually essential to long term forgiveness. One cannot forgive something that is beyond recall. True forgiveness means remembering the reality of what happened, so that the offense can be clearly understood in order to know what you are forgiving.

So, why forgive? After all, a sip of sweet revenge can be satisfying! However, even if we cause our offender the worst pain, there is no lasting joy in it. Retaliation always falls short of bringing the necessary resolution and healing. Resentment and bitterness hold us hostage. Forgiving empowers us. It frees us from resentment and allows us to focus on the future instead of being bound by the past.