

FORGIVENESS

Counseling Guide

DBU

COUNSELING CENTER

DALLAS BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or a desire for revenge against someone who has hurt you. Forgiveness is often given to someone who does not want or deserve your forgiveness. Forgiveness means that, regardless of whether the offender deserves or desires to be forgiven, you are ready to release the desire for revenge or for bad things to come to the person who hurt you and to move on with your life. The offender does not have to accept your forgiveness, apologize, or admit that they hurt you for forgiveness to take place. Forgiveness is ultimately about **YOU**.

- **YOU** have to make the choice (sometimes daily) to release resentment and let go of past hurts.
- **YOU** have the power to decide to forgive.
- **YOU** are the one who can be freed from hurt, anger, resentment, and vengeance by giving the gift of forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS IS:

- A gift, to both the offender and yourself
- A conscious decision
- A desire to move on
- Release of the desire to “get even”
- **HARD!**

FORGIVENESS IS NOT:

- Forgetting the hurt
- Condoning the behavior
- Excusing the behavior
- Reconciling the relationship
- Losing
- **EASY!**

WHAT IS UNFORGIVENESS

Unforgiveness is a reaction to a transgression. It is a combination of emotions, including resentment, hostility, hatred, bitterness, anger, and fear. Our initial fear (of being hurt again) and anger (for being mistreated by someone) are not unforgiveness. These are natural, emotional reactions to being hurt. Unforgiveness develops over time, as we ruminate on our hurt and fear. Everett Worthington describes unforgiveness as an emotion served “cold” (or delayed) because it develops over time as we meditate on those feelings of resentment and bitterness.

WHY DO WE FORGIVE?

When people experience the pain and anger associated with being hurt by someone, the question of “Why should I forgive?” often comes to mind. The idea of letting go of the anger and hurt and moving forward often seems both impossible and illogical. However, there are several good reasons to release those feelings of resentment and anger, and to resist the temptation of allowing them to develop into unforgiveness.

- 1. As Christians, we are called to forgive.** In Ephesians 4: 26-27, Paul urges the Christians at Ephesus to release their anger and forgive. He writes, “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” Paul is encouraging the Ephesians to let go of their anger each day and not to give Satan an opportunity to turn their anger into unforgiveness. It is important to note that Paul does not say that their anger is a sin – the sin he is urging them to avoid is ruminating on that anger and allowing it to grow into unforgiveness.
- 2. Forgiveness is a gift to yourself.** Unforgiveness has been described as carrying around a red hot rock, intending to someday throw it back at the person who hurt you. Forgiving allows you to release the burden of anger and pain and lay that hot rock down. Forgiveness also allows you to move forward with your life. Unforgiveness causes you to put down roots in a certain time or place in your life and to revisit that place over and over again. Forgiving the person who has hurt you gives you the freedom to move forward.
- 3. Forgiveness can benefit your mind and body.** Studies have shown that forgiveness reduces rates of anxiety and depression, contributes to better sleep, and lowers blood pressure and cholesterol. Unforgiveness puts a strain on your heart, mind, and body, and, over time, can negatively impact your health.

TWO TYPES OF FORGIVENESS

There are two “types” of forgiveness – **decisional forgiveness** and **emotional forgiveness**.

Decisional forgiveness consists of making a decision not to hold an offense against someone, and to restore the relationship to the way it was before the offense occurred. Decisional forgiveness is often easy when friends and loved ones make small mistakes. For example, someone might say, “I forgot our anniversary. Can you forgive me?” to which you might reply, “Of course.” Though your feelings are hurt and you may even be angry, you make a decision in that moment to not hold a grudge or allow the offense to negatively affect the relationship. In the cases of small transgressions by those we like or love, decisional forgiveness is easy. However, bigger hurts that cause us great anger and pain are harder to decide to forgive.

Emotional forgiveness is usually more difficult than decisional forgiveness, but it can also be deeper and longer lasting. Emotional forgiveness is what many people often think of when they hear the word “forgiveness.” Emotional forgiveness consists of changing your thoughts and feelings toward someone who has offended you from negative (angry, resentful, vengeful) to neutral or even positive. Emotional forgiveness does not mean that a person’s hurtful actions are forgotten; instead, over time, emotional forgiveness enables you to replace negative feelings associated with the memory of those actions with positive ones. Complete emotional forgiveness is what happens when we truly let go of all of our hurt and anger and replace those feelings with empathy, compassion, and love. Emotional forgiveness is typically the experience that drives a person toward reconciliation.

Decisional and emotional forgiveness are **not mutually exclusive**. Many times, forgiveness starts with a decision to grant forgiveness and to refrain from holding a grudge or punishing someone for a past offense. Emotional forgiveness usually comes later, as time and prayer allow positive feelings to replace the hurt and pain someone has caused.

HOW DO WE FORGIVE

“**F**orgiveness requires both letting go and pulling toward. A forgiver must release the resentment, hatred and bitterness of unforgiveness. A forgiver must release the desire to avoid or to seek revenge against the perpetrator.”

THE REACH MODEL

Everett Worthington, an expert in the field of forgiveness, created the **REACH** model of forgiveness. The **REACH** model is one effective way of walking through the process of forgiveness.



In the **REACH** model, step 1 is to recall the hurt. Worthington emphasizes the importance of allowing yourself to experience and acknowledge the pain and anger that accompany an offense. The next step is to empathize with the offender by allowing yourself to see things from their perspective and understand the circumstances they may have been facing when the offense occurred. Next, Worthington explains that we must choose to offer the offender the gift of forgiveness, whether or not it is sought or earned by the offender. Forgiveness is not about the offender, but about you choosing to release them from your anger and pain. The next step is to commit publicly to forgive. This can be as simple as telling a friend, family member, or counselor that you have chosen to forgive your offender. The purpose of committing publicly to forgiveness is to help you remember your decision and stand by it. The final step is to hold on to forgiveness. Once you have decided to forgive someone, stand firm in your decision, even when waves of pain and anger resurface.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FORGIVING AND RECONCILING

You may have heard before that it is good to “forgive and forget.” However, forgetting an offense is not always possible or wise. It is possible to completely forgive someone, letting go of all negative emotions toward that person, without forgetting the offense or restoring the relationship. Reconciliation is what happens when complete emotional forgiveness has taken place and both parties have agreed to rebuild and restore the relationship. Forgiveness is about one person giving the gift of forgiveness by changing their own thoughts and feelings toward another person. Reconciliation is about two people rebuilding trust and changing their behaviors toward one another in order to restore a relationship. Before you decide to reconcile with someone, there are some questions you should ask.

Do I actually want to reconcile with the person who has hurt me? There may be times that you feel a sense of finality or closure about a relationship and do not wish to rebuild it. You may find that you are happy without that relationship as a part of your life. The other person may not want to reconcile or may not be ready to reconcile. Finally, reconciliation is hard work, and the cost may outweigh the benefit.

Is it safe and healthy for me to reconcile this relationship? If the person who has hurt you is unsafe (such as an individual who is emotionally, verbally, or physically abusive) or contributes to unhealthy thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in your life then reconciliation may not be wise or desirable. Reconciliation requires both people to change their behaviors toward one another and to rebuild trust; if the person who has hurt you is not willing or able to commit to the process of reconciliation, it may be wiser to forgive and move on.

If you decide that you do wish to reconcile with the person who has hurt you, and that it is both safe and healthy to do so, this model may serve as a guideline for how to achieve reconciliation.

1	2	3	4	5	5	4	3	2	1
Stand	Decide	Discuss	Detoxify	Devote	Devote	Detoxify	Discuss	Decide	Stand

Imagine that the image above is a bridge, with you on one side and the person you are reconciling with on the other. As you move through the reconciliation process, you each take steps towards the other, reuniting at step 5, Devote.

STAND This represents the stage that precedes reconciliation, where both individuals are “standing their ground.”

DECIDE This represents the mutual decision made by both people to reconcile the relationship. Both individuals must decide whether, how, and why they want to reconcile the relationship. This is the first step toward reconciliation.

DISCUSS At this point, both individuals need to talk about the transgressions they have committed against each other. Both people may feel that they are the victim and that the other person is wrong. By speaking softly and with humility, honestly, and openly expressing their hurts, the individuals can forgive each other and move on to the next step.

DETOXIFY At this point in the process, it is time to work on the relationship. Both parties need to commit to “detoxifying” the relationship by eliminating negative habits of interacting with one another (being critical, defensive, self-centered, prideful, etc.) and negative or hurtful behaviors toward one another and set clear expectations for what the newly rebuilt, healthy relationship will look like.

DEVOTE Finally, after deciding to reconcile, discussing and forgiving past hurts, and detoxifying the relationship, it is time for both people to devote themselves to continuing to rebuild the relationship by empathizing with one another, decreasing negative (painful or angry) emotions within the relationship, and increasing positive emotions toward one another.