

Nine Steps to Forgiveness

Why You Should Try It

We all suffer slights, hurts, and betrayals, and it's natural to be upset with the people who hurt us, or sometimes even cut off contact with them. But holding onto a grudge too deeply or for too long can wreak havoc on our mental and physical health—it can elevate stress, increase our blood pressure and heart rate, and even compromise our immune system.

Forgiveness entails letting go of resentment or vengeance toward an offender and making peace with what happened so you can move on with your life; it doesn't necessarily mean reconciling with that person. Because forgiveness can be a daunting challenge, Dr. Fred Luskin of Stanford University has designed these nine steps to walk people through the process of forgiving someone who hurt them.

The process of forgiveness takes time and should only be initiated when you feel ready and have had time to grieve the wrong that was done to you. Research suggests that practicing forgiveness can not only strengthen relationships but also reduce toxic feelings of stress and anger and boost happiness and optimism.

Time Required

Each person will forgive at his or her own pace. We suggest that you move through the steps below based on what works for you.

How to Do It

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then tell a few trusted people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and no one else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning his or her actions. In forgiveness, you seek the peace and understanding that come from blaming people less after they offend you and taking those offenses less personally.

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4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not from what hurt you two minutes—or 10 years—ago.
5. At the moment you feel upset, practice stress management to soothe your body's fight or flight response. This could mean taking deep breaths, doing a mindful breathing exercise, taking a walk outside—whatever is most effective for you.
6. Give up expecting things from your life or from other people that they do not choose to give you. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship, and prosperity, and work hard to get them. However, these are “unenforceable rules”: You will suffer when you demand that these things occur, since you do not have the power to make them happen.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you.
8. Remember that a life well-lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving power over you to the person who caused you pain, look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Put more energy into appreciating what you have rather than attending to what you do not have.
9. Amend the way you look at your past so you remind yourself of your heroic choice to forgive.

Evidence That It Works

Harris, A. H., Luskin, F. M., Benisovich, S. V., Standard, S., Bruning, J., Evans, S., and Thoresen, C. (2006). [Effects of a group forgiveness intervention on forgiveness, perceived stress and trait anger: A randomized trial.](#) *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(6), 715-733.

259 adults who completed a six-week forgiveness training (90 minutes/session) reported lower stress, anger, and hurt than people who didn't undergo the training. They also felt more capable of forgiving and greater optimism immediately after the training and four months later.

Dr. Luskin led the training, which involved teaching participants the core elements of forgiveness outlined above, including taking less personal offense, blaming the offender less, and offering more understanding of the offender and of oneself.

Dr. Luskin has also successfully led his forgiveness training for victims of violence in Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone.



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Why It Works

By reducing feelings of anger and resentment that are not serving a constructive purpose, the steps described above can help shift people's mental attention away from ruminating on negative events in their past; this can decrease stress levels and potentially even improve physical health. In addition, these steps encourage people to focus on and appreciate the positives in their lives, such as experiences of receiving kindness and love—an orientation to life that, research suggests, can increase happiness and improve relationships.

Credit: Greater Good Science Center

