



Forgiving and Letting Go

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Our path to wellness and success is often thwarted because there is something we just cannot let go of. We burn with anger and resentment; we act out our bitterness and hurt. Below is an approach that I use with clients and myself, that I have found really does make a big difference. This method works equally well if it is you or someone else you need to forgive. So arm yourself with some paper and a pen and let's start.

The first thing to do is to write down the scenario. Write down as much detail as you can. If you want to you can even write it like a scene in a movie script. It may be difficult to remember all the details if it happened a long time ago, but write down everything you can remember. Once you have done this there are seven steps to follow.

Step 1: Processing the emotions

Emotions need to be felt and processed first. I don't believe that focusing on the benefits and learning from an experience is appropriate until the emotion is dealt with. While I am all for being positive, there is a difference between being positive and being in denial. If you have lost your job, your family, and all your money, telling yourself that you have a wonderful life is denial. Telling yourself that you can bounce back, get a job, save money, fix things with your family is positive. I believe that ignoring feelings and emotions, or pretending they don't exist, is a really, really bad idea.

Throughout this exercise I use incomplete statements as prompts. Read the statements over and over again and each time complete the statements with your own words. Only stop when you cannot think of anything more to write. Below are some statements which can prompt you to acknowledge your feelings. So take your pen and paper and write down as much as you can. One answer for each statement is not enough. And don't think too much - just take up your pen and write.

- I am so angry at you because you
- I am furious that you thought you could do.....
- How could you do.....
- I am so hurt that you.....
- I still feel..... when I think about this..
- You are an absolute..... to have done this to me

When you do this really give it all you have got. Get in touch with your anger and pain. If you need more than one sitting to get all the emotion out, that is fine. No one has to see or know what you wrote down, just get writing. If you want to repeat things you have written then do it. Swear if you want to, write in capital or big letters, get mad or cry as you write it all down.

Nature has designed us that we can heal through releasing our emotions appropriately. So after doing this step a few times you should feel better. If you find you are feeling more angry or depressed, or you are starting to become destructive, then it is a sign that you need to get professional help. I tend to regard mental and physical healing in much the same way. Just like a cut will heal on its own with the right environment and actions, so mentally we can heal with the right environment and actions. If, day after day, the cut gets worse, then you need medical intervention. The same applies for mental health. If after appropriately expressing your feelings, you find yourself getting worse rather than feeling relief, you need to get help. Appropriately expressing your feelings means that no person (yourself or others), and no property is harmed in any way.



Step 2: Understand the impact of the event(s) on your belief systems

Coming to terms with a negative experience means understanding how it affected your beliefs. This is important and lots of people don't do it. When you experience something it can change your beliefs. If you have an abusive boss or spouse, and you have spent several years living and/or working with them, their actions towards you can alter your beliefs. Some fairly obvious beliefs that you might develop could include: All bosses are cruel; men are abusive; women are dangerous; I am not worth being treated very well; and so forth. The result is that you now take these new beliefs into new jobs and new relationships - your baggage as we call it. It is not enough to just deal with the feelings, you need to understand how these unhappy experiences have shaped the way you think. Once again, put pen to paper and keep writing until there is nothing more you can think of to write down.

- As a result of your actions I think negatively about myself in the following ways...
- As a result of your actions I came to believe I was.....
- As a result of your actions I came to doubt myself in the following ways....
- As a result of your actions I developed the following fears
- As a result of your actions I have done...
- As a result of your actions I hold myself back by....

Now look at what fears, doubts, and negative beliefs you have developed that are not true, and that you need to change in order to move forward and have a better life. You may find some benefit in a few sessions with a professional if you have developed strong fears and a negative self-image.

Step 3: Taking Responsibility

In most cases I wait for another session - a week or two later - before asking people to do steps 3, 4 and 5. In these three steps we move out of the, "You done me wrong" thinking to taking accountability.

In step 3 I want you to think about what you are responsible for. This is often when folks become very defensive. This is a really hard step to do the first time you do it, and people often misunderstand how to take responsibility. Children tend to blame themselves, that is they take responsibility for what adults do to them, which is inappropriate. I find lots of people will take responsibility for the actions of others because those other folks say things like, "Look what you made me do", "Look how you made me feel". You are not responsible for the behavior of other adults. Some people want to take responsibility for everything and everyone because they feel guilty about so many things. As an adult, what you are responsible for is your own actions that you take, or don't take. And don't forget that last bit of the last sentence. If your marriage was going through a bad patch and you knew your spouse was unhappy, and you chose to ignore it, then you cannot cast every single bit of blame for the resultant affair on your spouse. Situations are also a result of what we choose not to do -of communication we choose not to have or of actions we choose not to take. Also bear in mind, that as adults, we are responsible for what we allow others to do to us, and how we allow them to speak to us. Your boss may swear at you for years on end, which he or she needs to take responsibility for, but you allowed him or her to speak to you like that. It's time to take up your pens again and write.

- I allowed you to
- I did not listen to my inner voice/intuition when it told me to....
- I chose to do..... when..... would have been a better choice
- I chose to complain instead of standing up for myself by....
- When I was unhappy I did not say.....

Banish any thoughts of blame when you do this exercise. I tend to regard blame in the same way I regard self-pity. There is not much good about it. Rather than casting blame try and understand what was going on. Be honest, no matter how painful it is. This is "owning" your part. When we refuse to own up to our part, life presents the same situation over and over again, until we eventually do learn the lesson.

Step 4: Understanding and Compassion

This step applies to you and any other party involved. If it is you that you want to forgive, then think about your view of the world at the time. If it is others, try and put yourself in their shoes and think about what was going on in their

minds. Bear in mind that it is the tortured who become the torturers. Understand the fears at play. Understand the pain of the other party. Try and guess what their self-esteem and level of self-acceptance was like at the time. Try and see the situation from their perspective. Write down how you think they saw the situation. If it is you that you want to forgive, think about your own fears you had at the time. Think about why you believed this was the best way to behave at the time. Dispense with judgment and show compassion.



Step 5: Lessons and benefits

Write down the lessons you have learned from this experience. Write down the benefits you can take away. Writing down benefits helps, not only because we are less likely to repeat mistakes we fully process, but because it is easier to reach acceptance of events in our lives if we can find some benefit in them afterwards. We can find benefit in awful things. People who have lost loved ones for instance, talk about how this made them appreciate life. Now there are some people who say all events are both good and bad. I don't agree with this. If a drunk driver killed your child it is never a positive thing in my view. However, because the human brain allows for us to interpret situations in so many different ways, and to find our own unique meaning in events, we can choose the different ways in which we want to interpret this event. So while I don't believe there is a benefit to losing your child, some people have used this type of situation to start organizations creating an awareness of the consequences of drunk driving. This is a way of taking the pain and using it constructively.

Step 6: Taking action

Often these last two steps follow after a week or two break from the previous three. Some people may even want to skip this step. Once you have processed the event fully you need to think about what you are going to do about the event/s. Taking action can be in a variety of ways. You may decide you want to confront the person face-to-face and explain how their actions affected you. You may want to write them a letter. You may even feel that legal action is the route you want to take. Before you actually decide on what actions you want to take, consider all the options and possible outcomes of each action. Think about them for a day or two and then take the action.

Step 7: Letting Go

To finish you may want a symbolic act of letting go to close off. For example you could take the pieces of paper with all your writing and tear them up and throw them away. You can jump up and down on top of the papers and burn them afterwards. I have heard of people throwing the papers in a river and letting them be carried away, but let's not pollute the environment. You can light a candle, plant a tree - anything your imagination comes up with, to signal it is the end. And then move on.

With Best Wishes

Penny