

Forgiveness is a Choice

Although thoughts on the subject may be changing, there is still relatively little research on the direct connection between forgiving and health—no direct evidence that proves that holding a grudge leads to long-term health problems.

There is, however, a great deal of scientific evidence that *does* exist on the health effects of depression, anxiety, and anger—byproducts of the hurt and betrayal felt when someone has wronged us. These include increased blood pressure, increased heart rate, the release of hormones that trigger our fight-or-flight reactions, headache, stomach problems, and sleeplessness, all occurring whenever we allow the painful episode to rewind and replay over and over in our minds.

We compound these effects whenever we allow the “things we wish we’d said” to roll across our tongues as we smack our lips at the thought of retribution. The result is that we begin to stew in our own juices. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been credited as saying that forgiveness is the highest form of self-interest, “I need to forgive so that my anger, resentment, and lust for revenge can’t corrode my being.”

The Rev. Dr. Lewis Smedes once said, “Forgiving is the only way to be fair to yourself—without it, you give the person who wronged you the power to continue hurting you in your memory. Forgiveness is about helping yourself get free of unfair pain.” Forgiveness, as well as its opposites—resentment and revenge—all begin the same way. With *a decision*.

Forgiveness *does not* mean forgetting! It does not sanction or justify the actions of the one who has deeply wounded us, and does not release the other person from responsibility or, in some cases, even legal punishment. Those who forgive are not fools. Forgiveness does not mean that the relationship can or even should go back to what it was before the incident.

Instead, forgiveness empowers *us* to take responsibility for our own future happiness. The process may not be easy, and likely will not adhere to a set timetable. We may even find we need to work and re-work our way through it. In some cases, forgiving can be extremely difficult, so it may be wise to find someone trained to assist in the process, someone we trust, such as our pastor or a therapist.

The important point is that we don’t have to wait for the other party to say they are sorry—which could involve a rather long wait, one that leaves *us* stuck with the pain. Instead, working through the process of forgiving empowers us to become the ones who determine when the healing begins; typically, that means allowing ourselves to feel the full impact of the pain incurred.

Trying to forget and push the resulting emotions out of our awareness only leads to repressed feelings that can later manifest themselves in other emotional or physical ways (for example, chronic headaches, depression, ulcers, or in some extreme cases substance abuse).

The bottom line is this—recognizing the fact that we can forgive the person without forgiving his or her actions takes away that individual’s power over us, and in the process allows us no longer to be held captive to the role of victim. He or she may not even ask for our forgiveness—to grant it or not remains *our* decision.

Ours is the first step to take on the journey toward healing. And how will we know when we’ve arrived? When we no longer feel that need or desire for getting even. When we no longer allow negative feelings, thoughts, or behaviors to control our sense of well-being.

If you find yourself struggling to get over a hurt—past or present—your pastor or a trained therapist is available to assist you in your journey toward wholeness; it is your decision, however, to take that first step.