Why Forgiveness Is Important for Your Overall Health

Let's face it: we've all been hurt by the words or actions of others. Whether you were insulted by a friend, betrayed by a spouse, or thrown under the bus by a co-worker, unresolved conflict can cause more trouble than just feelings of frustration.

While it can be extremely difficult to forgive, holding on to resentment and anger will end up hurting you more than the person who wronged you.

Today, we're going to explore the importance of forgiveness for your overall health and the first steps to releasing long-held feelings of bitterness.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is the process of letting go of resentment, hostile feelings, and grudges toward another person.

It's important to understand that forgiveness *doesn't* mean forgetting or excusing the harm done to you or even re-establishing a relationship with the person who hurt you. The act that hurt or offended you will always be in your memories, but forgiveness frees you from its grip and control over your emotions. It allows you to release the past so you can stop dwelling on the incident and move forward toward healing.

Some people are even able to eventually shift their feelings about a person so drastically that they feel empathy, compassion, or understanding toward them.

Why is forgiveness important for physical health?

Holding on to anger, frustration, hurt, and disappointment carries a large physical burden.

Feelings like chronic anger put you into a fight-or-flight mode, which results in many changes within the body involving heart rate, blood pressure, and immune response. Those changes increase the risk of serious physical and mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, heart disease, and diabetes, just to name a few.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, soothes the nervous system and calms stress levels, leading to improved health and decreased risk of certain diseases.

According to the Stanford Forgiveness Project, the largest interpersonal forgiveness training research project ever conducted, people who forgive report significantly fewer physical symptoms of stress such as a backache, muscle tension, dizziness, headaches and upset stomachs.

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Why is forgiveness important for mental health?

The act of forgiveness also greatly benefits one's mental health and well-being. When you hold grudges and anger within yourself, it can make you feel like a victim, which can negatively impact your confidence and self-worth. While it might initially seem counterintuitive, forgiveness actually helps you take back control of your emotions, well-being and life.

The Stanford Forgiveness Project also found that forgiveness lessens the amount of hurt, anger, stress and depression that people experience, helps people become more hopeful, optimistic and compassionate, and enhances conflict resolution skills.

How to learn how to forgive

Everyone will have a different path toward forgiveness, but here are five tips to facilitate the process.

1. Decide to forgive

While you won't be able to forgive someone with the snap of your fingers, making a choice to forgive is the spark needed to begin the process and stay committed to it.

2. Try to empathize with the other person

Was the person who hurt you abused when they were growing up? Did they just go through a traumatic event? While nothing excuses their poor behavior, realizing that their actions came from a place of hurt can help you see that what they did or said was not truly personal. It was simply the result of being in pain. With time, you might even be able to feel compassion for this wounded person.

3. Let go of expectations

Don't create a picture in your mind of how the forgiveness process should go. If you feel that you can only forgive someone if they apologize, you might end up disappointed. If you don't create any expectations, the process is free to unfold as it will. Regardless of how it plays out, forgiveness comes from within you and shouldn't depend on the actions of another person.

4. Talk to someone

Talking with a trusted friend, family member, counsellor, or therapist can help in many ways. It can offer support, help you release pent-up emotions, and allow you to see things from different perspectives. Don't hesitate to reach out for support if you feel it could help.

5. Forgive yourself

The process of forgiving includes forgiving yourself. It's so important to recognize that the actions of the other person were not your fault and are not a reflection of your self-worth. Understanding and internalizing this truth is an often overlooked, but crucial part of the forgiveness process.

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Make forgiveness part of your life

There is no "right" way to forgive or specific timeline you need to follow. Once you begin down this path, it has a way of naturally unfolding. Start where you can, be gentle with yourself, and seek support if needed. Remember, you're doing this for yourself—not the other person. While it might feel incredibly difficult to forgive right now, with patience, determination, and trust in the process you will eventually be able to free yourself from these hurts.

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