

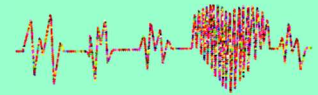
Forgiveness and Mental Health



Forgiveness is a concept with which we are all likely familiar, but it can mean different things to different people, and in different contexts. Acts of forgiveness can actually have numerous positive effects on our health. Although some of us may be naturally quicker to forgive than others, there are ways that any of us can intentionally be more forgiving. Cultivating this forgiveness in our lives can help us to tap into the many benefits to our physical and mental health that come along with it.

What are the Benefits of Forgiveness?

According to Johns Hopkins, acts of forgiveness can offer us a number of important health benefits. These include lowered heart attack risk, reduced levels of pain, improved levels of cholesterol, improved sleep, reduced anxiety, reduced stress, and lowered risk of depression.



Dr. Karen Swartz says, “There is an enormous physical burden to being hurt and disappointed.” (2024). Difficult or uncomfortable emotions can trigger our fight-flight-freeze response and wrestling with these feelings can cause other health problems, mental and physical.

What Qualifies as an Act of Forgiveness?

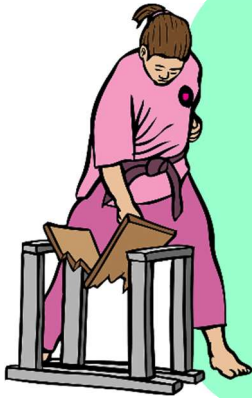
Acts of forgiveness big and small can offer us a number of boosts to our health and wellbeing. In life, we all have reasons that resentment may begin to build. It may be a small argument with our spouse, or a much deeper sense of betrayal from a more serious situation.

When we are engaging in forgiveness, we are choosing to let go of the feelings of anger and resentment that we are holding onto. It is important to remember that forgiving the person does not mean that we accept or agree with their behavior, or what was done in the past.

Forgiveness and Catholicity

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:21)

The Bible extols the value and importance of forgiveness all throughout its passages. In this verse from Matthew, Jesus gives Peter the sound advice to forgive as much and as often as he may be able. This helps us view forgiveness as a positive force that brings peace to the forgiver.



Is Forgiveness a Sign of Weakness?

No. It is not. In fact, forgiving; exercising compassion and empathy for someone who has hurt us, takes considerable fortitude. It can be so difficult to forgive. Recognizing built up feelings of resentment we are carrying takes skill and self-awareness. Once we do recognize these feelings, it is still no easy task to let them go. It's important to remember that forgiveness is a win for us, that can have many positive implications for our health. When we hold on to resentment and anger towards someone or something, it weighs on us and can be detrimental to our wellbeing.

Forgiveness Doesn't Mean We Must Forego Our Boundaries

Let's say we are choosing to forgive someone for teasing us, calling us names, and saying hurtful things to us, or about us. Does forgiving that person mean we are telling them that behavior is ok, and that we'll accept more of it in the future? The answer is no, and this is an important distinction. We can forgive someone and still establish healthy boundaries for the type of treatment we won't accept moving forward. The two concepts can coexist.



Forgiveness Tools

Practice Empathy

Trying to put yourself in the shoes of the person who hurt you and truly understand their perspective can aid you in the process of forgiving. It can help put their actions into context, which will provide insight.

Practice Self-Forgiveness

When we are wronged by someone, we may feel stupid, naïve, or weak. Try to practice self-compassion throughout the forgiveness process. Being a victim of something doesn't make you weak. Forgiveness takes time and effort.

Remember the Benefits

There's more than one reason to practice forgiveness. Yes, it may be a virtuous thing to do, but it also provides us with important benefits. We choose to move forward without the burden and pain of resentment.

Consider Writing It Down

Taking time to write a letter can be a helpful exercise in the forgiveness process. It will allow you time to process what you are saying and feeling and ensure your message comes out the way you want it to.

Do it for Yourself

Consider the perspective that forgiveness is for the forgiver as much, or more than the forgiven. Forgiveness can help us to move forward from something painful in a healthy way.

Speak to Someone

Forgiveness can be a very difficult thing to practice, and it can come with many mixed emotions. Consider speaking to someone you trust, or reach out for professional support during this process.