Learning to Forgive Yourself

We all mess up sometimes. So why is learning to forgive yourself a lot harder than forgiving others?

By Jean Lawrence

Your heart and mental health may depend on your ability to reduce hurt and anger, even at yourself. So effective is forgiveness -- if we could find a way to learn and teach it -- that Stanford University is undertaking a project to learn how forgiveness can enhance health and relationships and even prevent disease.

But first, you might have to forgive yourself. Did you cheat on your spouse? Hit a child in anger? Steal something? Go on a binge? The list of potential human misdeeds is long.

If someone else did these things, you might learn to forgive them or at least let go of the anger. After all, they don't live in your head, reading you the same old riot act. All the world's major religions preach the power of forgiveness. But forgiveness is such an elusive act, quicksilver in its ability to be strongly felt one moment and then dart away beyond reach the next.

According to Stanford's call for volunteer subjects, the definition of forgiveness is a simple one, not a near-impossible requirement that a person apply for sainthood. "Forgiveness," it says, "consists primarily of taking less personal offense, reducing anger, and the blaming of the offender, and developing an increased understanding of situations that lead to hurt and anger."

When You Need to Try to Forgive Yourself

Sharon A. Hartman, LSW, a clinical trainer at the Caron Foundation, a drug and alcohol treatment center in Wernersville, Pa., deals with the need to forgive every day. "These are such shame-based diseases," she says. "Forgiving oneself is one of the more difficult parts of recovery."

A chronic state of anger and resentment interferes with life, Hartman points out. Countless studies also show stress and anger can cause or worsen diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and various autoimmune disorders. "When resentment is interfering with your life, it's time to forgive yourself," she says. "So many people have constant, critical voice in their heads narrating their every move." She says she calls her critical voice "Gertrude" and try to counteract Gertrude's eternal litany with positive affirmations -- that she is getting better, that she is less angry. "Forgiving doesn't mean not being angry with yourself, but not hating yourself."

"No one," Hartman adds, "can beat us up better than we beat ourselves up."

Forgiving Requires Specificity

"I think people often try to forgive themselves for the wrong things," says Joretta L. Marshall, PhD, a United Methodist pastor and professor of pastoral care at the Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. "We think we ought to forgive ourselves if we are human and making human mistakes. People don't have to forgive themselves for being who they are -- gay or le or having some kind of handicap. Forgiveness means being specific about what we did that needs forgiving."

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"I think forgiveness is often confused with condoning or lack of accountability," Hartman says. "This is a world with high performance standards. People think they need to be perfect. Yet people do things -- intended or not -- that hurt others may not intend to harm, but the other person is no less hurt." That's when you need to stop at some point and forgive y

**Hanging on to Resentment Can Have Advantages**

"It's about relinquishing a source of pain and letting go of resentment. People think forgiving yourself means you are let yourself get away with whatever it was you did," Hartman goes on. "The pain and anger you are feeling are supposed t your punishment."

People want to feel pain and resentment? "Oh," exclaims Hartman, "resentment is a very attractive way of putting a ba around yourself as protection against being hurt again."

**Do You Need a Therapist?**

If toting around self-loathing like a heavy backpack has advantages, how do you set it down?

It can be done without formal therapy, Marshall says. "But not without community of some kind. It is in the context of our relationships (whether with therapists, pastors, counselors, churches, families, and friends) that we experience the grace of being forgiven and forgiving others." Grace, of course, is a peace of mind bestowed regardless of whether we deserve it or not.

"You need to talk to someone as a rule," Hartman says.

**How Do You Know You Have Forgiven Yourself?**

You picked the wrong mate and the kids suffered neglect. You spread a story that got someone fired. You didn't report a crime and others were victimized. Is talking to a therapist and declaring yourself forgiven enough? "You know you have done it when the memory gives you no more pain or anger," Hartman says. "It's as simple as that. You can say, 'I am free of this.'"

Of course, along with this often goes the need to ask the wronged person to forgive you as well. "Forgiveness," Marshall notes, "is never complete unless people and relationships are transformed in the process." That transformation, of cou could involve never repeating the action.

Writing on this subject in Selfhelp Magazine, Richard B. Patterson, PhD, a clinical psychologist in El Paso, Texas, says "Making amends is more than a simple 'I'm sorry.' It involves a willingness to listen to another person's hurt. It involves willingness to take immediate corrective action." He says, however, that if disclosure would harm the other person ("I a I slept with your husband. Oh, you didn't know?") you need to find another way to make amends indirectly, even by pra the person.

Hartman likens the sequence, if done properly, to a technique her husband used to correct a problem with his compute didn't want to lose data, so someone told him to set the clock back to before the problem occurred. This way, he lost th mistake, but not the data in the memory.

That's what forgiving yourself is -- you don't forget the mistake, but it doesn't cause any trouble and you don't lose the r of it.

**A New Day**

Forgiving yourself isn't a slogging, long-term, "good day/bad day" type of thing, Marshall says. "At some point," she say reach a turning point. Something shifts. You feel less burdened, you have more energy. You live longer, you have bett health."

"We all screw up sometime," Hartman says. "Forgiving ourselves is as close as we come to a system reset button."

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