



The art of forgiveness

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Are you able to forgive?

The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive but do not forget. Thomas Szasz (psychiatrist), *The Second Sin* (1973), 'Emotions'.

Introduction

In an earlier module we dealt with some aspects of apology (see 'The Art of the Apology', *Coach the Coach*, Issue 22, 2006). We raised the idea that the obverse of the apology is forgiveness. In this module we shall deal with forgiveness, a much more difficult subject, made even more difficult because of the common perception that it has a connection with some forms of religious practice. Let us be quite clear; this module has nothing to do with theology. Forgiveness for us is a matter of practical, gritty, human skills and attitudes that can have a profound effect on interpersonal

relationships and our own intellectual and emotional needs. We shall therefore deal with forgiveness in the same context as the apology, and as a consequence we shall overlap with what was written in the earlier module. For simplicity, we have written this from the point of view of your forgiving somebody rather than of your coaching somebody in this skill and attitude area.

What is forgiveness?

First let's try to understand what forgiveness is. One interpretation is eliminating an obligation of some sort. A crude illustration is telling a person who owes you £1,000 that they won't have to pay you back. You forgive the debt.

In our context, we don't mean that form of forgiveness. We are concerned about inconsiderate or

deliberate behaviour that has caused us pain and suffering. We are sure you can think of instances. For example, we have dealt with people whose career appears to be in tatters because of the pain of matrimonial breakdown. Forgiveness in these situations means thinking about the person as if the offence never took place. That is extremely difficult to do. The offended spouse may think, 'I hate them, why have they done this to me?'

Key learning points

- ◆ What is forgiveness?
- ◆ How forgiving someone else can help you.
- ◆ Considering the other person in forgiveness.
- ◆ Considering yourself in forgiveness.
- ◆ Steps to forgiveness.

- Weigh the benefits against the disadvantages of forgiving. For example, how much better are you likely to feel if you get rid of part of this anger? Are there positive aspects of your history with the offending person that you would like to renew, if you could forgive them? On the other hand, trying to approach and forgive someone is stressful. If it doesn't work out well, your anger may build and be more disruptive and prolonged. If your forgiving suggests (to you or significant others) that you condone totally unforgivable behaviour or that you now feel unworthy of condemning this person, perhaps you should wait. But if you can stop carrying a burden of resenting and blaming, if you can heal yourself emotionally by getting rid of this poison, it probably is worthwhile. It is not a decision to be made lightly. But, what a relief it is to lay down the load.
- Acknowledge all of your feelings. There is often anger lurking behind any hurt or sadness you might feel.
- Express your feelings – write them out, talk to a friend, or simply allow yourself to feel what you feel.
- Accept responsibility for your own emotions. Although you were wronged and your emotions may be justified, it is still up to you to decide when you're ready to stop feeling angry or upset.
- Make the decision to forgive.
- Decide whether the forgiveness will be overt or covert.
- If overt, see **Steps in overt forgiving** below and communicate your forgiveness to the other person. Once you've done this, make every

effort to move on and let it go completely.

- If covert, work at rebuilding trust in the relationship. Talk to the other person about the behaviour that upset you and how it made you feel. The odds are that you won't feel truly ready to forgive until you know this person has heard and understood your perspective.
- Rebuild trust in the relationship. Make agreements about acceptable future behaviour, whenever appropriate.

Steps in overt forgiving

- 1 Think about what happened and what it is you are forgiving.
- 2 Organise your thoughts. **Tip: write down your forgiveness.**
- 3 Know the message you want to give. **Tip: practise what you want to say.**

- 4 State clearly what you are forgiving.
- 5 Share your feelings about what happened.
- 6 Never blame, exaggerate or say empty words.
- 7 Listen to the other person's response without being defensive.
- 8 Offer to help the relationship, if appropriate.
- 9 Move on. Once you have forgiven, it is ended.

Conclusion

We have approached forgiving from a direct, personal point of view. We hope it will give you the basis for forgiving others if the need arises. Use it in your professional capacity to coach others to forgive. Through that they will grow as people and maintain sound relationships.

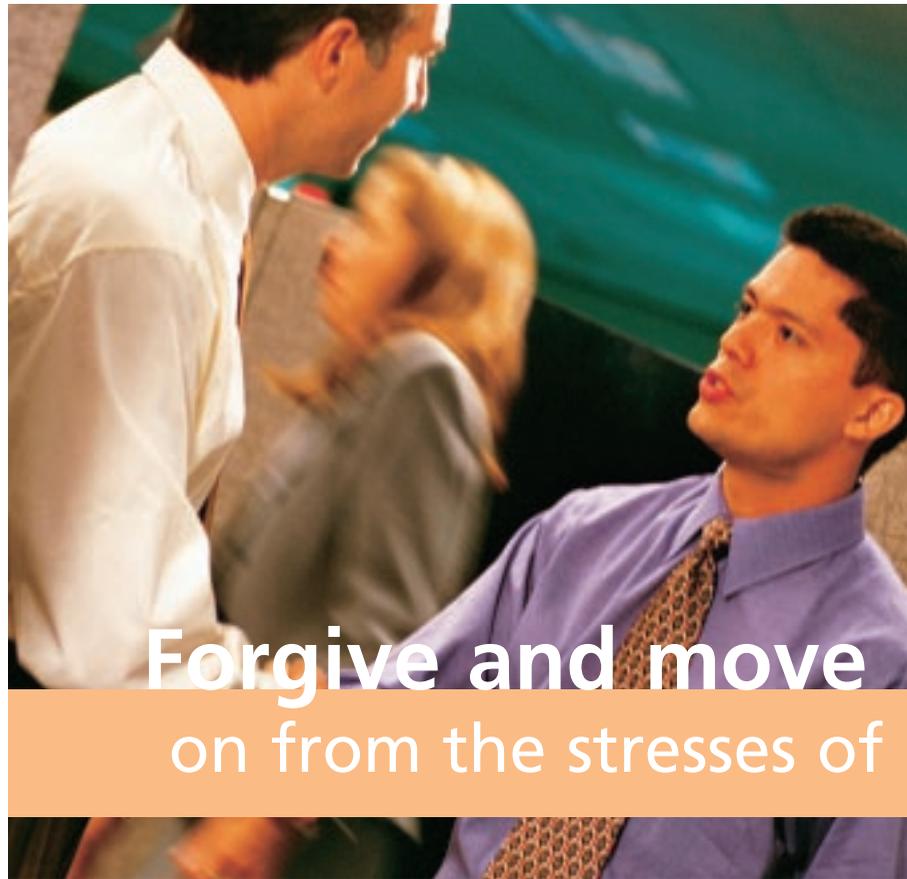
‘Would it feel good to give up the anger and the seeking of revenge?’

References

- 1 Robert D Enright, 'Counseling within the Forgiveness Triad: On Forgiving. *Counseling and Values*', *Psychology Today*, 40(20), 1996, pp.107-127.

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Forgive and move on from the stresses of anger and hurt

They may move on to the bitterness that is accompanied by ‘What can they do to make it up to me? How can I be compensated for the pain I’ve suffered?’ or, even worse, ‘How can I get back at them?’ If our example has hit a raw nerve, we humbly apologise and beg your forgiveness. Forgiveness is also the obverse of apology. If you receive an apology – forgive the giver.

Why forgive?

Forgiveness is primarily about you. You feel hurt, abused, demeaned in an emotional or physical way. You may want to retaliate, to gain some form of satisfaction. The question is, is this the best way? If it is, away you go. Do to another what they did to you. However, beware. Of such thinking and actions are feuds born.

If we could forgive the person who offended us, we would no longer be

so angry and stressed. With that better emotional balance we can function more rationally and work to fulfil our potential, whatever that is. It also modifies our behaviour to the offender. The grudging, wary or aggressive behaviour to the other person is eliminated and normal relations can be resumed. So this is a win-win situation.

Thinking clearly about forgiveness

For many of us, forgiveness is hard. It may be confused with other reactions and emotions. Making the distinctions below may help you to become forgiving:

- 1 Forgiveness is not forgetting, nor is it a promise to forget. You may never forget being hurt. In fact, if you had forgotten, you couldn’t forgive.
- 2 Forgiveness is not just saying that it’s OK. It’s also making sure that

the topic never comes up again. If you find yourself bringing up the thing you supposedly forgave, then you still have some issues that need to be worked out.

- 3 Forgiveness is not believing the other person was not guilty or not responsible for the wrong things they did to you. If they were blameless, there would be nothing to forgive.
- 4 Forgiveness is not praise or a reward; no reward was earned, none is given.
- 5 Forgiveness is not approval of what was done. You are not conceding that the wrong committed is viewed any less seriously than it was before the forgiving.

- 6 Forgiveness is not based on an assumption that the hurt will never be repeated, but it implies such a hope.
- 7 Forgiveness is not permission to repeat the offence.
- 8 Forgiveness does not mean that your values or society’s rules have changed.
- 9 Forgiveness is not something you can do for somebody else; you can only forgive a person for something they did to you.

By knowing clearly what forgiveness is not, we may be able to forgive more easily, using the following steps.

The steps in forgiveness

Forgiveness¹ is your decision to get rid of your anger, hostility or animosity; it is your attempt to heal yourself, to give yourself some peace. So you can see that it is about you,

not the offender. It is also about your relationship with the offender. It is a prime step in rebuilding the relationship. There is research evidence of a positive correlation between forgiveness and self-acceptance – that is, the more you accept others, the more you like yourself and *vice versa*.

Forgiveness may be overt or covert. That is, you may tell the person that you forgive them, or you may simply forgive them – in the latter case they will only know that you are behaving in a positive way towards them, as if they had never offended against you. It is necessary to think very carefully about how to forgive somebody overtly.

Imagine you go up to somebody who has harmed you and you say out of the blue, ‘I forgive you.’ What reaction is that likely to get? It can vary from, ‘You pious arrogant prig’ to ‘Thank you, I am grateful.’ Why such different reactions? It may depend on their recognition that they have offended against you; whether they internally accept that they have done you harm. Perhaps it depends in part on whether the person feels the need to be forgiven. It depends on whether the forgiveness is seen as a relief for the giver of the forgiveness and not as a help to both the receiver and giver. It depends on whether it is seen as part of the giver’s ritualistic belief system, doing it because they were taught a belief system that says the giver ‘should’ do this. We are sure you can think of many reasons why in a given situation the forgiven person may react in the way they do. Let’s explore this a little.

Considering the offender

- Make a serious effort to understand the circumstances, thinking, motives and hopes of the person who hurt you. Look

‘if you had forgotten, you couldn’t forgive’

for background information – cultural influences, problems, envy, ambitions and so on – that would explain (not excuse) the resented behaviour. Talk to colleagues and friends of the person who harmed or offended you. Get their opinions about the offender’s situation and motives. Have they had experiences that made their actions towards you likely to occur? Remember that you are not a psychologist using deep analytical techniques. You are just seeking some understanding.

- Use this background information to look at what happened from the other person’s point of view. What do you suppose they thought would be the outcome of treating you the way they did? What loss might they have been trying to handle or prevent? What emotions might have been dominating the other person? How do you think they saw you and your situation at the time? Remember that you are attempting to seek the cause of the behaviour against you.
- Has the offender apologised or made any effort to make up for harm that they have done, or made any efforts to change their behaviour? It is easier to forgive someone who is sorry or trying to change.
- Could the offender start to change from hearing about your pain? Remember you are forgiving them for your well-being, not theirs, but there may be a two-way pay-off, particularly in your relationship with the offender. Don’t expect miracles.

Considering yourself

- Be sure you really want to forgive. If you are still boiling inside and feel there could never be even a partial justification of what was done, you aren’t ready to forgive. You still have unfinished business with the offender and yourself. If and when you want to get these bad feelings off your chest, want to remove some of the emotional barriers from the relationship, and want to see the other person’s side of the situation, you may be ready to consider the remaining steps in forgiving. To get to the point of forgiving someone, try expressing the anger and pain with people you trust, and follow this with a genuine discussion of how and why you may be nurturing and prolonging the pain. Then consider what you would gain if you let go of the resentment. Ask yourself, ‘Am I ready to give up revenge against this other person?’
- What was it you did or did not do that may have provoked the offender’s behaviour? You may recognise that you were in some way provocative. If you do recognise this, you have three choices:
 - To change your behaviour: ask ‘Why should you?’
 - To help the other person cope with your behaviour: ask ‘Is this possible?’
 - To continue to behave as you do: ask ‘Is this sensible?’
- Regardless of how the other person feels about their actions, the questions are as follows: ‘Are you ready to absorb the pain without spewing hatred back? Can you start to wish the other person well? Would it feel good to give up the anger and the seeking of revenge?’