

Forgiveness: The key to releasing the pain of past mistakes and betrayals.

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Each one of us has an emotional gas tank inside us. Inside most of us, our emotional gas tanks are filled with anger, sadness and fear, or negative emotions. Negative emotions build up over time. They accumulate.

As an example, take anger. Anger is difficult to control yet it is predictable. It begins like a single drop of water. At first, it's merely irritating. No big deal, it's just an aggravation. Slowly, gradually, over time, anger accumulates. Some bonehead zips into the parking space for which you were patiently waiting. A guy in a hurry cuts you off on the freeway. Your boss is mistakenly upset with you because of a error a coworker made. The waitress takes forever to get your order and you are running late. When you finally arrive home, exhausted, your children are boisterous and energetic. Tiny drops of water slowly filling up your emotional gas tank. Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop. And when you gather together enough of these little drops of annoyance, you have unknowingly filled your emotional gas tank with rage and anger. You now are quick to judgment. You are fast to fury. You instantly become irritated.

Over time, over years and years of this pattern, you learn to trust no one. You learn to be expect the worst from people. You build a wall to shield you from more pain. And the quality of your life gradually becomes miserable. It's

insidious. Without awareness, you become an emotional time bomb that explodes under any additional difficulties.

There is a better way to live. It requires learning the human strength of forgiveness. Forgiveness takes some awareness and practice, but it can be learned.

All you have to do is learn how to dump out your emotional gas tank. Turn it upside down and release every last bit of negative emotions – anger, fear, disappointment and sadness. Once you've emptied your tank, you have the option of filling it up with what you choose – love, joy, peace and patience.

The problem is that no one ever taught you HOW to empty out your gas tank of these destructive emotions. Once you learn how to dump out all that rage and pain, then you have a choice. You get to choose what emotions you would like to put in the tank.

You see, the problem is that life is flawed. There is nothing permanent in life. Eventually, everything we love will wither and die. One of the few certainties in life is that, at some point, **everyone** feels heartbroken, let down, betrayed, or disappointed. That is the price we must pay to live life. And it's normal to feel anger, sorrow and fear as a result of terrible events such as homicide, rape or assault. The key is to learn how to get unstuck from those feelings. The less time you spend wallowing in your destructive emotions, the better your quality of life will be.

Why do you want to forgive?

We have a lifetime of experience holding on to our hurt. However, no one has ever taught us HOW to release the pain. Research has shown that it *is bad for our bodies* when we dwell on negative feelings. Yet most of us don't know any other way.

Studies show that people with higher levels of anger, fear and depression have more health problems, are more stressed, are at a higher risk of heart disease, have a higher incidence of cancer, are less hopeful and have fewer quality relationships. Negative emotions eat away at the inside of your arteries, are bad for your heart and kill your brain cells. They raise your blood pressure, make your muscles tense and cause more cortisol, the stress chemical, to be released into your body.

Now you know why you want to get rid of those negative, destructive emotions you've been sitting on for decades. Let's look at what forgiveness is and how to start to learn to forgive.

What is Forgiveness?

Learning how to forgive takes some practice. It takes a little open-mindedness. However, it works and it is tremendously powerful. Forgiveness is not for wimps. Forgiveness is not an act of weakness. Forgiving does NOT mean that you approve of the act which broke your heart.

There are at least five types of forgiveness.

5 types of forgiveness

1. **Forgiveness of others** which we extend to others. Forgiving others their trespasses against us allows us to release our anger, disappointment and sorrow. Forgiveness is done to help you. It is not a weakness. It is a strength that you can learn to develop. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful human strengths you can learn. *Forgiveness is the feeling of peace that you have in the present moment when you learn to stop dwelling on past hurts, betrayals and tragedies.* Forgiveness is done to help YOU out, NOT the offender. Forgiveness is way to reclaim your power and control over your life.

Forgiveness does not mean that you condone of or approve of the wrongdoings that hurt you. You don't need to be face-to-face with the offender in order to forgive. You can do it all by yourself.

2. **Allowing others to forgive us.** This piece is about being able to receive the forgiveness from others. This allows us to release our guilt and self-loathing. Just as we learn to accept an apology with grace and an open heart, we must also learn to accept the genuine forgiveness of other people. I see this in my children frequently, where I will forgive one of them for breaking a vase, for example, and they don't accept my forgiveness. My older son, in particular, will remain upset at himself for a long time. He beats himself up over his mistakes,

long after his mother and I have forgiven him. So I try to teach him how to accept our forgiveness by reminding him of what is truly important and what is not. One way to do this is to ask yourself, “Will this matter a year from now?” If the answer is “No” then let it go. Breathe it out.

3. **Forgiveness of self** which allows us to release our need to be perfect, our guilt related to our own shortcomings and our shame, or our belief that we are bad people at our core. Difference between guilt and shame. Guilt stems from something you have done which you know to be wrong. Guilt can be productive by steering you away from danger or wrongdoing. Guilt can spur you on to do the right thing. On the other hand, shame develops as a result of something that was done to you at a very early age, something over which you had little to no control. Shame is unproductive.

4. **Forgiveness of God** which as well as

There are your types of forgiveness where God is involved:

1. **You forgiving God** – When you forgive God, you begin to recognize and release any anger you may have at God because it allows you to let go of the idea that life should be fair. Life isn't perfect. It's not SUPPOSED to be. Happiness can only be measured by the depth of our struggles. Without anger, sadness and fear, there would be no joy or pleasure in happiness. For example, my youngest son's soccer team went undefeated last season. And it amazed me how unsatisfying the wins became towards the end of our

season. To win became merely expected. Once the expectation was lived up to, there was slight satisfaction that disappeared momentarily. Even the boys weren't all that excited after scoring a goal – it was just one more goal leading to one more win. On the other hand, we are now playing indoor soccer with a much different team. Wins are much harder to come by. Yet, when we do win, the excitement, elation and fulfillment run deep and last longer. To bring it back to my point, our joy is measured by our trials and tribulations. The struggles we endure give us perspective and appreciation of our victories – moral or otherwise. Life is intended to be filled with ups and downs. Forgiveness is a key to bouncing back from the down times.

2. **God forgiving you** – Asking God to forgive you your mistakes and shortcomings gives you a fresh start. Asking forgiveness of a higher power enables you to let go of your mistakes so you can stay in the present moment rather than fretting over the past or worrying about the future. It is critical to learn to let go of the past. You cannot change the past. It is done. The best you can do is manage your actions, thoughts and feelings in the present moment. Asking God for forgiveness is one way to do just that.

How do you forgive?

Forgiveness begins with the realization that you are in control over how you feel. You have a choice as to whether or not you want to hold on to the anger you feel – anger at those who have wronged you, anger at God, anger at your

self, anger at your parents, anger at everybody. Forgiveness is a learnable skill just like learning to swim.

The beliefs that you hold about forgiveness open or close possibilities for you. These beliefs determine your willingness to forgive. As a result, your beliefs about forgiveness dramatically influence how happy you are.

One of the ways that I learned to forgive came with the realization that I only harm myself when I hold on to my anger. It does nothing to get back or to punish the trespasser. Many times the person who wronged you doesn't even *know* you are angry. So your anger has no effect on them.

Also, forgiveness shatters the illusion that you are a victim of your past traumas or mistakes. You are not a victim of your past. You are a survivor. You are the hero of your own story. The past is the past. You cannot change it. The best you can do is to learn new ways of being in the present moment.

Forgiveness is a way out of your prison of pain. Forgiveness is a show of inner strength, NOT weakness. Forgiveness is a sign that you are able to rise above that which life has thrown your way. Forgiveness indicates to others that you have the power to overcome tragedy.

Getting to Forgiveness

Normally, when someone has wronged us, we create mental stories about the injustice done to us. Then we rehearse it over and over again. Many of us get stuck and have a hard time turning the page in our mind.

There are usually three parts to these stories, or grievances:

1. We take the offense too personally (when in fact it usually has little to do with us).
2. We blame the offender for your emotions surrounding the episode.
3. We create a grievance story and dwell on it.

By following these three steps, you can virtually guarantee a drop in life satisfaction, a decline in mood, and greater stress.

Rather than take these three steps, here are three new steps you can learn. The goal is to replace the steps above with the new steps below. As you practice, forgiveness becomes easier and easier.

3 Preconditions to be able to forgive

1. **Know HOW you feel** – Know specifically what emotions you are feeling.
Most times in tragic situations, a grieving process takes place. Grieving usually involves anger, disappointment (a combination of anger and sadness), sorrow, and shock.
2. **Know WHAT was wrong** – Know specifically which behaviors were hurtful or which words caused pain.
3. **Tell 1-3 trusted friends what happened** – Share your newly recreated story with some trusted friends.

Obstacles to forgiveness

1. Confusing an unforgivable offense with an unwillingness to forgive

2. Can you conceive of letting go of your grievance?
3. Pray to be willing to be willing to forgive
4. Realize that holding on to the grievance is hurtful to you
5. Understand that YOU are in control of your thoughts and your feelings

Retell the grievance story

1. Take it less personally (i.e., it has NOTHING to do with you)
2. Take responsibility for how you feel
3. Turn yourself into the hero of the story rather than the victim

Start forgiving your self and your loved ones today. It's a process that you learn. It takes time. You will make mistakes. That's okay. Forgive yourself for not being perfect. The more you practice it, the more forgiveness becomes a way of life and the happier you become.

About Dr. John Schinnerer

A nationally-recognized expert in anger management and positive psychology, Dr John is an award-winning author, speaker, consultant and expert coach in the fields of Positive Psychology and Anger Management. Dr. John has been nationally recognized as one of the premiere experts in his fields. He has appeared on a variety of national media outlets providing an expert view on managing anger and providing insights to a happier life. Dr. John's work can be found in both print publications, radio, CD, DVD and TV. He consulted on a major motion picture due out in June of 2015. Dr. John is also featured in the upcoming documentary, *Skewed*, on the impact of violence in the media. Dr. John Schinnerer, is a UC Berkeley-trained Ph.D intently focused in the field of happiness. Dr. John has given a Psychiatric Grand Rounds presentation for Kaiser Permanente on positive psychology. He has taught numerous psychologists, doctors and mental health professionals about the benefits of positive psychology. He has consulted with major companies such as Sutter Health, Kaiser, UPS regarding the need for and implementation of emotional intelligence. His book, [Guide to Self: The Beginner's Guide to Managing Emotion and Thought](#) was awarded Best Self-Help Book of the Year. Dr. John was recently included on a music album by Positive Music Imperative, speaking on the importance of positivity in music lyrics. Dr. John's blog on positive psychology, [Shrunken Mind](#), was named one of the top 10 positive psychology blogs on the internet by PostRank and Alltop.