

the process of forgiveness

1. Don't deny feelings of hurt, anger, or shame. Rather, acknowledge these feelings and commit yourself to doing something about them.
2. Don't just focus on the person who has harmed you, but identify the specific offensive behavior.
3. Make a conscious decision not to seek revenge or nurse a grudge and decide instead to forgive. This conversion of the heart is a critical stage toward forgiveness.
4. Formulate a rationale for forgiving. For example: "By forgiving I can experience inner healing and move on with my life."
5. Think differently about the offender. Try to see things from the offender's perspective.
6. Accept the pain you've experienced without passing it off to others, including the offender.
7. Choose to extend goodwill and mercy toward the other; wish for the well-being of that person.
8. Think about how it feels to be released from a burden or grudge. Be open to emotional relief. Seek meaning in the suffering you experienced.
9. Realize the paradox of forgiveness: as you let go and forgive the offender, you are experiencing release and healing.

degrees of forgiveness

The ability to forgive depends on other variables: the nature and severity of the offense, and the nature or type of relationship between the offender and the offended one. When trust is shattered between persons where there is a significant relationship (between spouses, parents and children, or pastors and parishioners), forgiveness can be very difficult to attain. Consequently, one forgiveness researcher (Michelle Nelson) talks about degrees or different types of forgiveness:

DETACHED FORGIVENESS There is a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender, but no reconciliation has taken place.

LIMITED FORGIVENESS There is a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender, and partial relationship is restored with the offender and a decrease in the emotional investment in the relationship.

FULL FORGIVENESS There is a total cessation of negative feelings toward the offender, and the relationship is restored and grows.

Adapted from Beverly Flanigan, in *Exploring Forgiveness*.

For Further Reading

Robert D. Enright and Joanna North, editors, *Exploring Forgiveness* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). This book contains an extensive bibliography on forgiveness literature and research, including works on forgiveness from a Christian, theological perspective.

Beverly Flanigan, *Forgiving the Unforgivable: Overcoming the Bitter Legacy of Intimate Wounds* (Macmillan, 1992).

L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Eerdmans, 1995).

Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (HarperCollins, 1984).

Web Sites

Campaign for Forgiveness Research: www.forgiving.org

International Forgiveness Institute: www.intl-forgive-inst.org

what forgiveness is not

- Forgetting: deep hurts can rarely be wiped out of one's awareness.
- Reconciliation: reconciliation takes two people, but an injured party can forgive an offender without reconciliation.
- Condoning: forgiveness does not necessarily excuse bad or hurtful behavior.
- Dismissing: forgiveness involves taking the offense seriously, not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant.
- Pardoning: a pardon is a legal transaction that releases an offender from the consequences of an action, such as a penalty. Forgiveness is a personal transaction that releases the one offended from the offense.