

Forgiveness

Pardon, absolution, leniency, mercy, grace

“And throughout all eternity
I forgive you, you forgive me.”

William Blake

There's an old Zen story that tells of two monks who were walking along the banks of an overflowing river. They saw a young woman who was afraid to cross. Although the monks had taken vows never to touch a woman, the older monk picked her up and carried her to the other side of the river. The younger monk seethed in anger all day. The two didn't speak until sunset, when they were allowed to break their vow of silence. Then the younger monk, enraged, accused the older monk of defiling himself and the whole order. The older monk simply answered “I put the woman down on the other side of the river early this morning. It is only you who have been carting her around throughout the day.”

You're not going to get through life without people stepping on your toes and sometimes even stealing your shoes. You've probably already experienced people lying about you, cheating you, betraying you, taking your friends, homework, or possessions, telling you you're stupid, and worse. You may have suffered physical pain, injury, or abuse from people you love. These things should never happen . . . but they happen.

What should you do? What's best for you. Drop your anger and desire for revenge like a hot potato, because if you don't, the person who wronged you will hurt you twice. *Example:* Your brother takes your bike without asking, ruins the gear shifter, then dumps the evidence in the trash behind a store.

Okay, he's hurt you once. If you seethe in anger like the younger monk, you'll put a stop to your own personal growth and probably hurt your health, too. Wham! Your brother has hurt you twice—and you still don't have your bike.

“Hate is like acid. It can damage the vessel in which it is stored as well as destroy the object on which it is poured.”

Ann Landers

Here's the secret of forgiveness: When you forgive others or yourself, *you stop being a victim*. You stop suffering. You can turn your pain into strength. You can improve your health, your sense of peace, and your happiness.

“Great,” you might say, “but forgiveness is easier said than done.” And you'd be right. Developing positive character traits isn't for wimps, and forgiveness is one of the hardest of all traits to form. You can do it, though. Here's how.

How to Forgive Others

- 1. Acknowledge and accept what was done to you.** Don't ignore it or bury it. Buried things rot. Life isn't fair, bad things happen to good people, and wrongdoers aren't always punished. This doesn't mean you should give up or give in.
- 2. Report the offense.** If the other person broke the law, report him or her to the police. If the person

broke a school rule, report it to your teacher or principal. If the person broke a family rule, tell your parents. You're not being a tattletale. Offenders should be held accountable for what they do.

3. Let your feelings out. Go ahead; get mad. Yell and cry if you want to. Let your anger out in a non-violent way. Anger held inside can make you sick. Jog, run, throw a football, pound the floor, pound your pillow, or wad up your dirty socks and throw them at the wall.

4. Talk with a caring, understanding adult or friend. Explain what happened and how you feel. Get professional help if you need it.¹

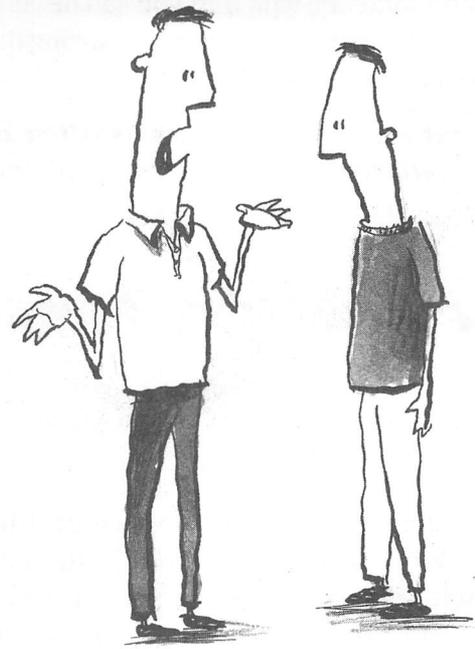
5. Write about your feelings in your journal.² Let them out. Or pound out your feelings on a piano or other musical instrument. Or draw your feelings. Do whatever works for you.

6. Tell the offender how you feel. Sometimes other people aren't aware that they've hurt you. Focus on the problem, not the person. Explain, don't blame. *Example:* You might say "I needed that bike to get to my job. Now I either have to walk or lose my job. This is a real hardship for me, and I don't know what to do." Don't say "You idiot! You stole my bike and ruined it. You're a thief and a liar. I hate you!" The first approach might turn your brother into an ally—someone who sympathizes with your problem. The second approach will put him on the defensive.

7. Ask the offender to make things right. Ask the person to return what was taken or fix what was broken. *Example:* "Will you help me repair my bike? Will you help me pay for the parts I need?" Sometimes this is possible, sometimes it isn't.

8. If this is appropriate for you, talk with God or another Higher Being/Higher Power you have faith in. Ask to be relieved of your anger and desire for revenge. Ask to be healed of your hurt. Ask for the ability to understand what's happened and put it behind you. Ask for the strength to forgive.

9. Forgive the offender. Take charge of your own attitudes, reactions, and feelings. Anger is a choice, revenge is a choice, hatred is a choice—



"I really NEED a bike. What am I going to do?"

and forgiveness is a choice.³ When you're ready, say "I forgive you." If you're sincere, you should feel a sense of calm and relief. Your body and spirit will be healthier. Don't worry about justice; leave that to the law, to the offender's own conscience, or to a Higher Power.

"It is by forgiving that one is forgiven."

Mother Teresa

10. Find a way to serve the offender. "WHAT?" you might ask. Yes, you read it right! This step is not for the faint of heart. Only the truly courageous can take it. But this is where you grow the most and gain the most—and that's why it's worth a try.

For this step, focus on the *person*, not the problem. See the human being complete with faults, weaknesses, worries, doubts, deficiencies, and insecurities. Then ask yourself "How can I serve this person? How can I help him or her? What can I do to make his or her life better—without expecting anything in return?" An answer will come to you. You might even do a "secret service" or a random act of kindness.⁴

¹ See "Endurance," pages 87 and 88, for crisis hotlines.

² See "Endurance," pages 88, 89, and 92, for journaling resources.

³ See "Choice and Accountability," pages 28–34.

⁴ See "Caring," page 24.

Serving someone who hurt you can be very healing. When you do this, you defeat the wrong that was done to you. You're free. You win!

11. Repeat any of these steps as often as you need to until they stick. Be patient with yourself. Forgiveness takes time.

How to Forgive Yourself

"If you haven't forgiven yourself something, how can you forgive others?"

Dolores Huerta

What if you're the person who committed the offense? Who hurt someone else? Who behaved badly? You can hope that the other person will forgive you, but that's not something you can control. What you *can* control is how you treat yourself.

You can't change the past. You can't go back in time and undo the wrong you did. But you can do good in the present. And you can start by forgiving yourself. Here's how.

1. Admit what you did. Take responsibility for your actions. You can't forgive yourself until you acknowledge that you did something wrong. Maybe you made a mistake; everybody does from time to time. Or maybe you deliberately hurt someone. Either way, *you* did it, and *you* need to admit it.

Think of your wrong or mistake as the first link in a chain that imprisons you. Each time you lie

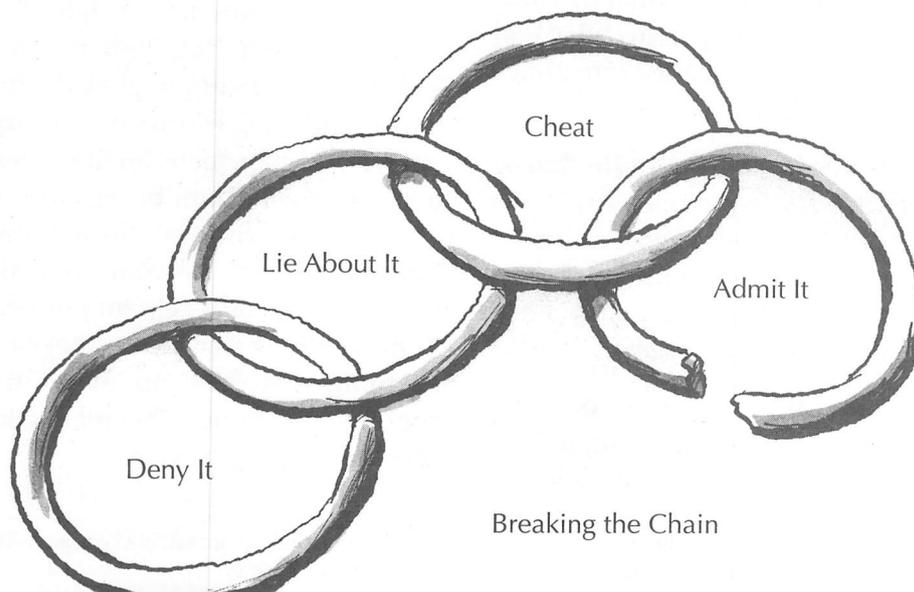
about or deny what you did, you're adding another link. Admitting it breaks the chain.

2. Let yourself feel guilty. But be aware of what kind of guilt you feel. If your guilt leads you to look in the mirror, admit what you did, and feel sorry for it, you'll grow from your experience. If your guilt makes you turn away from the mirror in shame and self-loathing, get help.

3. Talk with a caring, understanding adult or friend. Explain what happened and how you feel. Get professional help if you need it. Talking about wrongs and mistakes can be healing. You might ask for advice, if that seems appropriate. Then do what you think is best.

4. Say you're sorry and ask the person you wronged to forgive you. Be sincere. And be prepared; the person might throw a tomato in your face. It's not your problem if the person doesn't accept your apology. You can't control what he or she says, does, or feels. You can only control what *you* say, do, or feel. Try not to get angry if the person doesn't immediately respond the way you'd like. Forgiveness takes time. However, most people will soften if you ask for forgiveness and really mean it.

5. Accept the consequences of what you did—unless they seem unjust. Then you have the right to be assertive and work for a better solution. *Example:* You steal \$10 from the cash register in the school cafeteria. Someone sees you and reports you to the



Breaking the Chain

principal, who calls you into his office and confronts you. You say “What I did was wrong. I’m really sorry, and I’ll pay it back. Please forgive me. I won’t ever do it again.” The principal gives you a date by which he expects you to pay back the money. He also gives you a month’s worth of detentions. And you know that you’ve lost his trust and respect and will have to earn them back—if you can. Those consequences are fair.

But what if the principal makes you pay the money back *and* expels you from school for the rest of the year? Those consequences aren’t fair. Ask a parent, teacher, or counselor for help. If you’re convicted of breaking the law, get a lawyer. If you can’t afford to pay for a lawyer, ask the court to appoint one for you. You have the right to expect fair and just consequences for what you did.

6. Do what you can to make things right. Give back the money. Paint over the graffiti. Tell the truth about a friend. Admit that you cheated, then take the test over—or accept a failing grade.

7. Try to find a way to serve the person you hurt. If this isn’t possible, do kindnesses for other people.

8. If you have a faith tradition that encourages you to look to a higher power, ask that higher power for forgiveness. Ask for the strength not to repeat the wrong or mistake. Ask for patience if the person you hurt hasn’t forgiven you.

9. Forgive yourself. Don’t bad-mouth yourself or carry around a load of guilt. This can make you sick in your mind and your body. Sometimes it’s easier to forgive others than it is to forgive yourself. When you forgive yourself, you can learn from your actions and mistakes. You’re free to use your energy to keep growing and becoming the kind of person you want to be.

Character Dilemmas

For journaling or writing essays, discussion, debate, role-playing, reflection

Suppose that . . .

1 Your sister steals money from your room. You go through all the steps of forgiving others, but she won’t cooperate. She just keeps stealing from your room. What might you do?

2 You’re jealous of a big guy on the football team, and you want to replace him on first string. So you lie and tell the coach and everyone else that he’s muscular because he uses steroids. He gets dropped from the team, and you feel terrible about it. You finally go to him, tell him what you did, and ask his forgiveness. He punches your lights out. What might you do? Fight back? Tell the coach? Let it go? Try to make things right? Predict and evaluate the results of each action.

3 A man is mistakenly identified as a murderer and sent to prison for life. He knows he’s innocent, and the real killer is still on the loose. What might the man do with his life? Is it possible for him to get justice? How can he free himself from his own anger and the injustice committed against him?

4 Your best friend is driving home from school one day when she’s broadsided by a drunk driver. As a result of the accident, she loses the use of her legs and must spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair. What are some specific things you might do to help your friend overcome the anger and hatred she feels for the drunk driver?

5 You’re taking a math test when you happen to gaze to your right. You’re lost in thought, and you’re not even aware that your head is turning; in fact, you don’t even see anything. But your teacher notices, walks over to your desk, looks at your paper, looks at the paper of the person sitting on your right, and accuses you of cheating because your answers happen to match. You tell the truth—you weren’t cheating—but she doesn’t believe you. She tears up your paper in front of the class and announces that you’ll be getting an F. What might you do to release yourself from the anger you feel toward your teacher?

6 An elderly widow in your neighborhood has just lost her home. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has taken it because, they claim, her husband didn’t pay income taxes for 20 years. How might she handle her anger toward the IRS—and her dead husband? What might she do? In your opinion, were the IRS’s actions fair and just?

7 One of your friends is shot in the arm by a gang member for warning the police about a gang fight. The police can’t prove that the gang

member did the shooting, and after a few months in the detention home, he walks free. Now he's threatening to kill your friend. What might your friend do? Consider the possible consequences of each course of action your friend might take.

Activities

BRAINSTORM WAYS TO "LET OFF STEAM" when you're angry. Make a list. Keep your focus on positive, helpful things rather than negative, harmful, or vengeful things.

CHECK IT OUT

Don't Rant and Rave on Wednesdays! The Children's Anger-Control Book by Adolph Moser, Ed.D. (Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, 1994). Like *Don't Pop Your Cork on Mondays!* (see page 4), this book is written for younger kids ages 6–9, but the information it contains makes it worth reading at any age.

Everything You Need to Know About Anger by Renora Licata (NY: Rosen Publishing Group, 1994). Discusses the causes of anger, how it affects people, and ways to control it. Ages 12–18.

WRITE IN YOUR JOURNAL⁵ about someone you're angry with. Write about how you feel; write about what you'd like to do. Or write about an experience someone else has had.

COLLECT NEWSPAPER OR MAGAZINE STORIES about crimes, wrongdoings, and mistakes. Bring them to your class or club and rewrite them so they have positive endings. Imagine how each victim might overcome his or her anger and desire for revenge and arrive at positive new solutions.

CHECK IT OUT

True Stories About Forgiveness

<http://www.triadonline.com/forgive/>

On Easter Sunday, 1996 (April 7), the *Greensboro News & Record* published a series of stories on the subject of forgiveness. Reporter Lex Alexander interviewed five people including a man who was wrongly convicted and imprisoned for rape, a woman who put her mother in a psychiatric hospital, and a man whose sons were murdered. The series also includes

an article on how various religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—view forgiveness. If you can't access the Web site and you'd like to read the stories, see if your local library subscribes to the *News & Record* and has back issues on file or on microfiche. Or contact:

The Greensboro News & Record

PO Box 20848

Greensboro, NC 27420

1-800-553-6880

WRITE A MYTH about how forgiveness came into the world. You might want to start by reading myths or folktales from various cultures to get a feel for how they're written. (Your local library will have many books about myths for you to explore.) Afterward, consider presenting your myth as a play, reading it aloud to your classmates and younger students, illustrating it, or sharing it in other ways.

INVITE A PSYCHOLOGIST OR PSYCHIATRIST to your class to discuss the harmful effects of holding on to guilt, harboring grudges, wanting revenge, etc. Ask the expert's advice on ways to handle anger, being a victim, and so on.

WRITE A REPORT ABOUT MENTAL OR PHYSICAL ILLNESSES that result from harboring anger, guilt, grudges, and other responses to being wronged. You might interview your school counselor or psychologist, if one is available.

RESEARCH THE LIVES of one or more famous people who have overcome hatred, injustice, guilt, or being victimized and have made a significant contribution to the world. Make a chart showing 1) their names, 2) the injustices they suffered or obstacles they faced, 3) how they responded to and/or triumphed over the injustices or obstacles. *Example:* 1) Anne Frank 2) lost her home, her family, and ultimately her life to the Holocaust. 3) During the time she spent in hiding, she kept a diary that has inspired millions of people.⁶

ESTIMATE WHAT IT COSTS YOUR COMMUNITY to counsel people who have been victimized by crime, abuse, or other wrongs done to them. Contact victims' rights organizations, battered women's shelters,

⁶ See "Endurance," page 88, for information on Anne Frank's diary and a related Web site.