

CHOOSE THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness has power.

Think about the costs of failing to forgive: retaliation, isolation, revenge, retribution, reprisal, vindictiveness. Holding on to resentment calls for maintaining a constant supply of defensiveness, suspicion, and anger. And doing so takes up a lot of physical and emotional energy.

Ironically, some people complain about the amount of resentment they feel, yet they hesitate to give it up. They nurture their resentments like cherished pets. When they're angry, they feel most alive.

Resentment promotes a certain view of the world—the idea that we are objects mercilessly manipulated by circumstance and pushed around by other people. The problem with this viewpoint is that we see ourselves as victims. Our own choices seem to make little difference in the quality of our lives.

In addition, the people we resent come to dominate our minds. They take up much of the space inside our heads—rent-free. This can be true even for people who have moved away or who died years ago.

Sadness often relates to dwelling on times when someone really “stuck it to us.” It's easy to replay these incidents mentally, reliving the same scene over and over again.

Such thinking doesn't change the person we resent or resolve the problem; it only makes us miserable.

At any moment, we can adopt new ways of responding to resentment that can lead us toward the freedom of forgiveness. Some options follow.

Notice resentments

When we feel resentment, we can simply be aware of it. We might make verbal or mental notes such as *I'm feeling resentment right now*. We can also write discovery statements in a journal each time we start nursing a grudge.

Simple awareness of how much resentment we feel and the circumstances in which we feel it can go a long way toward defusing the feeling. As we become aware, it's important not to judge ourselves. We can then just note the resentment and move on.



Consider the benefits of forgiveness

Forgiveness is not always easy. Reviewing the benefits of forgiving might help.

To begin with, forgiveness provides a path toward feeling lighter and freer. Releasing resentments can feel like unburdening ourselves of a 200-pound weight.

Through forgiveness, we might even gain some health. We don't know precisely how to measure it, but there's evidence that sustained anger relates to illness.

Forgiveness also contributes to others. Our forgiveness can help people forgive themselves. And that can help them make lifelong changes in their behavior.

We don't forgive just to benefit other people, even though that's a worthy goal in itself. Forgiveness is a selfish act in that it benefits *us* as much as anyone else.

Recognize the difference between forgiveness and absolution

Sometimes judgment masquerades as forgiveness, especially when we forgive with a holier-than-thou attitude: "You were a real jerk. But because you struggle with so many faults, I forgive you."

When forgiveness has this flavor, it becomes absolution. This attitude implies that we have the right to judge others. Instead of healing relationships, this approach to forgiveness alienates people.

When we forgive, we can practice releasing our judgments along with our resentments.

Replace resentment with a positive wish

Even in the midst of a resentment, we can say a prayer or make a positive wish for the person we resent: *I wish that she be released from her anger*, or *I wish that this person find a job he loves, along with deeply fulfilling relationships*.

Experiment with this strategy. You might find it impossible to sustain a resentful thought and a positive thought in the same moment. The positive thought literally crowds out the negative one.

Some people rebel against this suggestion at first. To them it seems unreal, uncomfortable, or dishonest. They feel like they're faking forgiveness when they don't really *feel* it.

If you feel this kind of resistance, that's fine. Just note it and keep replacing your resentments. Over time, notice what happens to your resentment.

You can also separate feelings from behavior: You can *act* in forgiving ways, even if you don't *feel* forgiving in the moment. That's real freedom.

We can look for the effects of resentment on our own happiness and then make a clear commitment to replace the habit of resentment with forgiveness.



List your resentments

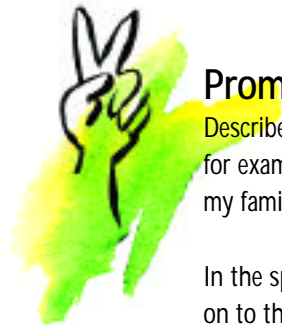
One way to get started at forgiveness is to make a list of resentments. Take some time with this and make it as complete as you can.

Making a list, even though it seems like a mechanical exercise, can promote forgiveness for a couple reasons. For one thing, people with a lot of resentments see that they have a long list. They often get a clear sense of how much mental and emotional energy they pour into their grudges. In addition, the simple act of writing can help us get perspective and neutralize the negative feelings.

Get started with your list by drawing three columns on a separate sheet of paper. Label those columns: *Person I resent*, *Action I resent*, and *My role in this situation*. Then fill in each column as appropriate.

Pay special attention to the third column about your role. Ask yourself *Did I do anything to help create the situations I resent?* For instance, the person who's recently been fired and resents her employer can ask about the quality of her job performance. The person whose spouse has moved out can ask what role he played in her decision to leave.

Sometimes, we play no role in what happens to us. Rape, incest, physical and psychological abuse, and crimes are examples. Getting to forgiveness in these cases can be more challenging. Perhaps learning to accept these events, with or without forgiveness, is the appropriate goal. If we are facing these types of issues, professional help can be useful.



Promise to forgive

Describe the costs of holding on to the resentments you listed in the previous exercise, for example, "The person I resent dominates my thinking." Or "I never allow myself to visit my family because the person I resent might be there."

In the space below, write the names of the people you resent, along with the costs of holding on to the resentments.

Now describe the benefits of forgiving each person, for example, "I get to forget about an incident that happened long ago and get on with my life." In the space below, write the names of the people you forgive and the benefits of forgiving these people.

Next, promise to forgive someone you've been resenting. Write the word *forgive* on a 3x5 card (or wherever you record your intentions) followed by this person's name. Also give this goal a priority and a timeline, if that's appropriate.

You might be wondering whether you've already forgiven this person. If you choose to write the person's name on your card, then you haven't forgiven.

Don't worry about how to forgive. If you worry about *how* to forgive, you might never commit to the *act* of forgiving. Just make the commitment and trust your brilliance to create ways to forgive this person.