

## Understanding Forgiveness in PFT

Forgiveness is a complex process that is key to struggling less with the pain that naturally shows up after being hurt by someone and doing more of what matters most to you (Walser & O'Connell, 2021). From a psychological flexibility training (PFT) perspective, forgiveness involves letting go of holding tightly onto painful thoughts and feelings toward others and cultivating forgiveness while committing to actions aligned with your values (Hayes et al., 2012).

PFT emphasizes recognizing painful thinking and feeling as normal reactions to hurtful experiences. When hurt by others, you might experience:

- **Betrayal:** Feeling betrayed by someone you trusted might lead to thinking about the sincerity of the relationship.
- **Resentment:** Holding onto anger toward the person who hurt you might lead to thinking about revenge.
- **Worthlessness:** Believing that your failures were the cause of someone's hurtful behavior might lead to feeling unimportant.
- **Self-blame:** Believing that somehow you deserved or provoked the hurtful behavior by another person might lead to feeling responsible.
- **Distrust:** Developing a lack of trust toward others because of being hurt might lead to thinking that everyone is potentially harmful, deceitful, or out to get you.
- **Powerlessness:** Feeling helpless in the face of hurtful actions might lead to thinking you can't protect yourself from further or future harm.
- **Isolation:** Thinking no one else can understand your pain or relate to your experience of being hurt might lead to feeling alone.
- **Fear:** Feeling anxious about encountering hurtful situations or people in the future might lead to thinking you're vulnerable or feeling insecure.
- **Loss:** Mourning the loss of the relationship or the way things used to be before getting hurt might lead to feelings of sadness or grief.
- **Injustice:** Feeling the hurtful situation was unfair might lead to thinking, why would someone intentionally cause you harm?

PFT is rooted in acceptance, which involves noticing and gently allowing painful thoughts and feelings to arise after being hurt without clinging to any judgments about them, like right or wrong or good or bad, or trying to suppress or fight them (Hayes et al., 2012).

Within the PFT framework, forgiveness is integral to this acceptance process when people have hurt you. It is not about condoning the harmful actions of others or denying the hurt they've caused but instead about letting go of the emotional pain that might be holding you hostage.

Forgiveness involves letting go of unhelpful responses to painful thoughts, feelings, and judgments that show up about someone who hurt you and choosing to respond to them with compassion instead. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting what happened, granting the person permission, or invalidating your feelings. It also doesn't mean reconciling a relationship, seeking out, or speaking with someone who hurt you. You can forgive a person without believing their actions were okay and having contact with them.

Unforgiveness, holding tightly onto painful thoughts and feelings about someone who hurt you, is like being caught on a giant hook with that person (Steven Hayes, co-developer of ACT). Wherever you go, so do they. Letting them off first is the only way to get off the hook. The cost of not letting go of revenge, anger, or resentment toward them might be a lifetime of unhappiness being hooked.

There are benefits to forgiving people who have hurt you. Some key benefits include (Hayes et al., 2012; Luskin, 2003; Worthington & Wade, 2013):

- Improved Relationships: Forgiving by letting go of grudges can improve relationships, fostering trust, empathy, and understanding.
- Reduced Stress: Forgiving can help reduce stress from holding onto anger and resentment.
- Increased Growth: Forgiving can lead to learning valuable lessons about resilience, empathy, and compassion, leading to self-discovery.
- Enhanced Mental Health: Forgiving can reduce the intensity and frequency of feeling depressed or anxious and other painful thoughts and feelings.

The story of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant told by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (18:21-22) is a reminder of the importance of forgiveness and the consequences of holding a grudge:

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus answered, Not seven times but seventy times seven. That is why the Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor who owed him a huge amount was brought before him. Since he could not pay it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, children, and all his property, to pay the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion, the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he put him in prison until he paid back the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed. They went to their

master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have pity on your fellow servant as I had pity on you?' Then, in anger, his master handed him over to the torturers until he could pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.

The moral of the Parable is that we should forgive others as God forgives us. When someone offends or sins against us, we should be willing to forgive them with a heart of gratitude, grace, and compassion, for we are debtors. Forgiving others is the best thing we can do for ourselves.

One last thing is that forgiving people who have hurt you is what often comes to mind when talking about forgiveness. However, another form of forgiveness is forgiving yourself or asking others for forgiveness when you make mistakes. We all make mistakes. It's natural to feel regret when we make them. Feeling regret alerts you to a mistake and things that matter to you. When you hold onto regret, perhaps because you're embarrassed, then regret might turn into guilt, shame, defensiveness, or payback. A healthy response to a mistake is forgiving yourself through self-compassion.

In summary, PFT provides a powerful and transformative framework for understanding and navigating the complex terrain of forgiving. By embracing PFT skills and compassion, you can let go of the struggle with hurt and past grievances and experience the healing and freedom that forgiveness brings. Whether directed toward others or yourself, forgiveness in PFT is not a one-time thing. It's a process of living aligned with your values and being less caught up in the hurt that can show up in life and hold you back.

## References

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