

# Creating a Forgiveness Ritual

## Objective

To take positive action toward someone who has hurt you through a forgiveness ritual.

## You Should Know

Forgiveness is a conscious decision to let go of anger or resentment you feel toward a person who has hurt you. Forgiveness does not mean you have forgotten, minimized, or excused an offense. Instead, it means recognizing it and making a conscious decision to let go of the pain. When forgiving someone, it is not necessary to reconcile with the person. You might believe reconciliation occurs along with forgiveness, but this is not always the case. For example, you may be able to forgive a family member who said hurtful things to you, but it might be harmful, both mentally and physically, to maintain a close relationship with that person. Forgiveness might take time, especially if the offense was serious. When someone causes serious harm, either deliberately or accidentally, true forgiveness can be challenging.

Here are some suggestions to forgive someone who has hurt you:

- Understand why the other person hurt you by talking about the issue.
- Empathize with the other person's situation.
- Avoid focusing on the feelings directed toward the person who did wrong.
- Reflect on when you hurt someone else, and treat forgiveness of another person as forgiveness of yourself.
- Tell the other person directly they are forgiven.
- Draw from spiritual, cultural, and/or religious teachings.

Forgiveness benefits you as well as the person you choose to forgive. Studies show an inability or unwillingness to forgive can have a negative impact on your mental health and well-being, contributing to depression and anxiety. If you forgive easily, you tend to experience increased happiness, better physical health, and stronger relationships. In general, you are less likely to experience the negative effects of stress. You are able to resolve conflicts more easily, repair damaged relationships, and experience higher levels of empathy. You are also likely to be more resistant to illness than those who hold grudges, as studies show people who hold grudges are more likely to have compromised immune systems.

According to acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), similar to all other thoughts and feelings, the thoughts and feelings that accompany forgiveness exist to be observed and held lightly while focusing on your personal values. Forgiveness is viewed as an action, not a feeling. If you offer forgiveness, you will likely feel a sense of relief, lightness, peace, and ease. However, these feelings will come and go. In the past, you might have forgiven someone and felt good, only to realize later your positive feelings passed and anger replaced them! What can you do? Feelings and emotions come and go, so that is why it is useful to view forgiveness as an action. You can choose to behave in a forgiving manner as your feelings come and go.

## What to Do

One action you can take is creating a forgiveness ritual. You can use your creativity to adapt this exercise into something more relevant and personal to you.

First, think of a time when someone hurt you. Choose a situation that is unresolved and you have not forgiven the person. Describe.

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**Step 1.** Complete the following statements:

*The thoughts, feelings, and memories I have been holding on to:*

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*Holding on to these feelings and thoughts have hurt me in the following ways:*

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**Step 2.** In your own words, write a commitment statement that describes how you will let these painful thoughts and feelings come and go, no matter how many times they return—without holding on to them, getting caught up in them, or allowing them to cause additional hurt.

*My commitment is to:*

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**Step 3.** Now, plan to read your answers from steps 1 and 2 aloud to a trusted family member or friend. Write down who you will read your statements to, when you will do it, and where you will do it.

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**Step 4.** After you read your statements, do something that symbolizes starting over—for example, burn your statements and scatter the ashes. Write down what you will do.

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**Step 5.** After completing the ritual, do something to nurture and care for yourself. Describe what you will do.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

After completing the forgiveness ritual, reflect on your values. If you could respond mindfully when someone hurts you, acting on your deepest values, what would you say and do? Are you willing to forgive, let go, and move on? Are you willing to release your painful feelings and let go of unhelpful thoughts? Explain your answers.

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When someone you care about hurts you, how will you ideally respond?

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When you hurt someone, how will you ideally respond?

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What will you say or do to make amends?

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What did you learn about yourself during this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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