

**FREE**

# The Myths & Stages of **FORGIVENESS**

Worksheets for Clinicians & Clients



Practical and engaging printable tools



# Introduction

## Forgiveness: What It Is...And Isn't

Regardless of whether forgiveness is a worthy virtue, a moral duty or something altogether different, in psychological studies, it happens that forgiveness is closely correlated with increased happiness and improved mental health. It seems that most of us would welcome happiness and better mental health. Right? Well, like everything else, that would depend on the personal cost involved:

- Am I required to condone the behavior of the perpetrator?
- Does it mean that the behavior was okay? (I should put up with it, because there was no *real injury*.)
- Must I develop selective amnesia and simply forget all about it . . . or at least pretend to?
- Must I pardon this person—allowing him/her to continue causing more damage?
- Must I reconcile with this person? Or get back into a relationship, where I'll get hurt all over again?

NO. The answer is no to all of them.

The quintessential nature of forgiveness: it is *a voluntary decision to acknowledge the offense, move through the resultant feelings, set aside the resentment, and release the anger, so you may move on with your life*. You need not condone, excuse, forget, or reestablish a relationship with the perpetrator.

Pardoning: It is problematic when forgiveness is coupled with, or equated to, pardoning. Freedman and Enright (1996) believe that a person can forgive, yet still expect justice. As they view forgiveness and justice to be in harmony with each other—both inviting and provoking change and growth.

Condoning: Forgiving the perpetrator for his/her action(s) does not mean you stop judging the deed. You forgive the person, not the action. Forgiveness allows you to live in the present and leave the past behind. Forgiveness will bring you peace. Freedman and Enright (1996) posit that condoning denies the resentment and the offense, which is likely to exacerbate and complicate the hurt and injury. In contrast to denial, forgiveness vanquishes the resentment with love and compassion.

*"Resentment is like taking poison and hoping the other person dies."*

~Augustine of Hippo

Reconciliation: It is possible to accept, even love a person and still choose not to be in a personal relationship with him or her. Aponte states, "Reconciliation is distinct from the moral decision to forgive. The choice to forgive [only] opens the door . . . to reconciliation, if safe, prudent, and right." In contrast to the notion that forgiveness be offered by the offended person, Freedman and Enright (1996) believe that reconciliation is the offender's responsibility and occurs when the offender recognizes his/her wrong and takes actions to correct the offending behavior. Further, forgiveness may take place when the offended gives up feelings of hatred or resentment, but does not necessarily restore the relationship with the offender.

# Exercise: Forgiveness: Myth Busting

## EXERCISE:

This experiential format can be used to address the modern myths and misconceptions around the concept of forgiveness.

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Print, distribute, and have participants read the introduction, Forgiveness: What It Is...and Isn't
2. Write each of the following myths on separate pages.
  - *If I forgive this person, it means that I'm condoning the behavior of the person I'm forgiving.*
  - *If I forgive this person, then my relationship with him/her will certainly improve.*
  - *If I forgive this person, then I won't be angry about what happened.*
  - *If I forgive, I give up my right to feel hurt, angry, or sad.*
  - *I haven't really forgiven that person when I remember what happened.*
  - *I should only have to forgive once (i.e., once I do it, I'll never have to think about it again).*
  - *I forgive, not for me, but for the sake of the other person.*
  - *If I forgive this person, I must remain in a relationship with this person.*
3. Read each myth aloud; then place the page on the floor, announcing to the group that this area is now dedicated to that myth.
4. Invite each participant to walk around the room, to reread each one.
5. Once read, (s)he should then choose the one (s)he feels the most energy around or the most identification with and stand in that designated area.
6. Once all of the participants are in a designated area, begin with the least populated area and invite each group member in it to share:
  - Why (s)he chose the one that (s)he did.
  - How (s)he identifies with the myth.
7. Moving on to the next group, repeat the process for each myth.
8. After everyone has spoken, have participants return to their seats.
9. Process the experience in a *go-round*, allowing participants to share thoughts and feelings regarding any aspect of the exercise and/or any aspect of forgiveness itself.



# Stages of Forgiveness

## STAGE ONE: IDENTIFY PERPETRATOR AND TRANSGRESSION

- I know who it was that has affected me negatively.
- I know what specific behavior(s) it was that has been physically, emotionally, or spiritually damaging to me.

## STAGE TWO: IDENTIFY, EXPERIENCE, AND PROCESS THE EMOTIONS

- I have felt the emotions associated with the offensive, damaging behavior. I have found a safe place to process these feelings.
- If it was safe to do so, I have spoken to the person regarding the adverse effects I endured as a result of his/her behavior.
- If it was not safe to do so, I was able to do it in therapy using an imaginary technique (e.g., role playing, psychodrama, the empty chair, etc.).

## STAGE THREE: UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

- I understand the benefits of forgiveness.
- I have reached a point where I recognize what has transpired, have begun developing compassion for myself, and am now able to see the perpetrator as a human being.

**Important Distinction:** Many people, including clergy members, philosophers, psychotherapists, and psychologists, *erroneously* believe that full forgiveness requires the victim to accept the perpetrator back into the relationship. What is actually required of the victim is that (s)he accept the perpetrator back into the human race (i.e., (s)he is no longer stripped of his/her humanity, regardless of whether the victim chooses to reestablish a personal relationship with him/her).

As Joan Borysenko states in *Guilt Is the Teacher, Love Is the Lesson*

Forgiveness is not a lack of discrimination whereby we let all the criminals out of prison: it is an attitude that permits us to relate to the pain that led to their errors and recognize their need for love. (1991, p. XXX)

## STAGE FOUR: SET CLEAR BOUNDARIES

- I have set clear boundaries with the perpetrator:
- I understand the need for and my right to protect myself.
- I feel competent in setting and maintaining these boundaries to keep me physically and emotionally safe.

## STAGE FIVE: INTEGRATE THE PAST AND BEGIN RECREATING THE FUTURE

- I have made an internal choice to forgive and have willingness to recreate a meaningful life for myself.

# Exercise: Stages of Forgiveness

## EXERCISE:

This experiential format helps in understanding forgiveness as a stage model, similar to the stages of grief.

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Invite each participant to choose a forgiveness issue that (s)he is currently dealing with, or is considering dealing with.
2. Print, distribute, and have participants read the worksheet, The Stages of Forgiveness. Print the following pages. Each page contains one of the stages of forgiveness:

### STAGE ONE: IDENTIFY THE PERPETRATOR AND THE TRANSGRESSION

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- I have made an internal choice to forgive and have a willingness to recreate a meaningful life for myself.
4. Read each stage aloud; then place the corresponding page onto the floor.
  5. Invite each participant to walk around the room, to reread each one.
  6. Once read, with regard to his/her perpetrator, the participant should then choose the stage that (s)he feels (s)he is in presently.
  7. Once all of the participants are in a designated area, ask the question, "Why have you chosen this stage?" Invite them to think about the answer.

8. After a few moments of reflection, instruct participants to walk to the area designated to the next stage (e.g., if participant is standing at Stage One, then move to Stage Two, if standing in Stage Three, then move to Stage Four, etc.).
9. Once all participants have moved, ask these questions:
  - Could you foresee yourself moving onto the next stage in reality?
  - If so, what would need to happen for you to do that?
10. Invite them to think about their answer(s).
11. Invite participants to return to their seats.
12. Process the experience in two *go-rounds*:
  - First *go-round*: Invite participants to share their answer to one or both questions.
  - Second *go-round*: Invite participants to share thoughts and feelings regarding any aspect of the exercise and/or any aspect of the stages of forgiveness.



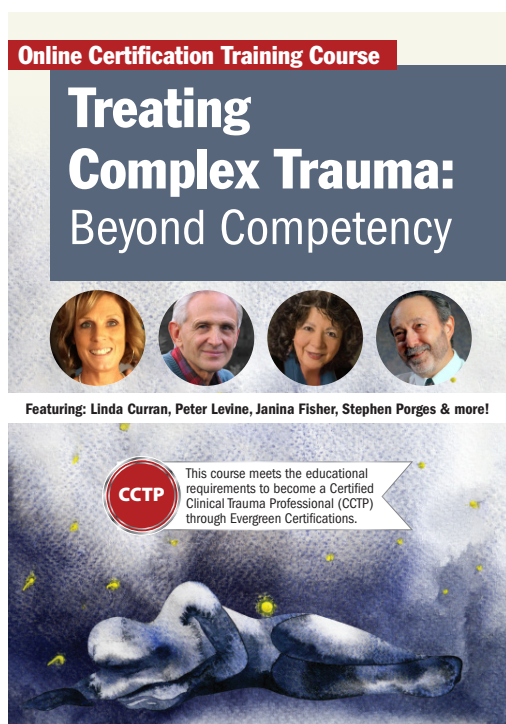


## Linda A. Curran

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Linda is the author of the best-selling *Trauma Competency: A Clinician's Guide* (PESI, 2010) and *101 Trauma-Informed Interventions: Activities, Exercises and Assignments to Move the Client and Therapy Forward* (PESI, 2013). She is the producer of the best-selling Interview Trauma DVD series in which she collaborated with the world's leaders in Trauma: Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.; Peter Levine, Ph.D.; Babette Rothschild, MSW, LCS; Stephen Porges, Ph.D.; Janina Fisher, Ph.D.; and many more.

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