

# Practicing Forgiveness

## Objective

To heal and strengthen your relationship by learning to forgive.

## You Should Know

All couples experience situations that lead to hurt, disappointment, misunderstanding, or painful exchanges. Marital offenses can be minor (like forgetting to run an errand) or major (like infidelity, addiction, or abuse). When your partner causes significant harm to your relationship, whether deliberately or accidentally, choosing forgiveness can be challenging. Taking the time to seek and grant forgiveness plays an important role in healing and strengthening your relationship.

Couples may be more likely to forgive each other if they

- understand why their partner “did wrong”—through clear communication and reflective listening;
- can empathize with their partner’s position or point of view;
- avoid projecting their anger, resentment, sadness toward their partner;
- reflect on times when they hurt someone, and treat forgiveness of another person as forgiveness of themselves;
- draw from spiritual, religious, and/or cultural teachings;
- review the negative consequences of holding a grudge.

**Forgiveness is not** letting your partner off the hook. It is not about condoning, forgetting, or accepting hurtful behavior. It is possible to forgive your partner without minimizing or denying that an offense was committed. Forgiveness may not involve reconciliation, as this might be unsafe or impossible. Misconceptions surrounding the process of forgiveness may be potentially harmful, especially when abuse is involved. Also, forgiveness may not be a quick process—avoid rushing your partner if they require days or even months to work through this process—especially if the offense was serious.

**Forgiveness is** the conscious decision to give up the right for vengeance, retribution, or negative thoughts toward the “offender” in order to release resentment, bitterness, anger, and other negative emotions. You recognize your hurt and pain and you make the choice to let it go. This process promotes emotional healing and restoration of inner peace—and it may also allow for full reconciliation. Research indicates that forgiving is good for you—mentally, emotionally, and physically. Research has also shown that forgiveness lowers blood pressure and heart rate and reduces anger—as well as symptoms of depression and anxiety. Happiness and hopefulness is enhanced, and relationships become healthier and more stable. People who consciously forgive experience higher levels of empathy and more positive feelings toward other people.

Choosing to remain in a state of “unforgiveness” creates physical stress; your heart beats faster and your blood pressure increases. Anxiety, depression, and stress may lead to pain, fatigue, and even self-harm. Individuals who maintain grudges or have difficulty with self-forgiveness may also be more likely to engage in risky and dangerous behavior (for example, substance and alcohol abuse). Studies show that people who hold grudges experience compromised immune systems. If you harbor resentment, bitterness, and rage—and allow these feelings fester and expand over time—your health may be negatively impacted. Holding on to negative emotions, even self-directed emotions, can lead to a decline in emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

If you are seeking forgiveness:

- Carefully reflect on your mistake and admit what you did was wrong or hurtful.
- Make an attempt to understand and empathize with the hurt you have caused.
- Take responsibility for your behavior and make restitution if required.
- Assure your partner that you will not do it again.
- Sincerely apologize and ask for forgiveness.
- Forgive yourself. (Recent research indicates that people who do not forgive themselves experience a reduction in empathy and they may be less inclined to make amends.)

If you are granting forgiveness:

- Identify and acknowledge your feelings.
- Be specific about your future expectations and limits.
- Give up your desire to get even, but be very clear about how you wish to be treated in the future.
- Release all blame, resentment, shaming, and negativity that is directed toward your partner.
- Communicate your forgiveness to your partner.
- Work toward reconciliation (if appropriate).

Many couples struggle with the decision to forgive because they know they have the “right” to be angry. Consciously choosing to forgive means letting go of *all* resentments to benefit you and repair your relationship.

## **What to Do**

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

How do you define forgiveness?

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Circle any of these that you experienced. Add feelings or behaviors that aren't listed:

**Painful emotions** (anger or shame)

**Changed behavior** (loss of interest in sex/intimacy)

**Changed worldview** (inability to trust)

**Cognitive rehearsal** (recurring negative thoughts)

**Practical costs** (time or money)

**Physical harm** (injuries from abuse)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your experience, including the emotions you felt.

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What are the pros and cons of forgiving your partner?

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Describe how things might be different if you decide to forgive your partner.

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Respond to one of these prompts:

- What was life like for your partner when they were growing up? Might this have an impact on their behavior as an adult?
- What is life currently like for your partner?

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How do you currently feel about your partner? Describe your positive and negative feelings. Have your feelings changed over time?

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If you have chosen to forgive your partner, how has that benefitted you? Consider how forgiveness has affected your emotional and mental health. Have you experienced any behavioral changes?

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Describe what you have learned through this experience, including your efforts to forgive and repair your relationship (either with your partner or with yourself). How has your worldview changed?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from 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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