Physiology of Forgiveness—Revisited

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Brain References
Health-Relationship Connection

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Studies have shown that people who refuse to forgive themselves and others are less content overall and have difficulty with relationships—but there is also a clear health connection.

“There’s something called the ‘physiology of forgiveness’®—being unable to forgive other people’s faults is harmful to one’s health.” —Herbert Benson, MD

Internationally renowned cardiologist
Forgiveness involves giving up your right to exact retribution from the individual who hurt or wronged you

- You choose to think about something else rather than harbor resentment in working memory
- You refrain from repeatedly bringing up the incident to yourself and/or others and rehearsing all the details
- You move from victim to survivor
Type 1: Decisional Forgiveness

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You make a conscious choice to respond differently toward a transgressor (yourself, an incident, another person) and let go of bitterness, resentment, grudges, and revenge, and you dismantle the enemy outpost in your head

This is perhaps the easier of the two types of forgiveness …
Type Two: Emotional Forgiveness

You replace negative and unforgiving thoughts and feelings with those that are positive (choose to think a different thought whenever “unforgiveness” pops up)

This involves psychophysiological changes to both the brain and immune system, which have greater positive direct health and well-being consequences
Emotional forgiveness is where the health action is. Emotional unforgiveness causes a chronic stress response, which results in obsessing about the wrong done to you.

Rumination is what gets people into trouble. It’s the mental health bad boy and is linked with almost everything bad in the mental health field—obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, depression, and probably hives, too.

—Everett L. Worthington Jr., PhD  
*Forgiveness and Reconciliation*
Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive

—C.S. Lewis

If forgiving yourself and others was easy, every person would be doing it—and forgiving yourself may be the most difficult of all

Avoid assuming responsibility for something you are not or could not be responsible for …
Resentment

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Without forgiveness, life is governed by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation

—Roberto Assagioli

A family unit can be split and the children can carry on both the resentment and the retaliation

A family system can be split and carry on unforgiveness generationally (e.g., Corsica)

Congregations can be split—even entire church systems . . .
Revenge is based on powerlessness and it is doomed to failure
—Jeanne Safer, PhD

Some get caught in the ‘eye for an eye’ rhetoric and have difficulty giving up the idea of revenge

‘If I suffered, so should they!’

The 3 R’s can help you work through and resolve a desire for revenge
The 3 R’s

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1. Re-engagement—you decide to think through what happened as openly and as objectively as possible

2. Recognition—you look carefully at every feeling you may have about what happened and ask, ‘what is the reason I want revenge?’

3. Reinterpretation of the injury—include an attempt to understand the person who caused it and/or potential perceptions
3 R’s → Survivor (not victim)

The process may help you gain wisdom and avoid some people and situations in the future.

You may never decide to reconnect with the person, but if you go through the 3R’s process, at least you can choose to give up a victim mindset and move into a survivor mindset.

Forgiveness involves wishing the other well—in a sense you’ve taken a big step if you just no longer wish them ill…
Attempting to understand more about the one who hurt you can help you realize that every pathology has an ecology—bad behaviors do not emerge from a vacuum; there are always contributing factors.

Understanding does not erase or excuse what happened—there is no excuse for bad behaviors; it can help you realize that what happened is usually more about them than you

- Some compensate for being hurt by hurting
Some mimic bad behaviors they observed in childhood or in movies and rationalize it’s okay.

Some give themselves over to evil and live out their dark side (M. Scott Peck wrote of this in his book *People of the Lie*).

Some live in anger to pump adrenalin and dopamine (to which they are often addicted).

Some have a damaged brain, likely unaware of right versus wrong, only thinking of what can benefit them.
As long as you don't forgive, who and whatever it is will occupy a rent-free space in your mind

—Isabelle Holland

Unforgiveness creates an enemy outpost in your brain that requires attention, ‘personnel’, and energy to maintain and triggers past memories of perceived wrongs (working memory and congruence) even as it drains your energy.
When you hold resentment toward another, you are bound to that person or condition by an emotional link that is stronger than steel; forgiveness is the only way to dissolve that link and get free

—Katherine Ponder

Over time, you gradually become what you think about; forgive for the benefits it gives you, so you do not end up bitter and resentful and ill …
Sincere forgiveness is not colored with any expectations that the other person apologize or change. Stop worrying about whether or not they finally understand you. Love them and release them. Life feeds back truth to people in its own way and time—just like it does for you and me.

—Sara Paddison

Expectations can set you up for bitterness and hostility, which trigger the stress response.
Those who cannot forgive, break the bridge over which they themselves must pass —George Herbert

- Forgive and you will be forgiven —Luke 6:37
- If you do not forgive (others) their sins, yours will not be forgiven —Matthew 6:15

From a spiritual ethic, this is something to clearly consider . . .
Forgiveness is like faith; you have to keep reviving it —Mason Cooley

It’s disconcerting when unforgiveness resurfaces about something you thought you forgave – If that happens, forgive again

Peter asked Christ how many times he needed to forgive his brother: ‘7 times?’ Christ replied, ‘70 X 7 or 490 times’ —Matthew 18:21
Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember; we change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.

—Louis B. Smedes

Don’t like your past? You cannot change it—but you can create a healthier future for yourself.
Charlotte van Oyen Witvliet PhD, Hope College, monitored physiological responses of college students as they either dwelled on injustices done to them or imagined themselves forgiving the offenders.

**Unforgiving:**
- BP surged
- Heart rates increased
- Brow muscles tensed
- Negative feelings escalated

**Forgiving:**
- Calmer feelings and physical responses
Frederic Luskin PhD, director of the Stanford University *Forgiveness Project*, encourages the practice of gratitude—the active effort to acknowledge what's good in your life.

• Simply focus your attention on positive things that have happened; this creates a biochemical experience that makes it more likely that forgiveness will occur.
Develop good stress management strategies, whether through prayer and meditation, deep breathing, physical activity, or relaxation exercises.

Living a Longevity Lifestyle in balance helps quell the stress of anger and resentment and makes it more likely that forgiveness will occur.
Encourage Forgiveness - 3
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• Practice ‘cognitive reframing,’ conscious thoughts that fosters acceptance of the facts of your situation—it is what it is …

You may wish you’d had different parents or could have gone to a better school or could have been hired by a more prestigious organization but ‘it is what it is’ — most people do about the best they can at the time with what they know (unless they are brain-damaged or evil and you can’t change that…)
• Change the story you tell yourself to appear more like a survivor who is hopeful about the future rather than a victim locked in the past with a grievance—this makes forgiveness so much more possible

'I hate my father because he didn't love me,' versus ‘Life is a challenge at times since I didn't feel loved as a child’

‘Jim, you are learning to love yourself and you know that God loves you, too’
Everett L. Worthington Jr., PhD, devised a 5-step program known as REACH to help people learn to forgive.

Step 1: Recall the hurt objectively, without blame and self-victimization – step away mentally, outside of yourself, and imagine how a third person, uninvolved in the event and looking on, might perceive it.
Step 2: Empathize by trying to imagine the viewpoint of the person who wronged you

Step 3: Altruistically think about a time you were forgiven and how that felt

Step 4: Commit to forgiveness, doing steps 1 and 2

Step 5: Hold tight to forgiveness and forgive again and again as necessary
Forgive all who have offended you, not for them, but for yourself — Harriet Nelson

Christ’s model is one of taking good care of yourself so you can give to others from an overflowing cup

Studies show that forgiveness can improve your health, enhance your relationships, give you more energy, and increase your risk for longevity …