The Physiology of Forgiveness—Can You Afford To Be Unforgiving?

©Arlene R. Taylor PhD
www.arlenetaylor.org
Brain References
Counselors have known for some time that those who refuse to forgive tend to struggle with relationships—but that’s not all.

There’s something called the ‘physiology of forgiveness’ — being unable to forgive other people’s faults (or your own) is harmful to one’s health.

—Herbert Benson MD
Internationally renowned cardiologist
What Forgiveness Is Not
©Arlene R. Taylor PhD  www.arlenetaylor.org

- Condoning bad behavior: minimizing, justifying, or excusing the injury / wrong
- Denying the other person’s responsibility or absolving a criminal of his/her crime
- Waiving right to justice / compensation
- Inflicting Vengeance or ‘an eye for an eye’
- Choosing to reconcile or remaining in an abusive relationship or environment
Confusion and misunderstanding typically surround the topic of forgiveness, not to mention definitions—likely as many as there are brains thinking about the concept.

Forgiveness involves the process of giving up your right to retaliate toward an offender and ceasing to feel resentment against that offender.

—Online Dictionary
Forgiveness can be defined as the peace and understanding that come from:

Blaming that which has hurt you LESS

Taking the life experience LESS personally

Changing your grievance story

—Dennis A. Marikis PhD
Forgiveness has everything to do with relieving oneself of the burden of being a victim, letting go of the pain, and transforming oneself from victim to survivor

—C. R. Strahan

Forgiveness is giving up the wish that things could be different

—Valerie Harper
Forgiveness involves giving up your right to exact ‘an eye for an eye’ from the individual who hurt or wronged you, and you:

- Choose to think about something else rather than harbor resentment in working memory
- Refrain from repeatedly bringing up the incident to yourself and/or others and rehearsing all the gory details
- Move from a victim to a survivor mindset

—Arlene R. Taylor
A victim mindset burns up norepinephrine (mood and stress), stops emotional growth, and blocks recovery.

It involves feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and often a sense of being special because you have been injured.

People are not special because they’ve been injured—everyone is injured in some way while living in the war zone of planet earth.
Moving into a survivor mindset, however, is a badge of honor—you can:

✓ Recover
✓ Grow up emotionally
✓ Heal wounds from the injury
✓ Role model a survivor mindset
✓ Help others

As a scriptural role model, Christ was abused more than any human being and was always a survivor
Two Types of Forgiveness

©Arlene R. Taylor PhD    Realizations Inc

At least two types of forgiveness pop up in the literature: decisional and emotional

Decisional forgiveness

- A behavioral intention to resist an unforgiving stance
- A choice to respond differently toward a transgressor (letting go of bitterness, grudges, resentment, and revenge)
Emotional forgiveness

- The replacement of negative and unforgiving thoughts and feelings with those that are positive
- Involves psychophysiological changes to both the brain and immune system
- Has greater positive direct health and well-being consequences
Forgiveness is Scriptural

©Arlene R. Taylor PhD     Realizations Inc

Forgive and you will be forgiven

—Luke 6:37

Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.

—Colossians 3:13

Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors

—Matthew 6:12

If you do not forgive (others) their sins, yours will not be forgiven

—Matthew 6:15
Forgiveness Confusion
©Arlene R. Taylor PhD    thebrain@arlenetaylor.org

Many religions emphasize how God forgives and some confuse human forgiveness with God’s forgiveness

1. Hurls your iniquities into the depths of the sea —Micah 7:19 NIV
2. Forgives ... and remembers your sins no more —Jeremiah 31:34 NIV
3. Forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases —Psalm 103: 2-3 NIV
How Humans Forgive
©Arlene R. Taylor PhD  thebrain@arlenetaylor.org

Often under duress, grudgingly, and incompletely (may only do the first type of forgiveness)

May continue to recall the injury, harbor resentment, rehearse to anyone who will listen, or ‘reheat and serve for dinner’

Resentment and unforgiveness are like taking poison and expecting it to kill the other person . . .
Humans never forgive
the way God forgives
AND they can forgive

Because humans tend to
recall and rehearse, create a metaphorical
cemetery and bury all the wrongs, injuries, and
mistakes that you have forgiven—yours and
those of others

Use no headstones so you cannot go back and
dig up what you’ve forgiven and buried
2. Nature Metaphor
©Arlene R. Taylor PhD Realizations Inc

Picture yourself sitting by a river or a body of water

Find a leaf or piece of bark and heap on it what you have chosen to forgive

Set it adrift on the water and watch it float away—tell your brain that what you forgave is gone forever
Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) research: what you think about can alter levels of several chemicals in your brain and body

Every thought you think alters your neurochemistry — changes the chemical composition in your brain and body, impacts your energy, and enhances or suppresses immune system function
When you say “I forgive you,” you’re also saying “I want to be healthy”

The act of forgiving allows the body to turn down the manufacture of catabolic chemicals and instructs the subconscious to banish negative feelings from the mind

— Doctors Arnold Fox and Barry Fox
Authors of *Wake Up! You’re Alive!*
You May Say . . .

©Arlene R. Taylor PhD     www.arlenetaylor.org

You may be tempted to say *No one knows I’m unforgiving . . .*

Your brain knows and your body knows—this knowledge will impact your health

- **Anger** - increases adrenalin and dopamine (can become addicted to adrenalin and dopamine by rehearsing dramatically)

- **Sadness** - decreases levels of serotonin
Reasons to Forgive

©Arlene R. Taylor PhD www.arlenetaylor.org

1. It’s the right thing to do since all humans make mistakes

2. To receive forgiveness

3. To preserve your health—if you choose unforgiveness, you will likely be the one who pays most dearly

4. To keep your energy levels positive

5. Because you benefit the most (it’s less about others and more about you)
Thoughts are Mental Pictures
©Arlene R. Taylor PhD Realizations Inc

I hate _________ and I refuse to forgive . . .

I regret what happened—nevertheless I choose to forgive for the benefits I receive

Your choice will impact your brain-body health
If you choose unforgiveness, studies have shown negative side affects, including:

- ↑ stress levels and muscle tension
- ↑ levels of adrenaline and cortisol
- ↑ blood pressure and heart rate
- ↑ risk for depression, heart disease, stroke, and cancer
- Suppressed immune function
- Impaired neurological function / memory
If you choose decisional and emotional forgiveness, studies have shown positive outcomes, including:

- Healthier relationships
- Lower blood pressure
- Less anxiety, stress, and hostility
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Lower risk of alcohol / substance abuse
- ↑ compassion, kindness, and peace
- ↑ mental, physical, and spiritual health
Forgiveness Guidelines
©Arlene R. Taylor PhD     www.arlenetaylor.org

1. Forgive at both decisional and emotional levels

2. Bury what you forgive in a cemetery without headstones or float it away on a leaf-bark boat

3. Stop rehearsing what you forgave

4. Prosper and be in good health