Physiology of Forgiveness—Revisited
How you can choose to forgive

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Brain References
Forgiveness, Health, Relationships

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Studies have shown that people who refuse to forgive others or themselves 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 (or your own) is harmful to one’s health.

—Herbert Benson MD
Internationally renowned cardiologist
What Forgiveness Involves
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Forgiveness involves giving up your right to exact retribution from the individual who hurt or wronged you

- You make a choice 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 or rehashing all the details

- You move from a positive of 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, hostility, hatred, grudges, and revenge, and you dismantle the enemy outpost in your head.

*Decisional forgiveness is perhaps the easier of the two main categories of forgiveness that pop up in the literature.*
Type Two: Emotional Forgiveness

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

This involves psychophysiological changes to the brain and immune system, which have greater positive direct health and well-being consequences—and may be more difficult as it involves heart and brain
Emotional forgiveness is where the health action is—emotional unforgiveness causes a chronic stress response that results in you 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—anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, 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 were not responsible for (a friend died in a plane crash and you had bought the ticket as a gift)
Without forgiveness, life is governed by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation

—Roberto Assagioli

A nuclear family unit can be split and the children can pass on the resentment and retaliation

An entire family system can be split and carry the unforgiveness forward for generations (Corsica); organizations, schools, and churches can be split—even entire countries
Revenge - Vengeance
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*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 revenge, thinking ‘I suffered and so should they!’

*Anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, and revenge are hungry parasites that feed and feed until there is nothing left for the brain or heart to eat* —Arlene R. Taylor
The 3 R’s can help you work through and resolve the desire for revenge

1. **Re-engagement**—think through what happened openly and objectively

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

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

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

You may opt never to reconnect with the person, but if you go through the 3 R’s process, at least you can choose to release a victim mindset and embrace 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 to be run over by a big bus.
Attempting to understand more about the person or event that hurt you can help you realize that every pathology has an ecology—meaning that bad behaviors do not come out of 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 hurt by hurting others

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 can become addicted

Some have damaged brains and focus only on what they think 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 continued attention, personnel, supplies, resources, and energy to maintain—even as it continues to trigger past memories of perceived wrongs that drains your energy, suppresses your immune system, and fuels revenge and retaliation.
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

The discovery of ‘mirror neurons’ in the brain point out that what you look at and think about changes your brain—forgive for the benefits it provides and avoid ending up resentful, bitter, and sick, with perhaps a shortened life span
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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

Unrealistic expectations can set you up for bitterness and hostility, which trigger the stress response and can negatively impact brain and body
Those who cannot forgive, break the bridge over which they themselves must pass —George Herbert

You tend to get back what you send forth; anger tends to return in anger, hostility in hostility, retaliation in retaliation, forgiveness in forgiveness —Golden Rule

From a spiritual perspective this is worth considering as spirituality involves the spirit with which you live your life . . .
Forgiveness is like faith; you have to keep reviving it — Mason Cooley

Forgiveness is a little like grief recovery; you may need to circle around and look at it from a different angle to get a larger picture and see something you may have missed earlier.

It can be disconcerting when unforgiveness resurfaces about something you thought you forgave—if that happens, forgive again.
Choose to Let It Go
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For every minute you remain angry, you give up 60 seconds of peace of mind.

Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities have crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsenses.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what you cannot forget creates a new way to remember; you change the memory of your past into a hope for your future.

—Louis B. Smedes

Don’t like your past? You can’t change it—but you can create a healthier future for yourself
Charlotte van Oyen Witvliet PhD, 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
- ↑ Negative feelings
- ↑ Tensed muscles

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

Focus your attention on positive things that have happened; this creates a biochemical experience that makes it more likely forgiveness will occur.
There is no stress in any situation until the individual human feels strain—and this differs for every brain. The distress perceived is less the result of what actually exists objectively and more about what an individual brain perceives is happening.

—Dr. Al Siebert

Dump worry and anxiety and embrace a Longevity Lifestyle—that can help quell the stress of anger, resentment, and revenge and make it more likely that forgiveness will occur.
Pull your head out of the proverbial Sand; practice cognitive reframing; Think conscious thoughts that foster acceptance of the facts of your situation—it is what it is …

You may wish you’d had different parents or 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)
Encourage Forgiveness - 4  
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Change the story you tell yourself and move toward being a survivor who is hopeful about the future rather than a victim locked in the past with a gnawing grievance—this makes forgiveness so much more possible

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

‘(Jim, Janice) you are valuable just because you exist. You are learning to love yourself.’
Reach for Forgiveness
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Reach high, for stars lie hidden in you
—Rabindranath Tagore

Everett L. Worthington Jr PhD created a 5-step program known as REACH to help people learn to forgive

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 just looking on, might perceive it
 Reach – Cont’d

2 - Empathize by trying to imagine the viewpoint of the person who wronged you

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

4 - Commit to doing both decisional and emotional forgiveness

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

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

An empty cup has nothing of value to give away—take good care of yourself (put on your oxygen mask first!) so you share with others from a full cup