

## **Forgiveness: The Healing Balm, The Key to Happiness**

What could you want that forgiveness cannot give?

Do you want peace? Forgiveness offers it. Do you want happiness, a quiet mind, a certainty of purpose and a sense of worth and beauty that transcends the world? Do you want care and safety and the warmth of sure protection always? Do you want a quietness that cannot be disturbed, a gentleness that never can be hurt, a deep abiding comfort and a rest so perfect it can never be upset? All this forgiveness offers you and more.

*A Course In Miracles* (Authors not named)

Forgiveness is one of those loaded words, like God. Sadly, because of this, the profound and treasured gifts that forgiveness bears are often pushed away, passed over or rejected out of hand. I often come across people who have been inoculated against it from a past bad religious experience, or who have seen friends or acquaintances profess a pseudo-forgiveness that has turned them off forever.

One of the most common misconceptions is that forgiveness condones hurtful harmful negative behaviour. If I forgive it is a 'letting them off the hook'. This is not true; justice still needs to be done. And if possible, a justice that will restore hope, not just a punitive justice. The only person you are 'letting off the hook' is you. By releasing the anger, hate and vengeance you are making a powerful decision to no longer suffer, a

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decision to heal your heart and mind. Another misconception is that to forgive means that we have to deny our feelings and pretend that what we see with our eyes or feel inside us is not really happening. This is not true. As a psychotherapist I often see the unhealthy consequences of what happens when a person denies their feelings.

**Kate** was a good-looking, 48-year-old executive accountant, divorced with two adult children. She said she had a 'job from heaven' in an industry she loved and felt passionate about. She said, "So why do I want to toss it all away? I am tired, depressed and just don't want to get up in the morning." Her 24-year-old daughter was expecting her first child and in Kate's own words "I should be the happiest person alive!"

Kate went on to say how different her daughter's first pregnancy was to her own. Kate had fallen pregnant at 16 and been forced by her parents to go interstate to give birth and have the baby adopted out. As life would have it, her baby boy was stillborn.

As she recalled the story she began to cry, then sob, saying at the time she was relieved and just wanted to get on with her life and leave the tragic events behind her. However she had never grieved the loss of her baby or felt the pain and anger at her parents' rejection and lack of support. I had her write a letter to her 'lost baby' and she decided to name him David. In a few months Kate was beginning to feel her old happy self after she experienced all the feelings that had been buried for so long.

Ultimately Kate's forgiveness of herself and her parents was a gift of love to herself.

Frequently women at mid-life are still carrying pain, guilt and blame from terminations

of pregnancy that they had years before. Another huge issue is resentment held towards husbands for not being there for them around the birth of a baby. Forgiveness holds the key to release for both these groups of women.

A further misconception is that to forgive makes us weak and unprotected. We feel that we are giving others the green light to hurt us again. If I forgive it somehow makes them right and me wrong. For some strange reason we hold the belief that anger is stronger than the power of love. Sometimes when we feel hurt the voice inside comes from a place of fear. When we don't forgive we are the ones who suffer and lose our sense of peace.

Love is the strongest source of power in the world. No matter how much we are hurting, somewhere deep inside there is always a choice. Do I want to be right or do I want to be happy? I see women in their roles of mothers and lovers being in a place of power and influence in a world that needs to be shown that love really is stronger than fear. The following story, written by Don Gowey the director of the Centre for Attitudinal Healing in Sausalito USA, is from his book *Fishing for fallen light*. Gowey went to Bosnia with a group of volunteers in response to a request from three women - Maja, Melita and Vesna. They asked for help to heal the hatred in the hearts of their people raped and torn apart by war. He writes,

"Together with a few others, these three women rent a house and make it cosy for the broken hearted pilgrims. This house is available for everyone. There is no discrimination. Everyone touched by war is welcome.

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One day some people at this little house suggest a simple proposition. " *Let's form a group and talk.*" Serbs, Muslims, Croats, everyone and anyone. A deep suspicion and chill of fear greets this proposal. It quickly raises Cain among the men. The world in which this war is waging has cut a line into their minds, a line they think they cannot cross.

In the back of the room a woman stands to talk. She adjusts her heavy mass and leans into her cane and says, 'I am from Sarajevo. A Muslim. The Serbs killed my father and took away my husband. I encouraged in my boys this hatred that is killing us. I sent them off to fight. Can you believe it? I thought that hatred in their hearts would make them strong and keep them safe.

She shakes her head and for a time her eyes grow dim. Then she continues,

*'They were killed in combat not much more than a month apart. They came back home to me in canvas bags. I tell you this: **I was the one who killed my sons. Not the Serbs. I killed them with my hatred.** And until my dying day I will say to every mother everywhere I go, teach your children love. Even for their enemy. It's hatred that will kill them.'*

For me this is not a story about a woman in Bosnia. It is a story about me. When I hear it I feel a personal invitation to let go of the anger and separation in my heart, not just for my sake but also for the sake of my children and grand children. It's a powerful story that speaks to my heart. It is particularly relevant now in a world that has changed since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. I listen to people here in Australia who are living their lives in a rubble heap of fear and uncertainty in the midst of their own family. I can only imagine what it must be like for those in the USA and Afghanistan.

This Muslim woman's plea puts the ball right back in my court. I may feel impotent in changing the opinion of world leaders but I can do something about the divisions inside my own heart. I know I have a terrorist inside me, that when hurt, wants to lash out and blame others. I hear this story as an invitation to let go of old pain and resentment. One thought leads to another and then another and collectively they are a force for good. So it's not just for my own inner peace, but the peace of the world. I feel empowered to do something instead of worry.

Another misconception about forgiveness is that if I forgive I will have to do things I don't want to do. Like becoming 'best friends' with my ex-husband or spending time with some person that has been hurtful. This is not true. You are not being asked to have warm feelings or like this person. You are being asked to see this person, no matter what he or she has done, as a human being. You are being asked to see that this person you hate or feel so angry with is indeed a child of God. You may not be able to feel love, but for the sake of your own freedom you can step back and allow life or God to love this person. You can step back and allow love to find a way.

One of the most painful things you can do to yourself is to hold another person out of your heart. One of the key words around forgiveness is *willingness*. Sometimes it is almost impossible to imagine what it would be like to forgive a certain person in your life. It is just too hard to even contemplate. All that is required to start the process is a little willingness. I once had a woman say to me that she 'wanted to want' to forgive her father for his abuse towards her. I assured her that that was all she needed for the

melting of the hurt and pain to begin. For her own happiness and peace of mind she wanted to let go of the angry, painful thoughts she was holding towards him. Slowly she began to withdraw the angry negative thoughts she held towards him. After some time she was able to see her father surrounded by love. She couldn't feel a personal love of him, but she could manage to see him surrounded by love. This was a great breakthrough for her healing and future happiness.

Why forgive? Forgiveness is the key to happiness; it releases us from a painful past. The roots of our pain are like a gnarled old tree stump that's buried deep down inside. No wonder it hurts! Forgiveness unties the tangled mess and eventually helps us let go of the anger, hurt and blame that are causing the pain and distress.

When you are upset you always focus on what you don't want. When you are feeling down or hurt by someone, do you find yourself getting out the 'logbook' and remembering all the other times this person has hurt you in the past, and loading shovels full of fuel onto the furnace of hurt and pain to justify your stand? I know I have. But does it get you what you want? Does it make you or anyone else happier, safer, more joyful or peaceful?

You can't stop the initial feeling but you can, with some practice, stop fueling the fire of justification and unhappiness. It helps to remember you have a choice, you don't have to be a victim. Honour the hurt feelings, then in the name of your own freedom and kindness to yourself, be willing to release them. The brain doesn't understand negative commands. What you focus on is what you get, so it helps to say

what you want and what you are willing to do to get it. By telling your brain you are willing to do whatever it takes to be happy and peaceful puts your feet on the road of forgiveness and ultimately peace and happiness. Forgiveness stops the past from inevitably being repeated in the future. It means living in the present without the shadows of the past.

Most of us are careful about ingesting dangerous fumes or drugs because we are aware of the detrimental side effects. Yet we are not nearly so careful about the toxic thoughts we allow to live 'rent free' in our head. Our minds are very good computers and what we program in has enormous consequences on our feelings, our bodies and our relationships. It is certainly possible to reprogram our negative thoughts. Sometimes we are carrying things around in our head and we don't even know. My dad, who died two years ago, was a pretty tough cop as I was growing up, a real man's man. When he was in his sixties he started to get palpitations in his chest and was quite a stress-prone, grumpy old man. Some years later, much to my surprise as well as his, he attended one of the 'Forgiveness Seminars' that my husband and I were running at the time. 'Just to take a look at this *stuff* you're always rabbiting on about'. He said nothing after the seminar. When I asked him if he liked it he said he supposed it was okay for some people. A week later he called in to see us one late afternoon saying: "You know that stuff you do really works!" When I asked him how he came to that conclusion he told me what had happened.

He was travelling down a busy highway towards the university where he swam every day; he was running behind schedule and, of course, in a hurry. As he approached a busy intersection he just missed the green lights and was stuck for some time waiting for the red lights to change. He said his heart was thumping he felt angry and uptight and was gripping the steering wheel 'like I was in a bloody car rally'. He then related how he happened to notice that he was thinking of an old superintendent who had wrongly accused him, when he was a young cop and how angry he was when he recalled feeling betrayed by this man. Then he began to laugh and give himself a talking to when he realized; 'Well I'm a silly old fool. Here I am thousands of miles away and fifty years down the track. That old beggar I'm thinking about is probably dead and buried years ago.' He said he thought to himself, "well I can rest assured he is not thinking about me, the only person whose gut is in an uproar is mine". In that moment he let go of the past and said to himself "just let that silly old fool rest in peace!"

After discovering how effective had been this letting go of old feelings and reactions my father then started a whole process of letting go of many other painful things in his past. He looked for a nice thing to say about every person he met and volunteered his time to be of service at the Centre of Attitudinal Healing where he made many new friends. For the last 15 years of my father's life he was a very happy, loving man surrounded by family and friends who loved him.

## **Helpful Hints**

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Sit in a chair and think of a person you are feeling angry towards.

Let all the feelings you have about this person flood into you.

How does your body feel?

Make a list of all the feelings, both physical and emotional.

Now you have the beginnings of a list of feelings you are carrying around 'rent free' in your head.

Why would you want to poison yourself with all that toxicity?

As an act of loving kindness to yourself – be willing to let these feelings go – to forgive.

I am often asked how long it takes to forgive.

My friend and teacher Dr. Jerry Jampolsky says,

It is never too early to forgive.

It is also never too late to forgive.

Forgiveness takes as long as you believe it will take.

If you believe it will never happen.

It will never happen.

If you believe it will take six months.

It will take six months.

If you believe it will take but a second

That's all that it will take.