Pathways to Forgiveness

Or Healthy Unforgiving
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Chapter 1 – Channelling Anger

When an insult, injury or hurt has been perpetrated against us we are told the road to recovery involves forgiveness. We are told that the appropriate response to wrong doing is to cease harbouring resentment and anger.

Health professionals want you to forgive and place emphasis on the importance of forgiving due to the studies that show forgiving has physical and emotional health benefits.

Forgiveness is also a religious concept. Many religions from Judaism to Hinduism view forgiveness as a divine act. In the Christian religion forgiveness is seen as a virtue necessary for God’s forgiveness and therefore salvation.

Both medical and religious perspectives on forgiveness place a huge amount of pressure on us to forgive those that wrong us and suggest forgiveness is a perquisite for physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing.

It’s a myth.

It is possible to move on from hurt and pain without forgiveness. It’s okay to not be ready. It’s okay to be angry and hurt. It’s okay to grieve for the person you were before the hurt or anger. It’s okay because it’s a normal human reaction.

Instead of forgiveness ask yourself what others ways you can use or channel that anger.

Anger is the most common emotion after going through a hurtful experience. It is true anger can become destructive and unhealthy but it can also be helpful to your journey towards recovery. You have a choice where anger takes you and what you use the anger to do.

Anger is a great motivator. Many victims of crime have used their anger to get involved in activism and support groups. Anger can be used to seek help and take the necessary steps to heal. In cases of abuse anger is considered an adaptive and healthy emotion that helps a survivor gain insight into the fact that they are worthy of being in a healthy relationship.

Denying their anger and forgiving the perpetrator often leads to remaining in a destructive relationship and continuing the cycle of abuse where the perpetrator seeks forgiveness but continues the behaviour. Sexual abuse survivors often gain a sense of peace and regain their self-esteem by being given permission to not forgive.

Instead of forgiving ask yourself how you can process and express your anger without letting the emotion become unhealthy or unsafe to yourself or others. Learn the difference between anger and violence as well as other unhelpful emotions.

Exercises to try that may help:-

Describe And Change Anger Visualisation
Try to describe your anger. Give it a shape, colour, sound, texture. Then try to imagine that anger being slowly transformed. E.g. If your anger seems spiky and red see it gradually transform to smooth and white.

**Throw away the emotions you don’t want**

- Write the emotions you don’t want on a rock and then throw the rock away. E.g. write or etch the word anger on a rock and throw into a waterway.

**Swimming away from your anger**

- Swimming can help you to express and release anger. Feel the anger being pushed out of your body with every stroke, every kick of your legs. See it being left behind you in your wake and cleansed by the water. Infuse your strokes with emotion and feel the power of your body to move through that emotion. Don’t be afraid to yell or scream under the water. Let it out. Let it dissolve into the bubbles around you.
- You can use any kind of exercise to release anger. Many people find using a punching bag helpful but it must be done with the proper safety gear. **Be forceful with your intentions but be kind to yourself.**

These exercises are about externalizing emotions like anger. This helps you feel a sense of control over your emotions. This is an important first step on the pathway to forgiveness.
Chapter 2 – What keeps you stuck

It’s normal to be stuck wishing the past could be different. You’re allowed to be sad for what you have lost i.e. innocence and trust. You’re allowed to be sad for how things could be different and to wish a painful event had never happened.

It helps to let yourself grieve and be sad about what you feel you have lost. Moving through the grief rather than denying or avoiding helps you progress towards acceptance that the past cannot be changed.

“Giving up hope for a better past we reclaim the energy for the future.” Paul Bailey

Ask yourself what keeps you bound to the person who hurt you

Ask yourself if wanting something from the other person keeps the wound open and fresh. It’s normal to want someone to apologies or acknowledge the pain they have caused. It’s normal to think this will help you move on. Unfortunately the perpetrator may never be willing or capable of saying sorry or feeling guilty or remorse much less express remorse for the pain and anguish they have caused. Your pain and anger won’t change their capacity for insight. You will experience the consequence of waiting, not them.

It is key to accept you cannot change the person who hurt you. Thinking you can move on only when the perpetrator changes only keeps you stuck. Instead focus on how you can change.

“Being stuck wanting something from the perpetrator is like going back to an empty well for water. Your bucket is going to come up dry.” Susan Forward.

Exercises that might help: –

Please note these exercise can be very difficult so you need to take self-care measures. Just like chapter one, these exercises are about externalizing the emotion and taking back control. At first you may not feel the symbolic exercise has lessened your desire for a reaction from the perpetrator but the act of doing the exercise is the first step to acknowledging you have the power to release yourself from the ties that bind you to the perpetrator.

Letting go of wanting

- Write on a leaf the words you want to hear from the person who hurt you. E.g. an apology. Place the leaf in a waterway and watch it float away. Every time you feel yourself wishing for an apology or response from the perpetrator visualize the leaf floating away and along with it your desire for the words.
- Write on a piece of paper the words you want to hear from the person who hurt you. On a separate piece of paper write down how your life would be different if you heard those words from the person who hurt you. Take the first piece of paper and burn it (safely). Now ask yourself who has the power to make the things on the second bit of paper a reality.
• Don’t give the perpetrator the power to decide if you are able to move on. Act as if you already have everything you need to move forward.
• You can’t change the past, you can’t change the perpetrator. Don’t let someone else control how and when you take steps towards resolution.

“Foriveness is giving up the hope that the past could have been any different.” Oprah Winfrey
Chapter 3 – Letting Go

If someone has caused you pain or trauma it’s okay not to be ready to forgive them. It’s okay if you don’t think forgiveness is possible right now. It’s not okay to let that stop you from healing and moving forward.

Instead of forgiveness ask yourself how you can let go

Letting go of the desire for the past to be different isn’t saying what was done to you is okay. Letting go of wanting an apology from the perpetrator is not condoning the behaviour. Letting go of the desire for revenge is not minimizing your pain.

Letting go is about deciding you have the power to let go of the emotions and thoughts that keep you stuck in the pain and prevent you from moving on.

You have the power not the person who hurt you.

“When we let go of unhelpful stories we stop the trajectory of those stories targeting our future.” Paul Bailey

Exercises that might help to externalize the emotions and gain a sense of control: –

- Try the leaf exercise again from chapter 2 only this time write down the negative emotions you want to let go and watch them float away. Or write on a piece of paper and burn (safely).
- Imagine yourself making an Emotion Pie – You decide what goes into the pie i.e. which ingredients go in and how much. If you want a bitter, inedible pie you can decide to fill it with negative emotions. If you want something sweet and delicious fill it with positive emotions. In the early stages of healing from a traumatic event it’s perfectly normal to still have the negative ingredients in the kitchen cupboard but it’s up to you how much use the ingredients get. It may sound overly simple but the reality is you decide what emotions get attention and what emotions you want to be a part of your daily life and taste every day.
- See if you can sum up the emotions or thoughts you want to pay more attention to in just a few words. Write them on a small piece of paper and tape them to a water bottle. Leave the water bottle overnight and drink from the bottle the next day. Apart from the interesting quantum physics that take place the exercise is about taking control. If its anger that’s keeping you stuck try writing the opposite emotion. E.g. peace. If its helplessness try reliance or strength. Maybe it’s just the words let go. Remember I am not saying there is anything wrong with anger just when it becomes a gateway to more pain for yourself or if it becomes all consuming.

These exercises are a starting point in the process of letting go. It’s a way of ritualistically saying – I have taken the first step – I have taken action and I will find a way to move forward.

“To let go is to fear less and love more.” Louise L hay
Chapter 4 – Permission to take care of yourself

If forgiveness is your priority make sure you forgive yourself first

If you believe the person who hurt or contributed to your pain has a right to your compassion, understanding and forgiveness. Don’t forget you deserve that too.

It’s important to forgive yourself for:

- For how you coped – forgive yourself for how you survived – for how you got to this point – even if that involved self-medication with drugs or alcohol, isolating yourself or pushing away friends and family.
- For not being ready to forgive – The pressure to forgive can keep you stuck – let go of the pressure for now. You can come back to it when the time is right.
- For being angry and other intense yet normal emotions including depression or anxiety.

Give yourself permission to take care of yourself emotionally and learn to self soothe

Try the following exercises:-

**Rain visualisation**

- Imagine lying on the grass with warm rain gently washing away negative emotions e.g. feelings of blame for self or others, feelings of hatred for self or others. Alternatively imagine blowing those negative emotions into a balloon. See yourself tie it up and let it float away.

**Light visualisation**

- Imagine a white light surrounding your body, calming you – saturating you with energy and strength – protecting you but still allowing you to connect to others. This visualisation in combination with breathing exercises or meditation is very effective.

If forgiveness is your priority for religious reasons ask yourself what you need to reach a place of forgiveness. One idea is a god box – literally a box where you place letters to god i.e. dear god, help me find compassion for myself.

**Give your heart the chance to catch up to your head.**

“He was still too young to know that the heart’s memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good and that thanks to this artifice we manage to endure the burden of the past.” Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

If you desire the capacity to forgive it’s okay to treat it like a marathon rather than a sprint. Allow yourself time to build up the emotional muscles required. Reading this article is the first step to building those muscles as well as externalising and gaining control over negative and harmful emotions.
Give yourself permission to find the path to forgiveness that is right for you.

Despite what you may have been told there is such a thing as healthy unforgiving. This can occur when you give yourself permission to progress through hurt, trauma and pain at your own pace based on your needs not the agenda of others.

The journey to resolution has many paths. It’s okay to feel emotions but not to be trapped by them or trapped in a cycle of destruction anger and resentment. If you are feeling stuck or that you can’t go forward because you are bogged down by the pressure to forgive – remember the way out of the mud of forgiveness or destructive emotions isn’t to keep spinning your wheels. That will only cause you to slip deeper into the bog. Letting go requires gently nudging the wheels back and forth a little at a time, this allows you to get out of the mud and drive forward.

You decide when and if you open the door to forgiveness and you decide that you can live a healthy and well-adjusted life in the meantime.
Chapter 5 - Links and Resources

Depression Links
Beyond Blue the National Depression Initiative
www.beyondblue.org.au

Conflict Resolution Tools
At the Conflict Management Resources website you will find adaptive resources that allow you to choose the method that best fits the dispute, corresponding needs and expected outcomes. The comprehensive resources will help you overcome chronic conflict workplaces.
http://www.conflictmanagementresources.com

Conflict Navigation EBook
Understand the cause of the conflict and stop the destructive cycle of conflict responses by identifying the true source and underlying emotions and cognitions driving conflict and influencing resolution. Gain insight into your conflict responses and overcome the effect of subjective perception and emotions that cloud the way a message is conveyed and received. Transform your workplace and increase the capacity for conflict to generate positive change and growth personally and professionally.
http://www.conflictmanagementresources.com/resolution-manual/

Available Conflict Workshops
Conflict Navigation - Learn how to create a collaborative workplace and skillfully resolve conflicts
Conflict Assessment - Analyze how you react to conflict and understand what motivates and maintains your conflict responses
Conflict Barriers - Remove barriers to resolution and understand the cause of conflict
Effective Communication - Change your workplace conflict culture and strengthen your workplace relationships.
http://www.conflictmanagementresources.com/conflict-workshops/

Conflict Coaching
Through a supportive and confidential coaching process you can learn how to be collaborative and create a respectful and productive workplace. Improve your ability to understand the underlying causes of conflict and reduce the impact of challenging clients, colleagues or bosses. Work through barriers that are preventing resolution and gain confidence in your ability to manage difficult situations.
http://www.conflictmanagementresources.com/conflict-coaching
Free Self-Esteem Tools

*Shame to Fame* - This eBook is a step by step guide to acknowledging and transforming shame. It is not easy but it is worthwhile.

*Bank It* - The "Bank It" eBook is a practical and unique guide to building self-esteem muscles in an achievable and realistic way.

http://www.conflictmanagementresources.com/free-resources

Free Burnout Tools

*The Hope Challenge* - When the inevitable difficult times occur having hope will greatly increase the likelihood of developing and maintaining healthy avenues to cope and move through distress. Hope provides protection against being stuck in the past or trapped in the vicious cycle of negative and pessimistic thinking. Challenge destructive thinking and attitudes and find a way to embrace optimism and restore hope in your life.

*Anti-Anxiety* - The anti-anxiety eBook provides you with simple and effective tools to distract yourself from worry or anxious thoughts. The more you practice them the more it will strengthen your belief in your ability to cope with panic or anxiety attacks in any situation.

http://www.conflictmanagementresources.com/free-resources

Free Effective Communication Tools

*Saying No* - Start the process of allowing yourself to think of your needs first instead of continually putting others needs before your own. This eBook will introduce you to tools used to develop effective communication skills. You will find exercises and examples that will help you with the difficult process of saying “no” to people. This free eBook will show you how to find a way of saying “no” that’s right for you and communicate your needs in difficult or highly emotional situations.

http://www.conflictmanagementresources.com/free-resources

Other Books By The Author Available On Kindle

*24 Seconds* - For a totally different way to explore hope and choice through the lens of fiction check out my novel *24 seconds*. As Detective Jasmine West interviews patients at The Moving Forward Neuroscience Clinic and desperately tries to find something to use against her suspect she learns that nothing is as fragile as reality. She is forced to examine who deserves to be released from the burden of truth and who she might be without her worst memory.

Kindle: http://amazon.com/author/gretchennetterfield

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