

What is Forgiveness?

By Monisha Srichand

“The act of forgiveness takes place in our own mind. It really has nothing to do with the other person”

– Louise Hay

We have heard the quote ‘To err is human and to forgive is divine’. While some of us may agree with this theoretically, some of us may also struggle to apply this practically when we have been deeply hurt and pained by another. It may almost seem unfair to forgive them for what they have done to us. We have perhaps heard that by forgiving others, we help ourselves and set ourselves free. But **how** do we do this, is often the question.

We are bombarded with messages about the importance of forgiveness and the benefits of it but seldom are we taught about what forgiveness really is and how do we practically forgive another who has wronged us. So here’s sharing with you a psychological understanding of the what’s and how’s of forgiveness

What is forgiveness?

Psychologists suggest that forgiveness, strictly speaking, is not just an emotion. It is an act of the will. Forgiveness requires us to make a choice, from our will and intellect, based on our reasonableness, even when feelings of hurt continue to linger. When we forgive, we may not instantly feel positive emotions towards the person. There may still be ‘unforgiving feelings’. But in spite of those feelings, we choose to act positively towards the person.

Therefore forgiveness is a choice. When we choose to let go, there is an act of the will, not necessarily instant loving feelings.

Giving our power away

Loiuse Hay, the bestselling author of ‘You can heal your life’ says ‘When we blame another, we give our power away because we’re placing the

responsibility for our feelings on someone else. People in our lives may behave in ways that trigger uncomfortable responses in us. However, they didn't get into our minds and create the buttons that have been pushed. Taking responsibility for our own feelings and reactions is mastering our 'ability to respond'. In other words, we learn to consciously choose rather than simply react. We can't talk about resentment without also talking about forgiveness. Forgiving someone doesn't mean that we condone their behavior. The act of forgiveness takes place in our own mind. It really has nothing to do with the other person. The reality of true forgiveness lies in setting ourselves free from holding on to the pain.

Does forgiving mean forgetting?

No, it doesn't. Forgiving the person who hurt us and forgetting what the person did are two different things. Psychologists agree that forgiving does not always involve forgetting. The brain cells that carry memories are part of our biological wiring; therefore it is impossible to literally 'forget'. If we believe that forgetting should follow immediately if our forgiving is genuine, then we may consequently fall victim to unnecessary guilt and emotional conflict. We may even feel hypocritical and cause ourselves confusion and distress. The good news is that forgiveness is an act of the will, even when unforgiving feelings and memories still linger.

Martin Padovani, a counselor with more than 20 years of experience and author of 'Healing Wounded Emotions' states that 'the act of forgiveness is just that: an act; it's a decision. It's a reaching out to a person and inviting him or her back into a former relationship. It can be a difficult act but a firm one; it can be cold and devoid of accompanying warm, positive feelings but nonetheless genuine.' He further adds that 'the act of forgiveness can be a fact but the feelings of forgiveness may come only in time. When we confront these 'unforgiving feelings', deal with them honestly, and work through them, they will gradually become dissipated. Then the forgetting process could commence. The process of forgetting is just that, a process that involves our feelings, which we must respect and understand.' We perhaps have less control over how we feel, but more control over how we act and handle our feelings.

Research in Forgiveness suggests that we can genuinely forgive even though time is required to forget and to heal our negative feelings. The divorced, the victims of crime, injustice, terrorism and war, parents hurt and rejected by their children, children neglected and mistreated by their parents, the old who are overlooked and the young who are not heard – all who suffer the hurts, misunderstandings, and insensitivities of daily living can forgive and need to realize that forgetting may take time. We cannot program ourselves into a set time-frame for forgetting. Each one of us has a different, unique healing ability.

Does forgetting mean forgiving?

Forgetting does not necessarily mean forgiving. Without the experience of forgiveness, forgetting can be a way of avoiding dealing with the pain and hurt of being offended. Sometimes we could prevent ourselves from truly arriving at forgiveness by burying our hurt feelings. Forgetting is perhaps impossible especially until we experience and acknowledge a hurt, and then go through the struggle and satisfaction of forgiving. People who say ‘forget about it’ can leave us hanging and unsure about how they truly feel, making us wonder if we are forgiven.

Coping with unforgiveness, hurt or resentment

Research has shown that working with our thoughts and emotions bring about changes in our behavior towards a person who has hurt us. Forgiveness which is an act of the will is often a consequence of changing certain thought patterns that may be a stumbling block in our healing. We have to choose to let go. For this, counselling approaches based on *Cognitive Behavior Therapy* are known to be useful.

Sometimes we may have worked through our thought patterns but our emotions take control of us and therefore emotions may become the stumbling block in letting go. In such cases, counselling approaches based on *Gestalt* or any other technique that works with visualization is often known to help.

Forgiving others is not easy. Often what is more difficult is forgiving ourselves. But it is possible, if we choose to let go. If you’d like to talk about your struggle with forgiveness, consider talking it over with a trained counsellor.