

Q&A



The power of

Forgiveness does not only benefit the guilty. In the Hoffman Process, an intensive course for those wishing to let go of the past, it can be one of the most powerful catalysts for change. Here, **Tim Laurence**, director of Hoffman International, explains what it means to forgive

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Why do you think it's important to forgive? What would you say are the emotional and psychological benefits of doing so?

I strongly believe that forgiveness is an essential part of our healing journey. Having worked with people in the Hoffman Process for the past 15 years, I have been constantly amazed by the courage it takes to forgive, and let go of anger and pain. I have seen people whose lives have been determined by a grievance that has affected not only themselves, but also generations after them. To then see that person forgive and be able to move on in their lives is like watching them unlocking the door of their own prison and stepping out into freedom.

Most of us find it extremely difficult to forgive. Why is there such a strong need to hold on to our hurts and grievances?

Holding on to anger or resentment can fuel us with a passionate sense of being alive and strong. It can feel good to blame someone; it gives us a false sense of self. But, ultimately, who wants to have a life defined by anger, pain or suffering? You are not much fun to be around, and meanwhile

you're the one with the headaches, broken sleep and maybe even ulcers.

Should we always forgive everyone – the parent who abused or ignored us, the cheating partner, the rapist – or are there limits?

There's an important distinction to bear in mind with forgiving. You can condemn the act, but be able to forgive the person. Of course, you can't force yourself. Forgiveness comes at the right time and the right place. You may wake up one morning and think, 'I'm fed up with blaming my parents', or you may see your ex on the street and realise, 'now is the time to forgive and move on'. In my work, I've seen people being able to forgive parents and strangers for all kinds of terrible actions. Think of Mandela, who forgave his jailers. That takes a big heart.

How important is it to be able to forgive yourself?

The benefits of acknowledging our mistakes, learning from them and moving on are huge. Sometimes it takes a near-death experience to force us to review our lives. If the first step is to forgive others, then the next has to be to turn that forgiveness towards ourselves. It brings relief from a potentially crippling sense of shame



forgiveness

BLAMING SOMEONE ELSE CAN MAKE US FEEL ALIVE AND STRONG. IT GIVES US A FALSE SENSE OF SELF

and guilt. Learning self-acceptance brings peace of mind.

Through your work, you have found that forgiving is one of the most important catalysts for change. Why?

Forgiveness goes beyond psychology: a spiritual transformation takes place. It takes us from a sense of 'small self' or ego, to one of a 'larger self'. With that change of perspective, everything changes. Just as we move from childhood to becoming an adult, forgiveness takes us from an immature position, one of a false sense of power, to one of wisdom and generosity.

How can you bring yourself to truly forgive someone? What are the steps you need to go through?

Through my work I have found there to be four distinct stages. First you choose the person you need to forgive, and examine the effect that they have had on your life. Allow yourself to blame them and say, 'It was your fault.' We call this stage the 'prosecution', because, just as in a court of law, you have to prosecute someone before defending them. The second stage is expression. Identify the emotions and feelings that have come up for you. You may find writing a journal or talking to someone helpful. Also, 'the body expresses what the mind represses', so let your body express what it feels. For intense emotion, find somewhere private where it's OK to shout or cry.

Having prosecuted, we then put the case for the defence. This stage is about finding empathy and compassion for the way the other person behaved. As the Native Americans say, to

resources

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■ **For more information on the Hoffman Process visit** www.hoffmaninstitute.co.uk

understand someone, first you have to walk a mile in their shoes. Imagine being them. What motivated them to behave the way they did? Were they acting out some old grievance and blaming you for it? What in their own background causes them to behave in this way? When you reach a stage of empathy both in your head and in your heart, then you are ready to forgive. To mark this fourth stage, some kind of ritual is helpful. Create your own ceremony. You might write a letter to the person and then burn it, light a candle, go for a walk, put on music and dance, or find a sacred spot and speak out loud your forgiveness. Having done that, then acknowledge yourself for the courageous step you have taken.

Is it important for us to be forgiven?

Imagine if you had a child who had always been angry at you, and one day they came back saying they forgave you. That would feel like quite a gift, wouldn't it? You could now connect with them on a positive level, whereas before you might have been connected, but with a strong negative charge.

Who benefits most from forgiveness – the forgiver or the forgiven?

Since the forgiven person may never know it consciously, it's the forgiver who reaps the conscious benefit. There's a lot of published research on the effects – from lower blood pressure and less risk of heart disease, to reduced anger and depression.

Remember, it's not our responsibility to change the other person – all we can do is change ourselves. If they change as a result, that's an added bonus. ■