

Forgiveness:

The Secret to a Healthy Relationship

Scientists who study forgiveness have long agreed that it is one of the most important contributors to a healthy relationship. **Studies** have shown that couples who practice forgiveness are more likely to enjoy longer, more satisfying romantic relationships. **Research** has even found that people who practice unconditional forgiveness are more likely to enjoy longer lives.

Forgiveness is such a key component to a healthy relationship, because, let's face it, people are not perfect. No matter how close to complete a soul mate we find, every individual is incredibly different from the next. Couples who form a “**fantasy bond**” in an effort to merge identities, fall completely into sync and function as one are forgetting this basic reality. They're also setting themselves up for great disappointment.



It's important to accept that we all have separate minds and points of view. Each and every one of us is hurt, defended, flawed and inevitably going to make mistakes. Having this perspective doesn't mean we should sit back and withstand abuse. However, if we want to enjoy a lasting relationship with someone we value and choose to spend our lives with, we may want to grow our ability to forgive.

The science behind this may seem intuitive, but it helps illustrate the important role forgiveness plays in a couple's long-term well-being. A 2011 **study** published in the **Journal** of Family Psychology on “Forgiveness and Relationship Satisfaction” showed that, in relationships, a lack of forgiveness makes resolving conflict much less likely. **Research** has also shown that a lack of forgiveness stirs up negative emotions and creates more conflict. Couples who don't practice forgiveness are more likely to engage in “**negative interpersonal tactics**” and have a poor ability to compromise or resolve issues.

Couples who do practice forgiveness **show more behavioral regulation** and have more positive motivation toward their partner. In other words, they drop the case rather than holding a grudge or harboring resentment. Instead, they put effort into maintaining a positive relationship, in which they are less hostile or punishing. As the study put it, “[They] inhibit their tendency to damage their relationship by using negative interpersonal tactics like hitting, berating or avoiding their partner.”

In practicing forgiveness, people are able to break a cycle that so many couples get into, where there is an ongoing, destructive back and forth, and no one really wins. As an article from the [Mayo Clinic](#) warned, “If you don’t practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly.” The article goes on to list some of the effects of holding a grudge as:

- Bringing anger and bitterness into your relationships
- An inability to enjoy the present
- Depression and anxiety
- Feelings that you lack meaning or purpose
- A loss of connectedness with others

Interestingly, similar downsides are experienced when we fail to forgive ourselves.

Beating ourselves up and failing to have a compassionate or forgiving attitude toward ourselves can have bad consequences for both us and the partner we wronged.

One [study](#) found that self-punishing and “pseudo self-forgiving responses” have no real benefits for restoring or repairing a situation. “In contrast,” researchers noted, “genuine self-forgiveness (involving effort to work through one’s offense, responsibility taking, and self-acceptance while acknowledging failure) is associated with positive restorative outcomes for both the offender and the victim.” This is true in romantic relationships, where [studies](#) further found that both parties benefit from an “offending partner” showing self-forgiveness. Both partners tended to feel more relationship satisfaction and have fewer negative thoughts and sentiments toward themselves as a result. Self-forgiveness also decreases our chances of repeating the same offense.

With all this data supporting the importance of forgiveness, what could possibly be the downside of becoming a more forgiving person? Here are five ways to do just that:

Think about the outcome you want – In dealing with relationship conflicts, we sometimes lose track of our goals. It’s important to emphasize cooperative over competitive goals, in other words, to share the common goal of getting back to being close as opposed to the competitive goal of winning the argument. As my father psychologist [Robert Firestone](#) likes to say, when you engage like this, “You may win the battle, but you’ll lose the war.”

In order to both come out victorious, try to have empathy for your partner and see the situation from his or her eyes. Try to recognize the ways you may be hurting yourself and the relationship by acting out hostility, coldness or holding a grudge. This process doesn’t mean dismissing the things that matter to you, but it does mean talking about them in ways that will enhance your partner’s understanding and help you stay on a track, so both of you get the outcome you want.

Drop the case – Most people in relationships know what it’s like to quietly build a case against their partners, cataloguing each and every mistake they make until they appear to us as a caricature of themselves. This distortion can injure and undermine our warm and loving feelings for our partner. Moreover, when you hold a grudge, the person who suffers most is you. In my blog “[Stop the Blame Game to Improve Your Relationship](#),” I elaborate on the importance of not building a case against your partner. Instead wait until you are calm, then try and express how you felt in the situation. Then, give your partner a chance to communicate their perspective. Be open and a good listener. When we express our feelings and let them go, we can regain a kind, compassionate attitude toward our partner.

Don't listen to your critical inner voice – We all have cruel, coaching thoughts inside our head that get especially loud when it comes to our relationships. This “critical inner voice” is full of bad advice that interferes with our happiness and tends to criticize us (or our partner) at every turn. It may tell us not to invest in or trust our partner. It may advise us to protect ourselves by not getting too close or to seek revenge when our partner messes up. Once again, these actions are rarely in our own best interest and will only wind up hurting us.

This coaching “voice” may sound soothing at first, telling us “Just give him the cold shoulder. It will make you feel better.” Or, it will say, “Just call her up and make her reassure you of how she feels.” However, once you listen to these thoughts, the same voice is right there to punish you: “Here you are alone again. What a loser. You’ve just pushed him/ her away, and now you won’t have anyone.” In order to act on our own, real point of view and move toward what we really want, we have to silence both the self-soothing and self-critical directives of our inner critic and act in ways that lead us toward our goals.

Be aware of any fears of intimacy – If we find ourselves all of a sudden picking apart our partner or stubbornly unwilling to forgive a character flaw that was there from the beginning, we may want to consider that our own fears of intimacy are driving us to push our partner away. Most of us can easily see certain fears or hesitations around closeness in our partner, but we often fail to recognize it in ourselves. We all face a certain amount of internal struggle when it comes to love and intimacy, so before you jump down your partner’s throat for showing up late or forgetting a favor, try to think if there may be some underlying inclination within you encouraging you to push him or her away.

Don't recreate old family dynamics with your partner – Sometimes when a specific trait pushes our buttons more than others, it’s because it triggers something in us from our past. For example, if we had a parent who struggled with alcoholism, we may be extra sensitive to our partner getting a little tipsy at a party. If we had a caregiver who lost their temper at random, we may have alarms go off the minute our partner raises his or her voice. Be careful of ways you may project or even recreate old dynamics in your current relationships. Think about if you’re behavior is really a reflection of how you want to act or a reaction to something that’s been stirred up from your past.

When we take these steps, we may have thoughts telling us we are a fool, or we will just get hurt. Yet, being vulnerable actually makes us more likely to get what we want. It leads to healthier modes of relating and creates a more compassionate relationship. And, in the instances when someone is regularly hurting us with no sign of changing, we can be strong in our choice to move on, and we can do so without tormenting ourselves by plummeting into harmful feelings of victimization, shame or misdirected anger. Yet, when it comes to the road bumps we experience with people we trust and choose to be close to long-term, it actually makes **us** happier to forgive.