



Family forgiveness

By Mary Jo Rulnick

A derogatory comment, hurtful actions, offensive behavior or infidelity can tear a family apart. Being on the receiving side of these "wrongs" can cause resentment, bitterness, depression or the need to seek revenge. The closer our relationships, the more times we will hurt each other and will need to forgive or ask to be forgiven, says Rabbi Irwin Kula, author of the award-winning *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*. Kula states family is the central place we learn about and carry out forgiveness.

The offense and the number of times the offense has occurred play an important part in forgiving. Professor Fred Luskin, expert on Emotional Health and Forgiveness at Stanford University, says one of the primary reasons many of us don't forgive is we're too angry to consider it. "We may or may not be aware of the anger we live with day to day," says Luskin. "The anger that holds us hostage to unforgiveness is a rage stored deep in the attics of our hearts."

However, forgiveness is crucial to our health. "Holding a grudge is harmful to the human body and mind," says Psychotherapist Dorthea Hover-Kramer, Ed. D., RN, and author of *Second Chance at Your Dream*. It implies we've been wronged and the perpetrator of the wrong must pay. Unfortunately, the person who may have made a mistake can grow and live well, while the person holding the grudge becomes more and more constricted in his thinking and can actually develop stress-related diseases, such as cancer or heart problems.

Counterfeit forgiveness

Although we might feel we have forgiven the person, Professor Luskin believes instead of true forgiveness we sometimes offer counterfeit forgiveness, which can be a mistake. According to Luskin, counterfeit forgiveness includes:

- Stoic numbness. A rush to forgive without taking the time to feel the trauma and pain.
- Minimization. Overlooking the wrong or minimizing the offense.
- Psychoanalyzing the offender. Explaining away foul behavior with excuses for them.
- Holding one's breath emotionally. Putting on a face for others to cover up hurt feelings.

Path to true forgiveness

The very first thing we need to know about forgiveness is that it is not a moment, but a process, says Rabbi Kula. It is the same process whether it is a small

hurt or a major betrayal. There are key steps in the path to forgiveness for the person who made the offense and steps for the person who was on the receiving end.

To be forgiven

To be forgiven for an action that hurt someone, Kula recommends these steps.

- Recognize what we did wrong. We need to realize that we actually did something that hurt another person.
- Regret what we did. We need to express our regret to the person we hurt. The more deeply we actually feel the regret the more authentically we can express it. Regret is an indication of conscience and an invitation that one wants to make things better.
- Resolve to try not to repeat the hurt. As there is no way to know for sure that we will never repeat the hurt, we need to express our resolve to the person.
- Repair the rupture. We need to do tangible things to mend the hurt. Depending on the nature of the hurt this will require anything from repeated apologies to separation to "going out of our way" to be kind, thoughtful, aware, considerate and loyal. These new behaviors ease the pain and begin to restore trust.
- Reconcile the relationship. Reconciliation doesn't mean everything is forgotten. It means moving on and using the brokenness as a stepping stone to a new stage in our relationship.

To forgive

To forgive someone who has hurt you, Sister Catherine Nerney, SSJ, PhD., director of the Institute for Forgiveness and Reconciliation at Chestnut Hill College, suggests these steps.

- Give back the humanity of the offender. Don't get stuck on what the person did to you. Then, it is all you can see and the offender becomes the offense. Say a family member lies. Now, he becomes a liar. Rather than seeing the offender as a liar, see him as a human person like you. Remember the person has many good qualities which can be overlooked when resentments take over.
- Give up your right to get even. This is not the same as seeking justice or making restitution for the wrong. Instead, it means letting go of the sweet feeling of wanting to watch them suffer or wanting to hurt them back because they hurt us. The injured person is set free by her capacity to forgive, to let go, to release the bondage

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one holds over the other who offended her.

- Revise your feelings toward the one who injured you. Change your attitude by seeing the offense as a mistake made by another person. Forgiveness is the way to love in an imperfect world. We all love imperfectly. Learning to forgive is the way to keep love alive.

Forgiveness starts at home

Creating a family culture where members learn to work through letting go of hurts, not holding grudges and acknowledging the pain one has experience is the way we can change the culture of violence in society today, says Nerney. We change society by changing the dynamics of family life. Learning how to forgive starts at home. ▀

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