



Peter Murphy  
Archdiocese of Washington  
Office of Family Life

## Forgiving Oneself

As Alexandra Asseily says in the film, *“I think that if we all just remember that if we forgive ourselves, it’s a wonderful beginning to forgiveness. Because actually if we really forgive ourselves for all the wickedness we think we have inside or all the things we think are wrong with ourselves, we would then be so much more compassionate with others. And I think probably it’s our lack of compassion with ourselves that makes us so upset with others.”*

Forgiving yourself is an opportunity to free you of pain and anger that has built up over time. Forgiveness moves you from focusing on a past hurt into the present. You may not forget the hurtful event, but you can move on with your life. This choice to forgive yourself may not be a one-time event and may take time to do, but over time you will find yourself living without the familiar pain you are used to carrying with you. Forgiving yourself may not be easy, but the alternative is choosing to live with the pain of bitterness and resentment toward yourself.

Failure to forgive ourselves can result in

- Continually being hurt by unresolved pain, suffering and ways of acting that harm us
- Low self-esteem and low self-worth
- Being overly defensive or distant in relationships
- Unnecessary guilt and remorse that wear us down.
- Self-destructive behavior

Forgiving ourselves can have many benefits such as:

- Learning to love yourself in healthy ways and no longer beating yourself up for your mistakes
- Realizing we are human and all make mistakes
- Letting go of hurtful memories and painful events and developing an optimistic view for the future
- Realizing you have value and self-worth can open you up to loving others in new ways and demanding respect for yourself

### **Self-forgiveness Exercise:**

1. Write down an event for which you wish to seek forgiveness from yourself. Recall areas in your life where bitterness, resentment and unforgiveness reside. Write with as much detail and clarity as you can recall.
  - a. Recognize the hurt.
  - b. Forgiveness does not minimize the hurt and pain you feel. Realize what hurt you feel and that you can move past the hurt when you are ready to choose to forgive.

2. Read over the event you have written. Have you held onto these feelings a long time? Does this area affect the way you live your life and interact with others?
  - a. You may want to tell your story to a trusted friend, family member or counselor.
3. Grieve the hurt / damage done and work through any anger. It is very natural to be angry at oneself for not being perfect, but no one is perfect.
  - a. Realize you are not perfect; forgive yourself for what you did wrong.
  - b. Choose to release the negative emotions associated with the incident
  - c. Realize that we all make mistakes, are imperfect and in need of forgiveness. Forgive yourself for any wrongs you have done
  - d. Realize that you are a good person and not deserving of being punished or hurt. Let go of pain. If you still hold onto pain and resentment, it will be harder to give and receive forgiveness.
4. Shred or burn the list as a visual symbol of letting go.
5. Repeat the exercise for other areas of unforgiveness.
6. Move forward in your life without the burden of unforgiveness.
  - a. Give yourself permission to shed the hurt, pain, anger and to begin to heal by living in peace.
  - b. When the event or pain from the event resurface, remind yourself that you have forgiven yourself and that you chose to move on with your life without the pain.

### **Forgiving Another Person**

Even in the closest of our relationships we can harbor unforgiveness. Taking some time to reflect on our relationship can help us identify and dislodge any unforgiveness that may be present. If pain and resentment are left unchecked in our relationship, and the healing power of forgiveness has not been made use of, resentment, bitterness or a loss of hope could develop.

We often carry around misperceptions of what forgiveness is and these misperceptions impede our ability to forgive or be forgiven. It is important to know what forgiveness is not.

- Forgiveness is not forgetting. We often will not forget a hurtful event, but we can still seek and grant forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is not having resolved all the painful feelings. Often the hurtful feelings will last. But we can still seek and grant forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is not absolving someone from the responsibility of what they have done. What they did was wrong; you are simply choosing to not let it negatively impact you (and your relationship) anymore.
- Forgiveness is not accepting being continually hurt. If you are in an abusive relationship or one in which you are regularly being hurt, then that pattern must change. You do not deserve to be hurt. This may require staying away from the offending person to protect yourself.
- Forgiveness does not mean the relationship is always back to where it was before. If the offense is minor, you might be able to go back to where you were. If the offense is serious, it may take time (even years) to rebuild trust in the relationship. Forgiveness is simply starting this healing process.

### **Spouses/Couples Forgiveness Exercise:**

(If forgiveness is difficult for you or rarely done in your relationship, try this exercise with a less hurtful issue before conducting it with deeper more painful issues. Forgiveness, like any virtue, takes practice.)

1. When you both agree that you are ready to discuss the issue, set a time and place to discuss the issue at hand.
  - a. Cover only one item at a time. The laundry list approach rarely leads to helpful conversation.
  - b. Prepare yourself to be open and honest and to fully hear out the other person's side of the story.
2. Take time to listen to one another's side of the situation without interrupting. Don't give advice. Don't allow yourself to be distracted. Turn off your cell phone, blackberry, television, put the kids to bed, get a babysitter, etc.
  - a. Simply listen to and understand your partner's side of the story. Ask clarifying questions.
  - b. Seek to understand not just the facts of the situation but the feelings as well.
  - c. Reflect back what you believe you hear your partner is saying to assure that you both have the same information and the same understanding of that information.
3. When one person has finished sharing his or her side and feels understood, the other person gets a chance to be heard out fully.
4. Once you both feel understood and heard - Request Forgiveness.
  - a. Throughout the conversation, hopefully offending parties will be more aware of the hurt they caused (in many cases both parties have something to be sorry for). Ask for forgiveness, being as specific as possible. Say something like, "I'm sorry for that (Name what was wrong about the action you took or the words that you said)."
  - b. Requesting an apology can be very healing to the offended party.
5. Grant Forgiveness.
  - a. When forgiveness is being asked of you, be sure to acknowledge the apology. If you are ready, grant forgiveness. Simply saying, "It's OK" is not sufficient. It is not OK. The person is requesting forgiveness of you. Tell him/her if you forgive him/her. If not, say "I accept your apology. But I need more time to work through the painful feelings."
6. When you are ready to forgive or have been forgiven, move on from the hurtful event and discuss ways to avoid this pain in the future.
  - a. This may include developing new ways of relating to one another and getting rid of offensive behaviors.
  - b. The offender in particular should verbalize new ways he/she will act so as not to hurt the other.
  - c. Hug as a physical sign that you are moving on and wish a loving relationship to flourish between the two of you.
7. Allow time for trust and healing to occur
  - a. If the offense was very hurtful, it may take time for trust and healing to occur.
  - b. Your forgiveness and time together has begun the road to healing. Be patient.

**Exercise in Forgiving Someone Else (even if they are not present):**

1. Write about a time or incident that you wish to forgive someone.
  - a. Write out all the thoughts and feelings associated with this event, the more detail the better.

- b. How has this incident impacted your life? How much energy do you give to it? What was your involvement in the event? How has the event impacted your self-esteem and self-worth?
2. Think about ways that you can take ownership of your actions.
  - a. When thinking of your actions, do you hold onto resentment to keep the other person beneath you? Do you blame them for the feelings you feel?
  - b. How can you begin to take responsibility for your feelings and actions in the future?
3. Think of a variety of ways that you can seek forgiveness from the other party.
4. Forgive them in your heart and mind and if appropriate, plan how to forgive them personally.
  - a. If necessary, also think of ways to avoiding being hurt by this person or others in the future.
5. Repeat the exercise for as many people you wish to seek forgiveness.

### **Parents Teaching Children to Forgive**

Parents teach their children forgiveness in a variety of ways. The Amish do not use any formal curriculum, but use their faith and example to pass on the lessons of forgiveness from generation to generation. Tony Hicks, the young man who shot Tariq in the film, learned forgiveness not from his parents but through being forgiven by Tariq's father, Azim.

While there are many ways to learn forgiveness, one of the most effective is for children to see their parents modeling forgiveness in their daily life. Children can also benefit from their parents instruction on forgiveness. Like most life lessons, teaching forgiveness to your child will be a continual process, but one that can bear great fruit.

Children, especially young children, are very impressionable. As you teach your child how to forgive it will be an on-going process. You may even have to give your child the words to say if they have not developed the vocabulary of forgiveness yet.

An example might look like:

Parent: "Johnny, you hit your sister and now she is hurt. You need to say "I'm sorry.""

(Or if the child is older, "I feel bad that I hurt you and I am sorry for hitting you.")

Johnny: "I'm sorry Sally."

Parent: "Very good Johnny. Now give your sister a hug to let her know that you are sorry."

Johnny hugs his sister.

Parent: "Now I want you to play nicely with your sister. If you get angry, use your words.

Hitting is not appropriate. Have fun."

The parent gave her child the words and actions to do in step-by-step fashion. Children often can only remember one step at a time. Following the words and actions of forgiveness, the parent set a new course of action for the child, one without violence. When your child responds to your request, be sure to reward his behavior by saying "Thank you" or "Good job" or hug them yourself. This process may have to be repeated over and over, but in time it can bear fruit.

As your children get older their lives will get more complex and nuanced and they will need an ever expanding capacity to forgive. They will need to learn problem-solving and conflict resolution skills as they get older, but the foundation that you have taught them as a child will

help make this process go smoother. They will always need to see you role model these and other skills.

If you feel ill-equipped to teach your children forgiveness, take the time to go to your local library and get some books or tapes on forgiveness. Check your local community for parenting classes. These resources will be especially important if you did not receive these skills yourself as you were growing up. We all learn forgiveness in a variety of ways. Hopefully *The POWER of FORGIVENESS* has begun your journey the road to forgiveness in your life.

### **Family Exercise 1:**

Gather your family for an evening without distractions or interruptions to discuss the healing power that forgiveness can have in your family. If you have previewed the video and believe it is age appropriate for your children, then view the Azim Khamisa and Ples Felix story at the end of the video (or another part of the video you feel appropriate) to enhance the discussion.

[Following the video, select some of the questions from the previous study guide to lead discussion.]

At another meeting on forgiveness take some time to come up with a list of common family situations that require forgiveness from within the family. Examples might be; your brother takes one of your toys without asking, your sister does not do the chores that she was asked to do and you do yours, your parents get angry at you for something that you did not do. Think of situations that relate to your family.

Once the list has been created, discuss ways that forgiveness can be given in each of these situations. This might involve role-playing between parents and children. Freely discuss how it is difficult to forgive in situations, but that it is well worth the effort.

The discussion and role-playing give concrete modeling for family members who need to see how to forgive in real life situations where they may not feel able to forgive (or not know how).

Some concluding discussion questions could be:

1. Why is it important for family members to forgive one another?
2. What would our family look like if we chose not to forgive one another?
3. What situations are most difficult for me to forgive?
4. Does our family forgive readily (similar to the Amish)? If not, how can we become a more forgiving family?

### **Family Exercise 2:**

Gather your family together (best if the previous exercises have been done) to discuss forgiveness in the family. Have members of the family write out things they need forgiveness for (assure them that no one will see the list). Spend a few moments in silence. Then discuss feelings associated with asking someone else for forgiveness. Do you feel embarrassed, ashamed, fearful, scared, or hurt yourself? Let your children know that these feelings are very normal and that forgiveness is rising above these feelings to mend their relationship with the offended person. Forgiveness frees yourself and the other to become the friends or family members you wish you could be, without resentment or bitterness between you.

If you believe it is appropriate, have family members take time in the group or individually asking each other for forgiveness. Parents ought to role model this forgiveness first for their

children. Keep it simple and to the point. Allow time for the children to ask forgiveness, if they wish, from you or each other.

Conclude by burning the lists (if you wish you can say a prayer) and letting your children know that when they seek forgiveness, it can strengthen their relationship with the person they once offended.

**Family Exercise 3 (from the video):**

*The Power of Forgiveness* presented a clip from a classroom where children were learning to forgive (view clip). Jeanette Knutson said, “In the early years, we begin to teach the children the concept of inherent worth, which is the idea that all people have worth. Not because of where they live or how effective they are in their work but rather they have worth because they are a member of the human family.”

1. Have your child reflect on a time where someone hurt them.
2. Listen without interrupting, but assist them in sharing if necessary.
3. If you wish to use forgiveness glasses as the video did, feel free, or simply ask your child to look at the other person who hurt them with new eyes and tell you something good about that person.
4. Show your child that people may hurt you but that there is usually more to a person than just the hurt they cause.

**Additional Resources** on The Power of Forgiveness in your family:

Currently researching books. Once they are reviewed, we will add them to this section.

Enright, R. D., & North, J. (Eds.) (1998). *Exploring forgiveness*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Enright, R. D. (2001). *Forgiveness Is a Choice*. Washington: APA Books.

This article was developed for community conversations around *The POWER of FORGIVENESS* by Journey Films. More material available at [www.journeyfilms.com](http://www.journeyfilms.com).

Funding provided by The John Templeton Foundation, Supporting Science, Investing in the Big Questions, and Fetzer Institute, as part of their Campaign for Love and Forgiveness.

