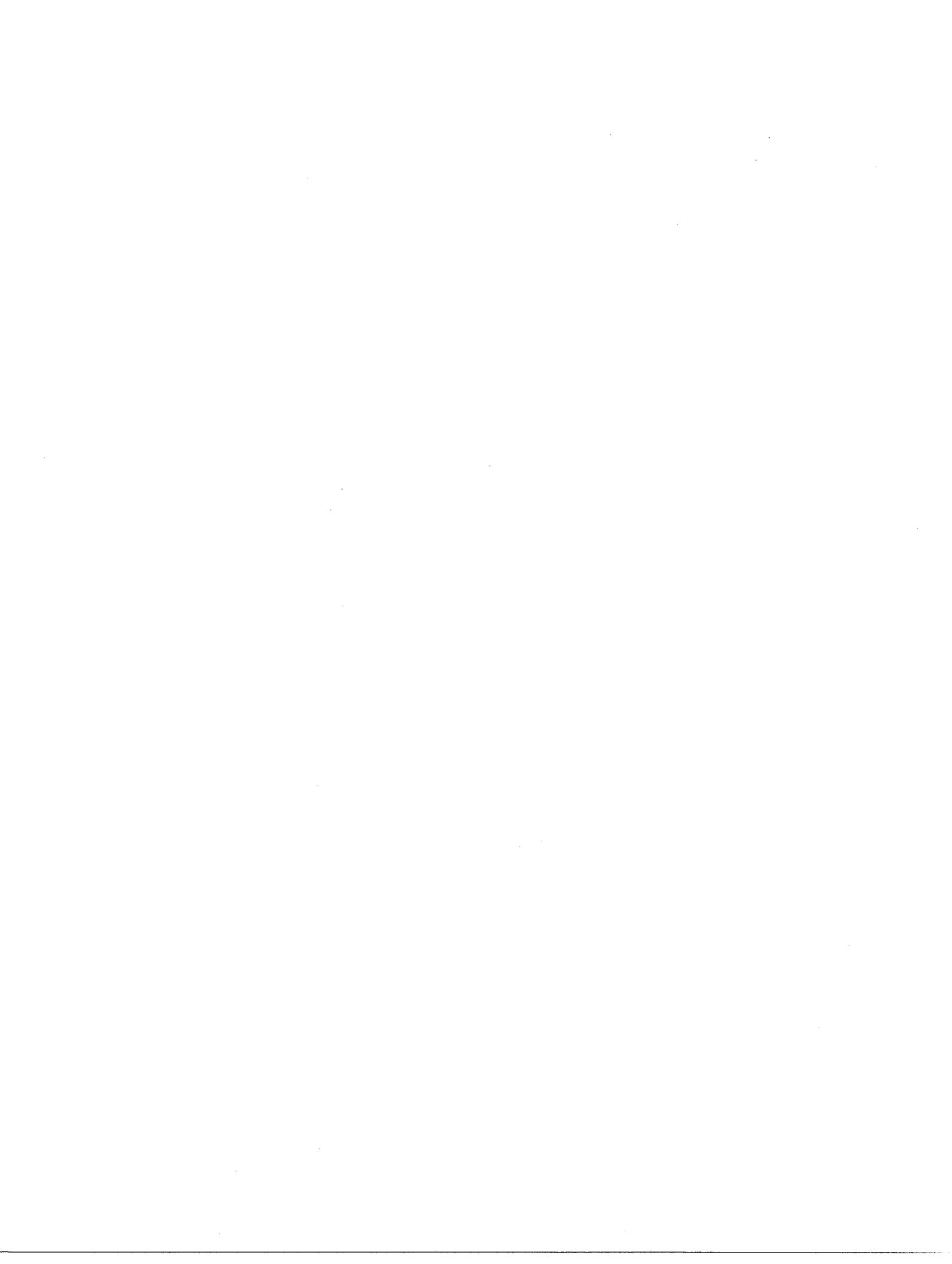


Recovery
Issues
Workbooks

Ending Our Resentments

Ronald and Patricia Potter-Efron





ENDING OUR RESENTMENTS

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About the workbook:

This workbook is designed to help you identify and end your resentments. It will explain how anger from a single incident can turn into bitter resentment. The exercises ask you to confront your resentments to see how they are affecting your life. Finally, the exercises on forgiveness will take you through the stages necessary for a reconciliation—if not with others, then at least with yourself.

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The Potter-Efrons' latest book is *Letting Go of Shame: Understanding How Shame Affects Your Life*, published by Hazelden Educational Materials. They are coeditors of and contributors to *The Treatment of Shame and Guilt in Alcoholism Counseling and Aggression, Family Violence, and Chemical Dependency*, both published by Haworth Press. Ronald is also the author of *Shame, Guilt, and Alcoholism Treatment Issues in Clinical Practice*, also published by Haworth.

RECOVERY ISSUES WORKBOOKS

ENDING OUR RESENTMENTS

Ronald Potter-Efron
Patricia Potter-Efron

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Contents

Introduction	1
How Resentments Grow	2
Injuries	5
<i>✍ Exercise</i> Looking Closer at Your Resentments	6
Resentments Hurt Us	7
<i>✍ Exercise</i> Bearing the Burden of Your Resentments	7
Forgiving	8
<i>✍ Exercises</i>	
Totaling the Cost of Your Resentments	9
Moving Toward Forgiveness	11
Letting Go of the Past	12
Making Amends	14
Forgiving Yourself	15
Summary	18
Review: Ten Suggestions to Help You Forgive	18
Guidelines to Keep from Building Resentments	19
References and Suggested Reading	20

I'll never forgive her for what she did to me. Every time I think about it I get furious.

He tried to apologize to me. But now it's too late. I hate him and I always will.

I've held grudges for years—against my spouse, my kids, my brothers and sisters, my friends—against just about everybody. But it's been hurting me a lot more than them. I refused to attend the family reunion last summer to show them I was still angry. This summer I'll put my resentments on hold long enough to go.

Introduction

Resentment is hard, cold anger that eats away at us. Maybe we're still feeling an old insult nobody else even remembers. Or we're feeling cheated because someone else got something we wanted—property, love, attention, praise, or luck. Sometimes we store up a lot of little things against someone. We may try to be nice, but we really feel used. Resentment turns anger into something tough, stiff, and rigid, forming a shell around us. It stops us from enjoying others and destroys inner peace.

Most of us struggle to let go of our resentments, but they are like weeds that are deeply rooted. Sometimes it seems we will never be able to pull them up. And, like weeds, resentments grow quickly and easily, even when we try to ignore them. Left alone, resentments crowd out our other feelings. They destroy our serenity. They ruin relationships. We become bitter and isolated.

How Resentments Grow

Resentments grow in stages. They start small, but get bigger and stronger until they demand a lot of our attention. Resentments grow from the original injury and anger . . . to firm resentment . . . to hatred and the desire for revenge. We will examine each of these stages and see how one leads to the next.

Original Injury and Anger

Resentments grow out of a belief that we've been wronged in some way. Some injuries are more serious than others, but what may seem trivial to one person may be very serious to another.

Alice always felt close to her family—until she discovered that her mother recently gave her sister the desk that Grandfather built fifty years ago. She thought that desk would be hers someday. She even had a place reserved for it in her front room. After all, she was closest to Grandpa. She didn't know until she stopped by her sister's home and saw the desk there. The worst part is that nobody told her.

Alice feels hurt and angry. Now is the time for her to speak up. She needs to tell her sister and mother that she is upset, and why. She may even get the desk. Even if she doesn't, at least they can talk about the problem. They will know why Alice feels hurt and may be more aware of her wants and needs in the future. But Alice says nothing.

"What good would it do to raise a fuss," she thinks. "And I don't want them to know how hurt I am." She tries to tell herself she "shouldn't" be bothered. She makes an excuse to leave and goes home to lick her wounds in secret. When her mother calls the next day, she says nothing.

Many people would feel angry if they had been in Alice's place. This is a normal response. Anger signals that something is wrong and needs our attention. Resentments are more subtle. They build from our anger when we fail to deal with the anger. Sometimes we carry secret resentments while we pretend to be happy. But if we avoid conflict by ignoring our real feelings, we pay the price later as our resentments build.

Alice is just beginning to build a resentment. There is still time to handle her anger positively. Instead, she thinks the worst about her mother and

sister. She might begin to wonder about her relationship with them: *Do they really love me? How important am I to them? Do they even care?*

These doubts are like moths, quietly eating away at the fabric of trust that holds Alice and her family together. They give Alice reason to feel hurt, offended, and wronged.

Instead of openly expressing her anger, Alice does something that only makes things worse. She waits. She is too proud to talk to her family about how hurt she is. She hopes they will somehow read her mind, realize they've hurt her, apologize, and make up for it in some way. She might even find that she begins to want to hurt them back.

It's easy to grow resentful when we feel like a helpless victim. That's what's happening to Alice. She thinks all she can do is wait for her family to see their mistake and come to her. But they may not even realize there is a problem. Or they may know *something* is wrong but believe it has nothing to do with them. Or they may simply not care. We may wait forever when we wait for someone to apologize. That's why we must take action ourselves in order to heal resentments.

Creating Firm Resentments

A resentment is like slowly hardening concrete. At first it's easy to mold and form. Then it gradually hardens and becomes rigid. As resentments harden, we develop a hostile attitude. We begin to see others as opponents and enemies. We become more distrustful, afraid that we might be hurt again by those who harmed us before. We start to form defenses.

Alice tells herself, "I should let go of it." But she keeps thinking about that desk. She decides that her family deliberately tried to hurt her and that this is not an isolated incident—it is part of a pattern. She remembers times when her mother or sister said mean things to her. She thinks more and more about how her mother favors her sister. Now she looks for reasons that prove this.

Of course, she can find some evidence if she looks hard enough: a day when her mother calls her sister twice and Alice only once, a conversation in which her mother talks more about her sister's children than Alice's, another gift that her sister gets. Before, Alice would also have noticed the days her mother gave her special attention. Now all she can see are the insults and slights.

Alice's anger is hardening into a resentment. She's still waiting for an apology. She feels like a victim. She feels betrayed.

If her mother were to apologize, do you think Alice would be satisfied? Would Alice accept an apology and end the resentment? She might. It's possible. But resentments often build to the point that an apology seems like too

little too late. Alice may pretend to accept an apology but secretly believe she deserves a lot more than a measly "I'm sorry." She really wants an apology for all the terrible things that have been done to her over the years.

Resentments can become so hardened that no apology is enough. Many people say that nothing those who have hurt them could do would ever heal their wounds. They believe they could never forgive them. When asked, "What if they came crawling on their hands and knees, begging your forgiveness, telling you they are truly sorry for what they did, and were willing to do anything to make amends? Would that be enough?" The answer in some cases is no! Some people become so resentful for so long that they cannot imagine changing their opinion.

Since the person who receives an apology decides if it is good enough, this means *the power to end a resentment is in the hands of the one who resents, not in the hands of the one who offended.* Only Alice can decide to accept or reject her mother's apology. Alice, not her mother, has the power to end her resentment. Maybe she will do that. She may also decide to keep her resentment like an old friend.

Hatred and the Desire for Revenge

Resentments can turn into hatred. Hatred is an intense and unchanging dislike of somebody. People who hate are convinced that others have done terrible harm to them.

Alice may even carry this as far as hating her family. If she does, she will probably spend hours each day, trapped in rage, thinking about how she has been hurt. Alice might even want to harm them. (*After all, they should suffer as I have.*)

Revenge is the desire to return one injury for another. People who seek revenge believe they have been mistreated and won't let go of their rage until those who have done them wrong have been punished. They may feel superior to those they hate or refuse to have anything to do with them. This only makes it harder to resolve the real issues that divide them.

It's hard to let go of hate and the desire for revenge. Sometimes the hatred becomes the basis of a relationship. We may have hated someone for so long that we've gotten used to it. What would we do with all our anger if

we quit hating that person? We've lost the ability to be open to any other outlook. So we hang on to what is most familiar. It's also possible that we need to think of someone as totally bad to make ourselves look good.

We may decide to attack in order to "pay them back" for what they did to us. An attack might take the form of vicious gossip, stealing or destroying property of the hated person, or emotional or physical harm. Some people have even resorted to murder.

Injuries

Let's look at the things we use to fuel our resentments.

- *What they did to us*—The things people do to us that we think of as mean or thoughtless.
- *What they didn't do*—The nice things people *could* do for us but don't.
- *When they didn't do enough*—The times we think others aren't doing enough for us.

Alice believes her family has hurt her in all these ways. *What they did do* is give the desk to her sister. *What they didn't do* is talk to her about it. And even if Alice's mother did apologize, Alice would still think she *didn't do enough*.

Resentments usually begin with something someone did: we believe someone has harmed us. We then think of what the person didn't do or could've done. We say things like "I wouldn't be so mad at her if she'd talked to me," and "I guess he tried to be nice, but he could never make it up to me." Resentments over what people didn't do or should've done are really hard to work out. That's because they're about something missing, something that *didn't* happen, something we didn't get from someone. It's easy to find examples when we look for them. After all, nobody's perfect. Who can meet all our needs all the time?

We cannot always stop others from doing things that hurt us. But we *can* take responsibility for dealing with our hurt and anger before they turn into resentments.

LOOKING CLOSER AT YOUR RESENTMENTS

Noticing how you begin to develop a resentment is a very important part of learning how to live with less anger. We often become resentful about the things that people don't do that we expect them to do as well as about the actions they take. For the next day or two, you can explore what you respond to with resentment. Whenever you begin to feel irritated or resentful, use the format that follows to keep track of what is happening. List the name of the person you're feeling resentful toward, and what happened or did not happen that you resent.

NAME

WHAT THE PERSON DID/DIDN'T DO

Use an extra sheet of paper if you have several events to list. At the end of the two days, go back over your list. Do you get resentful mainly over what people do or don't do? Do you resent some people's actions and others'

lack of action? Do you get resentful about both actions and inaction on a regular basis? What do your results say about what you focus on and the way you are using your energy?

Resentments Hurt Us

Ultimately, resentments hurt us more than anyone else. Peace of mind is impossible when we spend our time thinking about how terrible someone else is and how we've been hurt.

When we are caught up in our resentments we cannot grow emotionally or spiritually. We're stuck in the past.

Even if we haven't seen the people we resent for years, we can't forget them if we are still resentful. A man may still go into a rage every time he thinks about his long-dead father. One woman refused to marry again after her divorce because she thought her ex-husband would no longer have to pay support. She wanted to "make him pay forever." We can't get on with our life while we are carrying the burden of resentment.

The following are some of the ways our resentments affect us:

- We can't get our resentments out of our mind.
- We focus so much on the person we resent that it's hard to do more enjoyable things.
- We feel frustrated and angry much of the time.
- We feel sorry for ourselves and how we've suffered.
- We get irritable with other people, and our relationships with them suffer.
- We have symptoms that result from emotions we're uncomfortable with and don't express, like headaches, stomachaches, knots in the stomach, aching muscles, and so on.
- We see others as bad, thoughtless people out to hurt us.

✍ Exercise

BEARING THE BURDEN OF YOUR RESENTMENTS

How are your resentments harming you? Carrying these burdens usually has a negative effect on us. Take some time here to look at how your resentments and hatreds affect you in uncomfortable, time-consuming, or painful ways.

List three ways resentments are a dead end for you.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The good news is, there is a way to let go of resentment. Through forgiveness, we can reverse this flow of energy that is draining us and keeping us unhappy.

Forgiving

Here are some things we need to consider before we decide whether or not we want to forgive:

- Forgiving is a choice that must be made freely to have value.
- Forgiving is an act of kindness to *ourselves*, not to the person we forgive.
- Forgiving usually takes place gradually.
- Forgiving means changing both our attitudes and our actions.
- Forgiving the past helps us to live in the present.
- Forgiving might or might not lead us toward reconciliation with others.
- Forgiving means we must be willing to forgive not only others, but also ourselves.

Forgiving Is a Choice

We don't have to forgive anyone. And we don't have to forgive another until we are ready, even if that person apologizes or attempts to make amends. Forgiving another person has to be a free choice. It loses its value when we think we "should" or "must" do it. Forgiving is right when it is something we *want* to do.

We just may not be ready to forgive yet. Maybe the pain is too fresh. Maybe we need some time to think about it. We don't have to rush. We needn't forgive someone right away because we feel guilty. It's important to wait until we are sincerely ready to work on it.

Yet we shouldn't wait forever. We shouldn't look for reasons not to forgive. We need to be honest with ourselves.

- Are we getting pleasure from resentment and hatred?
- Are we keeping an enemy so we can blame someone else for our unhappiness?
- Does having a resentment make life more exciting?
- Are our resentments an excuse to become violent, irrational, or abusive?

In his book *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes points out that forgiving is not the same as forgetting about or excusing what someone did. Nor does forgiving mean that we have to put up with unacceptable behavior. Rather, forgiving means letting go of our obsession with the wrong that has been done to us and refusing to allow it to hurt us anymore. We don't have to pretend that nothing bad happened, and we don't forget the past. Instead, we choose to live in the present by letting go of old resentments. We may need to remember some things to keep us from being hurt again, but we remember in a different way when we forgive—we remember without hate.

Forgiving Is an Act of Kindness—to Ourselves

Sometimes we resist forgiving because we think it is a gift to the people who hurt us. We're the ones who got hurt—why should we give them something nice?

But we're mistaken. Forgiving is really an act of kindness to ourselves. Remember, we are the ones who carry the burden of anger wherever we go. And we are the ones who feel the pain over and over. The time to start forgiving is when we realize the cost of resentment to ourselves.

↳ Exercise

TOTALING THE COST OF YOUR RESENTMENTS

Resentments limit our freedom, often leading us to avoid certain people or situations. We nurse our anger and pain only to have the wounds opened again. In what ways have you punished yourself by refusing to forgive? List three specific incidents or examples.

1.

2.

3.

Forgiving Is a Gradual Process

Have you ever thought you'd forgiven someone only to discover that you were still full of resentment? Did you then think there was something wrong with you? Did you think you'd failed? When this happens, we need to remember that forgiving is usually a slow, gradual process, not a one-time event.

Forgiving can be quick and simple. We may feel a sudden burst of relief as we release the burden of a resentment.

Usually, though, forgiving isn't simple or speedy. We may still feel hurt or angry about many things. Maybe we've nursed our wounds for so long that they've become part of us. Even though we understand that forgiving would help us, we're not certain we want to do that yet. We're pulled in two directions, toward hating and healing. This is why forgiving takes time, and why resentments we thought we'd released sometimes reappear.

Forgiving begins when we really want to forgive a person. We'll need to be patient with ourselves and expect gradual change. There will probably be times when we feel really stuck. But if we try not to get discouraged and stay with the desire to forgive, we'll gain a new emotional freedom.

Forgiving Means Changes in Attitude and Action

We can change the way we think by challenging old ideas that keep us hostile. Here are a few examples of the thoughts that keep us trapped in resentment: *I'll hate her the rest of my life; Why bother to forgive him? I never see him anymore; and I'll forgive her after I get even.*

We can challenge them with a new message: "Today I choose to forgive _____." Of course, giving ourselves this message just once won't be enough. Think of how many times we've heard the old messages. But we can catch ourselves when we do and repeat the new message every day, several times a day, if necessary.

Forgiving also means acting. It won't do much good just to say we forgive someone (or think it to ourselves). We're going to quit bad-mouthing, criticizing, avoiding, or tensing up around this person. Instead, we will relearn how to appreciate this person.

Sometimes we can change our actions even before we change our thoughts. People in Alcoholics Anonymous call this “acting as if.” We can choose to act as if we have already forgiven those we still resent.

We can “act as if” with someone we want to forgive. We can ask ourselves, *What would I say and do if I did not resent her?* Perhaps the answer would be to visit her once in a while or show interest in her work. We may feel foolish at first. But we’ve got to begin somewhere. We can’t wait for a “forgiving mood” to strike. And this way, we regain control over our resentments. Besides, we may discover that the person is only human after all.

Exercise

MOVING TOWARD FORGIVENESS

One of the most difficult parts of the process of turning resentments into forgiveness is to do something nice for those we resent. Most of us would rather see something bad happen to them. When you have made the choice to forgive someone, try the short exercise that follows. Do it several times, and don’t worry if it doesn’t feel right or seem to work right away. You can’t change long-term habits and thinking patterns overnight.

- Find a place to relax quietly.
- Think about something that would feel wonderful to you—children running into your arms when you come home, being honored for something you have done, someone you love saying “I love you too,” a secret admirer sending you flowers—whatever would feel really good to you right now.
- Next, imagine the people you resent—picture them very clearly—and mentally allow this wonderful event to happen to them. Imagine them accepting and feeling joyful about this gift of life.
- Give them your forgiveness by mentally letting them enjoy this gift several times.

When you do this exercise, you may find you're being petty—perhaps you don't want to give them quite such a nice gift, so you give them something you would never want. Don't worry. When we have developed strong resentments, we often feel "small" in this way; it simply takes a while to open our heart again to forgive those we have been very angry with.

Forgiving the Past

Resentment or hatred for someone from our past may be affecting our life in the present. But forgiving someone who has died or is out of our life may seem pointless. For one thing, we may think forgiveness "doesn't count" if the other person isn't there to know about it. Or we might not want to forgive someone we're angry with because we don't want to feel the grief of letting go completely. Or we may feel that we can never forgive those who can't change their actions toward us, so since they really "blew it" during their life, we are condemned to hate them for the rest of ours. Or maybe we find it hard to forgive a person who is gone because we see the same faults in ourselves but do not want to admit it.

✍ Exercise

LETTING GO OF THE PAST

If you are having trouble forgiving someone who has died or left your life, first ask yourself how this anger is useful to you now. How does it fulfill a need or want, protect you from the emotional pain of reality, or give you a reason to stay angry? Write down three things you gain by hanging on to your anger.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now write down your losses. For example, how does this resentment negatively affect your life today?

- 1.

2.

3.

Decide whether you want to hang on to your resentment or let it go. Don't ask yourself what you "should" do, but what you are *willing* to do. Don't worry about being ready or not ready. If you decide that you are willing to forgive the person who is gone, use what you've learned so far in this workbook to work on it. We strongly suggest that you also talk this over with a trusted friend as you do it. You will need to share many feelings with someone. Use professional help if you need to.

Forgiving May or May Not Lead to Reconciliation

Many people see reconciliation as the final goal of forgiving. To *reconcile* means to become friends again instead of remaining enemies.

It's even possible to reconcile with those who have died or moved away. After forgiving, we may be able to remember them with more warmth and less bitterness. We might recall positive things they did for us—memories that were buried in the pain of resentment.

Sometimes reconciliations are not always possible or even necessary. Beverly Flanigan, who gives workshops on forgiveness, suggests that the best we can do is to let go of our hatred so we can get on with our life. A person who has been the victim of assault would, of course, not want to have any more contact with the attacker. The primary goal is to quit dwelling on the attack. Forgiving may be the only way to let go of the past, the only way to expel the attacker from our mind.

Perhaps we need to forgive a parent for being alcoholic and abusive. Remember, forgiving is our gift to ourselves. We may still choose to have little contact with that parent.

Reconciliation may or may not be part of forgiving. First we need to release stored-up resentments. Reconciliation may follow. If not, we will at least have gained freedom from the past.

We Must Be Willing to Forgive Ourselves

We might think of forgiveness only in terms of forgiving others. But we've hurt ourselves by hanging on to our resentments. Maybe we've damaged the people we resent by our unreasonable actions. Before, we felt justified in attacking them. Now, we see that our feet are just as muddy as theirs.

Lewis Smedes writes that it takes great courage to face what we have done to others. He says that it's not enough to admit that we have harmed someone. We need to deal with exactly *how* we did it. Then we can make a meaningful effort to change the way we behave. We may need to go to those people to make amends. We may hope that someday they will forgive us. If they do, will we be able to forgive ourselves?

It's hard to forgive ourselves. That's because we feel guilt and shame about what we did. Our guilt tells us that we have *done* something wrong, while our shame hints that we *are* something wrong, that we are basically bad and defective. We heal our shame by accepting that we are human. We may have done wrong, but we are still good. We can still hold up our head with dignity.

Self-forgiveness means accepting ourselves just as we are. There's a saying that a real friend knows all your faults and likes you just the same. That's the kind of friend we need to be to ourselves. It means letting go of our past mistakes. We heal the old splits inside when we forgive ourselves. Self-forgiveness is an act of personal reconciliation.

 *Exercise*

MAKING AMENDS

Have your resentments led you to take actions that you are not very proud of? Have they caused you to do things you don't approve of in other people? In other words, *do you behave in ways that you don't like because others "deserve" it or you "can't help" it?* List three instances in which you have broken your own rules.

1.

2.

3.

Now relax. Breathe deeply. Don't get defensive or feel you need to justify these behaviors. Ask yourself how each action you listed has added to or detracted from your life, and decide whether you want to keep this kind of behavior in your life. Do you control all these actions—or do some seem to take control of you?

Negative actions, including getting back at others, may give us a sense of power, but it is false power, since we lose important parts of our trust and respect for ourselves in the process. The most important question to answer about each behavior may be, *Do I need to be forgiven too?* Resentments often help us to forget that we too are human and probably make mistakes as often as others.

List three specific behaviors or incidents for which you feel you need to be forgiven.

1.

2.

3.

✍ Exercise

FORGIVING YOURSELF

Resentments can cause us to distrust ourselves and our judgment, since we often think and act in ways that go against our value system or moral code

when we are under the influence of our anger and hatred. We may even begin to hate ourselves. List three hostile or negative thoughts you think about yourself most often.

1.

2.

3.

Now make a list of positive traits about yourself. List at least three. You may get someone else's help to start your list if you are having trouble, but you must list at least three positive traits you have thought of yourself.

1.

2.

3.

Now write down some positive things you can do for yourself—not what others can do for you. Think of positive actions that show love from you to yourself. (Examples could include taking time out for yourself when you need it, practicing relaxation, taking a walk and feeling the breeze and the warmth of the sun on your face, giving yourself something special, saying

something good about yourself in front of others . . . whatever makes you feel good about yourself.) Remember, these are not things you would like from others, but things you can do for yourself.

1.

2.

3.

Begin by relaxing, and then imagine giving these things to yourself, just as you did for others. Begin to experiment with doing them. Be good to yourself. This is self-forgiveness.

Summary

We have seen how anger can harden into resentments and hatred. These resentments take up tremendous energy. We can become trapped in them, and when we do, we stop growing emotionally and spiritually.

Forgiving is the way we let go of resentments. Forgiving takes time, patience, and a deep sense of commitment. We may have to forgive ourselves as well as others. Our goal in forgiving is to heal old wounds so we can end our resentments and get on with our life.

REVIEW: TEN SUGGESTIONS TO HELP YOU FORGIVE

In this workbook you have learned how resentments form and how you can work to overcome them. The following is a review of the steps you can take to end your resentments:

1. Make a list of all those people you are ready to forgive. Remember to include yourself in the group of people you need to forgive. Include all the reasons you need to forgive them.
2. Notice how your resentments are harming you. Write down the consequences of your resentments.
3. List the hostile thoughts you think most often about each person.
4. Write down the negative actions you take against these people—how you avoid them, gossip or make sarcastic remarks about them, physically attack them, and so forth.
5. Make a commitment to stop those thoughts and deeds as much as you can. You might have to start with one or two people on your list so you don't feel overwhelmed.
6. Make another list. On this one write down at least three positive characteristics of each person. After you write them, relax. Breathe deeply. Begin to appreciate each person as a unique human being. By the way, no "yeah, buts" allowed. Don't follow praise with criticism. Stick to the positive.
7. Many people can begin to forgive others by praying for them. Another way is to think good thoughts about them.

8. Now write down three positive things you might do with or for each person. This is your “as if” list. Over time, try out these actions. (Remember, forgiving is a gradual process.) For example, you could sit down beside someone you resent instead of at the other side of the room. Try to do this without building up expectations about what the other person will say or do.
9. Remember these phrases:
 - “I will be patient with myself.”
 - “No strings attached.” This means I won’t expect or demand anything from the people I forgive, including their forgiving me.
 - “Forgiving is not forgetting.”
 - “Forgiving is for me, not them.”
10. In order to forgive yourself, you might need help from friends, counselors, or spiritual leaders. Don’t be afraid to ask. Find people who understand that you really want to end your resentments and who know how, or are learning how, to do it themselves.

GUIDELINES TO KEEP FROM BUILDING RESENTMENTS

People will always do things that bother us. Here are a few simple guidelines that will help keep resentments from building:

- Try to address the real issue without exaggerating it. Stay realistic.
- Stay active. Resentments build up most when you are inactive. That’s when you start to feel helpless and hopeless. Don’t allow yourself to think, act, or feel like a victim.
- Stay in the present as much as possible. Don’t go back to old injuries. Concentrate only on what’s hurting you today. You can confront someone without debating about how many times it’s happened before.
- Stick to the issue. Take the view that you don’t like specific *behaviors* of the person rather than the person him- or herself.
- Get help if you need it. Don’t let your anger turn into resentment and hate.
- Don’t depend upon someone else for your serenity. Make it happen yourself.

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