



Managing Stress and Improving Well-being through Forgiveness

To forgive is to let go of anger and resentment towards someone. It is to stop blaming another person for a perceived wrongdoing. However, forgiving is more than just words; it's a conscious decision to let go of the negative feelings.

Forgiveness is simple in theory, but sometimes hard to do. Why is it hard to let go of our hurts? According to Everett Worthington, Professor of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, "...Just as you make that decision, I'm going to make them pay. All of a sudden, in your brain, the pleasure pathways just fire up. This is the same pleasure pathways that light up when you have a craving for a food... We have a biological process in our brain that rewards us for paying people back..."¹ In other words, it feels good to seek revenge—at least temporarily.

If it's easy to hold resentment, you might wonder why you would make the effort to forgive. According to John Hopkins Medicine (2014), people who hold on to resentments are more likely to experience severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as other health conditions. Though, people who forgive tend to be more satisfied with their lives.² Forgiveness reduces stress by releasing the emotional power the person or situation has over you. It does not mean that you do not hold someone or yourself accountable for behavior. Though, it does mean you let go of the negative feelings that may be increasing your stress level.

If you still aren't convinced of the need to let go of that resentment, here are some other benefits. According to the Mayo Clinic (2016), forgiveness can lead to³:

- Healthier relationships
- Greater spiritual and psychological well-being
- Less anxiety, stress and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Stronger immune system
- Improved heart health
- Higher self-esteem

As mentioned earlier, forgiving can be easier said than done, and it involves more than words. The good news is you can learn to be more forgiving. Here are some tips to assist you to forgive yourself and others.

Make the decision to forgive. Decide to move away from being a victim, so you can release the power or control the offender or situation has over you. This mental mindset prepares you to be willing to forgive.

Let go of expectations. Often, we are let down because we expect something and don't get it. Learn to focus on your behavior versus on what you expect from others. You can't control what others do, but you can control how you respond.

Decide to be kind instead of being right. We can all use mercy from time to time, after all, we all make mistakes. Even if you are right, you may be best served by being understanding and extending compassion. For instance, if someone says something for which you feel offended, choose to respond in kindness instead of harshness.

Practice forgiveness exercises. Learning to truly forgive takes practice. Take time to participate in forgiveness exercises on a regular basis, such as Ho'oponopono or Forgiveness Meditation. Try practicing these exercises on a regular basis for 10-20 minute intervals to promote forgiveness.

References:

¹<http://www.thepowerofforgiveness.com/understanding/health.html#>

²http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/healthy_aging/healthy_connections/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it

³<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/forgiveness/art-20047692>