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Forgiveness: A Journey Towards Healing

When an infant arrives in the world, it is hard-wired to seek a relationship with a caregiver for assistance in the regulation of intense feelings and for survival. A secure attachment requires an emotionally available parent/caregiver who can respond to the child's needs. It is inevitable that misattunements between parent and child will occur; followed by timely repair, these are actually essential for optimal development.¹ This "rupture and repair" cycle results in the expectation that misattunements, separations, and other forms of interpersonal disruptions, will be repaired promptly or at least experienced as tolerable. This process creates a secure base for the child from which to explore the world, as he or she comes to understand that the parent is a reliable resource when needed.²

As adults, individuals hope to establish and maintain attachments with significant others (e.g., parents, partners, siblings, and longtime friends) with whom they likewise experience a secure base (e.g., security and comfort). These relationships are very influential on emotional and psychological well being. Hence, individuals invest much caring, time, and energy in the preservation of these relationships. Yet because people are imperfect human beings, they will, as in the parent-child relationship, act at times in a misattuned manner. They may say uncaring words, misconstrue what their loved one needs, or perform actions that are hurtful, making these important relationships the sources of one's most painful wounds.

Rupture-Repair

Ideally, the process of rupture-repair will take place soon after the "offense" has occurred. The individual who was hurtful recognizes the pain inflicted, apologizes, and commits to changing his or her behavior to avoid such a repetition in the future. Such timely repair will serve to reestablish trust and safety within the relationship. Forgiveness is extended to the "offender" and hope for a continued positive relationship is reignited.

However, if there have been more egregious interpersonal injustices, such as the deep betrayal of trust through infidelity, repetitive violations of the other's boundaries, or repeated acts of deception, the rupture-repair process breaks down. In these instances, disruptions do not result in "repair," but in "despair." The damage done to the injured person's mind, body, and spirit may be too great. Powerful feelings of hurt, resentment, and the need for

revenge begin to create emotional shackles that eventually keep the harmed individual from living life constructively and freely.

How does one free oneself from the enslavement of such strong emotions? Through forgiveness. Forgiveness unlocks the self-destructive shackles that bind one through resentment and revenge to the offending situation or person. Unshackled, one can then free one's energy for the pursuit of positive activities and constructive living.

Forgiveness is a Mind, Body, Spirit Approach to Healing

Research studies have demonstrated that holding on to anger and hatred can be harmful to a person's physical well being. Negative thinking can affect one's immune and cardiovascular systems. Negative thoughts elevate blood pressure. The energy a person uses to fight and hate others over a prolonged period can create hormonal changes that are linked to cardiovascular disease and, possibly, to impaired neurological function and memory.³

The process of forgiveness is extremely effective in quelling the kind of anger that debilitates the wounded or injured person. Research studies on forgiveness have demonstrated numerous benefits, including a lessening of depressive symptoms, diminished anxiety, increased hope, improved self-esteem, and a decreased preoccupation with the offender. In addition, other benefits include improved stability of mood, less impulsive behaviors, and improved ability to control angry feelings with less overreaction or misdirection of anger, improved marital and family relationships, and decreased obsessive thinking.⁴

What is Forgiveness?

One formal definition of forgiveness is the following: "People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the harmful act or acts has no right)."⁵

The breakdown, the severance or "rupture" in a



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