



iflow Psychology

Information Sheet

Supporting mental health, resilience, and wellbeing

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Forgiveness and Repentance

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“He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

Every one of us has been hurt by another person at some point—sometimes in small ways, sometimes profoundly. Criticism from a parent, betrayal by a partner, humiliation at work, or even serious interpersonal trauma can leave lasting wounds.

Likewise, each of us has hurt others, intentionally or unintentionally. Understanding forgiveness and repentance helps us navigate both sides of these universal human experiences.

When We Are Hurt

Being harmed by someone we trust evokes anger, sadness, disappointment, and sometimes deep emotional injury. If these hurts remain unresolved, they can harden into:

- Hostility and resentment
- Difficulties in current relationships
- Anxiety and depression
- A sense of disconnection from others
- Inability to enjoy the present moment

Holding a grudge consumes psychological energy. It keeps us tethered to the past and prolongs our suffering.

Forgiveness frees that energy. It opens space for peace, hope, gratitude, and emotional relief.

What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a deliberate decision to let go of negative emotions toward someone who has harmed us. These emotions may include:

- Anger
- Bitterness
- Desire for revenge
- Rumination about the offence

Forgiveness reflects a motivational shift—from retaliation and avoidance toward understanding, compassion, goodwill, or simply emotional neutrality.

Marcus Aurelius wrote:

“When we reject our sense of injury, the injury disappears.”

Forgiveness does not erase the past. Instead, it transforms our relationship to it. It is fundamentally an act of agency—a way of taking back control and choosing freedom over resentment.

It is also a skill. With practice, we can become better at it.

Why Forgive?

Holding onto resentment harms us far more than it harms the offender. Negative emotions act like psychological anchors—they weigh us down and prevent forward movement.

Forgiveness allows us to release these anchors and cultivate:

- Inner peace
- Emotional freedom
- Hope and optimism
- Resilience and strength

It redirects our cognitive and emotional resources toward activities that nourish us rather than deplete us.

Forgiveness has been linked with:

- Healthier relationships
- Improved mental health
- Less anxiety, stress, and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced depressive symptoms
- Stronger immune function
- Improved heart health
- Higher self-esteem

Forgiveness is not only a relational act—it is also a virtue and a pathway to wellbeing.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Forgiveness is often misunderstood. It is not:

- Excusing, condoning, or justifying harmful actions
- Forgetting what happened
- Pretending something wasn't painful
- Denying or suppressing emotions
- Automatically reconciling with the offender
- Removing consequences for harmful behaviour

Forgiveness is an internal psychological process. Justice, accountability, and reconciliation are related but separate processes.

Formal justice systems may provide resolution or accountability, but they do not necessarily provide emotional closure. That inner work is personal.

Decisional vs Emotional Forgiveness

There are two forms of forgiveness:

1. Decisional forgiveness

A rational decision to forgo revenge or punishment.

It sounds like: "I choose to forgive because it aligns with my values."

2. Emotional forgiveness

A deeper emotional shift where resentment is replaced with compassion, empathy, or neutrality.

Emotional forgiveness is the transformative stage. Decisional forgiveness alone may temporarily mask resentment without resolving it.

How Do We Forgive?

Forgiveness requires readiness. Sometimes people must grieve or process emotions before they can move toward forgiving.

A helpful framework includes:

- Recognise the value of forgiveness. Understand how it will improve your life—not the offender's.
- Identify what needs healing:
 - What happened?
 - Who hurt you?
 - What emotions were triggered?
- Acknowledge emotions honestly. Anger, sadness, fear, betrayal—face them before attempting to release them.
- Choose forgiveness intentionally. It is a commitment you make for yourself.
- Release the identity of "victim". Forgiveness allows you to reclaim power and reduce the influence the event has had on your life.
- Practise compassion and perspective-taking. This does not excuse wrongdoing, but it can soften rigid anger.
- Repeat the process when needed. Forgiveness is rarely a one-time event. Some hurts must be forgiven repeatedly.

When we let go of grudges, we stop defining ourselves by our wounds. We make room for compassion, understanding, and confidence to grow.

When Forgiveness Feels Difficult

Forgiveness is often hardest when:

- The harm was severe
- The offender does not admit wrongdoing
- We feel deeply betrayed
- Justice feels incomplete or unavailable
- The injustice feels “unfair” or unresolved

When stuck, consider:

- Practising empathy: “What might have led them to behave this way?”
- Reflecting on times you sought forgiveness
- Journaling or writing unsent letters
- Using mindfulness to reduce reactive emotion
- Speaking with a trusted, compassionate person or psychologist
- Remembering that forgiveness is a process, not a moment

“Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does change the future.”
— Richard Moore

The Benefits of Forgiveness

Forgiveness counters our natural impulses toward avoidance, anger, and revenge.

Research shows that it supports:

- Emotional healing
- Restoration of positive thinking
- Rebuilding of relationships
- Reduction in anxiety and stress
- Improved self-esteem
- Increased hope and optimism
- Stronger resilience and coping skills
- Reduction in rumination and brooding

Chronic anger has physiological consequences: elevated heart rate, high blood pressure, increased cortisol, and heightened sympathetic nervous system activation. Over time this contributes to cardiovascular issues and poorer health.

Forgiveness reduces these physiological stress responses and cultivates empathy, compassion, and emotional clarity.

At its core, forgiveness is a restorative process. It rebuilds our sense of humanity—both toward ourselves and others.

“Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself.”
— Richard Moore

The Process of Repentance

Repentance involves recognising and taking responsibility for harming another person. It is a process of restoration, not merely an apology.

There are five essential components:

1. Acknowledge

Recognise what you did wrong and the impact of your actions.

2. Admit

Take responsibility—without excuses or minimisation.

3. Apologise

Express genuine remorse for the pain you caused.

4. Amend

Where possible, repair or restore what was damaged.

You may ask for forgiveness, but must never expect it.

5. Abstain

Commit to not repeating the harm.

This is the most important step for rebuilding trust.

If an apology is followed by repeated behaviour, trust deteriorates rapidly. Reflecting deeply on consequences—and planning concrete alternatives—is essential for lasting change.

Final Reflection

Forgiveness and repentance are not abstract ideals—they are courageous acts of emotional maturity. Whether we are seeking forgiveness or offering it, we engage in processes that promote healing, resilience, and genuine human connection.

Both are gifts. Both involve strength. And both allow us to reclaim peace, integrity, and wellbeing in our lives.
