

Having been on her own long quest to understand forgiveness, Patricia Herchuk Sheehy shares what she's learned so far and offers some conclusions that may help you.



Letting Go of *the* Hurt

Patricia Herchuk Sheehy

"I'll never forgive him," thirty-four-year-old Sharon tells a friend she hasn't seen in nearly two years. They're at a baby shower and, while the mother-to-be opens crib sets, teddy bears, and sleepers, Sharon revisits her divorce in whispered fragments of conversation. "Maybe our marriage wasn't the best, I'll admit that. And maybe we should have split a long time ago. But I'll never forgive him for the way he left." As she talks, her naturally warm, open smile turns small, her jaw tightens, and the muscles in her neck become noticeably strained. Anger lives inside Sharon's body, and it's playing havoc with her health. She doesn't sleep well; she has frequent headaches; her temper flares easily. Still, she isn't willing to forgive her former husband for his betrayal. It's understandably difficult, and to her it would be letting him off the hook. And why should she do that?

In my own quest to understand forgiveness, I've found how common it is to equate letting go of our hurt with giving in, with losing. We think the other person has somehow won and gained control. It seems to me, however, that nothing could be further from the truth. Whether we're talking about a spouse who has been unfaithful, a parent who has neglected our needs, or a friend who has betrayed our confidence, holding onto hurt—wearing it like an old, heavy coat, day in and day out, season after season—keeps us a victim of the experience. Forgiveness, on the other hand, sets us free; it restores our sense of balance and harmony, within ourselves and in the world. Ultimately it's essential to our emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Holding on really hurts

Maintaining anger requires us to focus on the hurtful experience over and over again, placing us in a constant state of tension. We end up feeling slightly uneasy most of the time. We may feel raw and vulnerable, unable to trust. We often become ill. Our held-in resentment can result in depression, ulcers, high blood pressure, and even bouts of rage.

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Physical therapist Ronda Agostinucci sees lots of patients whose physical pain is linked to unresolved emotional or physical trauma: "The mind and body are not two separate entities. If we don't let something out, it stays in, and when it stays in, it begins to spiritually and physically poison us. We become so afraid of letting go that we end up in a guarding, ready-to-defend-at-all-times position. We use our body to hold onto the rage, and that's very unhealthy. It can only get suppressed successfully for so long. It'll come to the surface eventually, and it's usually as some kind of physical disorder." Letting go—forgiving what we may have once thought was the unforgivable—is the first step toward our own wholeness and healing.

Forgive, don't forget

In the process of forgiveness, our minds and hearts are released from past hurts, allowing us to move forward in life. It doesn't mean we're condoning irresponsible, hurtful behavior, or saying that what the other person did is okay. Forgiveness doesn't require us to have a relationship with the person. And it doesn't ask us to forget what has happened. "In fact," Agostinucci argues, "I don't think we should forget. All experiences should give us some knowledge about not being vulnerable again. For instance, if somebody slaps you, you might say, 'I will forgive you for what you did, but I'm not going to get in your line of fire the next time.' To forgive is a self-healing experience, but to forget is being naïve. It takes away the lesson. That's where I think turning the other cheek needs an addendum."

A process of compassion

Sister of Mercy Beth Fischer sees the decision to forgive as an attitude of the heart, a restorative experience of grace and letting go. "Forgiveness asks us to see God in the other person, to open ourselves up to his or her humanness and to our own." When we begin the process of forgiveness, it's for ourselves, not for our offender. The person we're forgiving may never even know—or care—that we're attempting to let go of our anger and feelings of revenge.

Like any kind of healing, forgiveness is a process. It takes time. And patience. In much the same way as people work through common stages of grief, there are identifiable steps in the process of forgiveness. As with the stages of grief, these steps may not always happen in the same sequence or quite the same way for each person. A beginning step is formally acknowl-

5 Rituals for Letting Go of Anger

Holding anger hurts—physically and emotionally. Letting it go can require real discipline, but it is a gift you deserve and can only give yourself. Here are some ways to begin.

1 WRITE IT AWAY

Write out your feelings in a letter. Burn the letter and scatter the ashes.

2 TALK IT AWAY

Use a tape recorder to talk out your feelings, then remove the tape from the cassette and throw it away. Or, if you're still feeling resentment, put the tape in a jar with a solid lid. Now the anger is out of you and in the jar. When you're ready, throw the jar away.

3 WALK IT AWAY

Walk as long and as often as you need. Or, choose another form of exercise. With every step or pushup, discharge your feelings of resentment.

4 IMAGINE IT AWAY

Take a length of string or twine wind it around a balloon until the entire surface of the balloon is covered. When you're done, pop the balloon; as the balloon collapses, imagine your anger collapsing with it.

5 PRAY IT AWAY

Create a safe, sacred space for yourself. Light a candle. Pray for help with your grief and anger. Come to this place every day for solace and guidance.

edging—if even just to yourself—that you’ve been wronged and deciding to forgive: Yes, I am a victim. I have been hurt. I have been abused or stolen from or lied to. My child was hit by a drunk driver. My best friend let me down. Ask yourself: What am I gaining by holding on? Does my resentment make me feel right, superior, or somehow special? Does my pain serve as an excuse for my actions, or inaction? Then ask: What am I giving up by holding on? My health? My relationships? My sense of peace and well-being?



A next step calls for discharging our deepest feelings of resentment and revenge. Get it all out; express the anger over and over again—How could he do that to me? . . . she’s a horrible person . . . I didn’t deserve that kind of treatment . . . I hate him . . . I’ll show her . . . Every now and then stop and ask: Is there more? If there’s more, keep

discharging. Eventually, there will be no more. You will only be saying the same things over and over again. Some people accomplish this through rituals such as journaling, prayer, or meditation. Some write letters that will never be mailed. Others talk out their feelings with a trusted friend or seek help from a therapist or spiritual director. Deliberate walking is another technique. With every step, you pound another piece of anger into the ground until your body finally begins to relax.

Another step toward forgiveness is finding room in our hearts for empathy. Without empathy, there can probably be no true forgiveness. “It helps,” Sister Fisher says, “to believe in the innate goodness of every human being. Embracing such a belief moves us closer to understanding and, ultimately, forgiving the person who has hurt us.” Let’s take the example of a teenage boy mugging you in the park and stealing your money. You think: All people are good. So then you ask yourself: What could have possibly happened to this youth to make him attack me? Then you think: Look where he lives. And how he lives. Maybe he thinks that was the only way to get what he needs. Maybe you decide to do some reading on troubled youths or watch a television program on the subject. Maybe this leads you to some type of volunteer work. As time passes, you begin experiencing a shred of empathy for this boy. You’ll never condone the action, and you don’t want him in your life, but the anger has begun to leave. There’s a piece of you that understands what brought him to this point in his life. Your empathy allows you to forgive his humanness and to let go of the anger that keeps you victimized.

“Forgiveness is never easy. But it’s the best thing we can do for ourselves,” Sister Fisher says. “It brings healing and inner peace and allows us to experience renewed feelings of faith and gratitude. It takes a lot of courage and it brings us to a deeper place in our relationship with God and with one another.”

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5 Steps toward Forgiveness

In talking with those who have dealt with forgiveness personally or who counsel people through forgiveness, I have found that the following five steps may not always happen in the same order, but do seem to be common to the process of forgiveness.

1 ACKNOWLEDGING THE WRONG

When bad things happen, we feel like victims. The incident makes us feel vulnerable and exposed. When we stay in this stage, we risk damage to our physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being. The feeling of being victimized fuels our anger, and we remain in a vicious, self-defeating cycle.

2 RELEASING ANGER

Holding in anger keeps us from moving forward in our lives. We can never truly forgive as long as we’re harboring resentment.

3 DISCOVERING EMPATHY

Once we discharge anger, we can often find compassion for the people who have hurt us, even though we can never condone their actions.

4 DECIDING TO FORGIVE

The decision is always ours. When we take responsibility for the pain and decide to let go, we begin to move beyond the role of victim. Forgiveness is a process that takes time and patience and does not follow a linear path.

5 LETTING GO AND MOVING ON

Ultimately, this is what forgiveness is all about. It is an experience filled with grace and courage. When the hurt finally has no power over us, we will feel a deeper connection to God.