

Steps of Forgiveness

For most of the tasks we perform, we have forgotten the steps we have learned and just do the job automatically, like tying our shoes. Forgiveness is important enough to learn and remember the steps.

The Steps of Forgiveness begin with the admission that you have suffered an injury. *What happened?* Sergeant Joe Friday on *Dragnet* used to ask the crime victims, "Just the facts, Ma'am." The healing unfolds as you break through the denial, admit the truth, and feel the shock of reality. The end of forgiveness really is forgetting, at least until something reminds you of the injury. Outlined below are the necessary steps of forgiveness, from the beginning of the recovery until it is finally over.

The process of forgiveness happens to us. We go through steps of healing on the way. These steps are necessary to heal. Reconciliation cannot happen until these steps are finished; then, it is only an option.

SUMMARY OF THE STEPS

1. What happened?
2. What did it do to me?
3. What did I do to cause it?
4. What can I do about it?
5. What have I lost from it?
6. What am I afraid of?
7. What else needs to happen before I am ready to forgive?
8. What are the results of forgiving this now?
9. What else needs to be forgiven?



The steps to forgiveness are to unshackle you from the past.

1. Violation of your boundaries causes you to be injured, perhaps physically, emotionally, mentally, relationally, financially, legally, or even spiritually. The violation of your boundaries results in a loss, either of what you had before (like a theft), or what you could have had (like a betrayal violates the trust you wanted). Most people guard against painful violations through psychological defenses, like denial or drinking to drown their sorrows. Babies react to violations naturally, and express their feelings when their mouths are dry or their diapers are not. Ask yourself, *What did the violation do to me?*

2. False Guilt can come with the realization that something is wrong. You may ask yourself, *What did I do to cause this violation?* Certainly mistakes are for learning, so, if you did do something which contributed to the violation, then learn from it; however, this step is called false guilt because the blame does not lie with you, but with the person who chose to violate you. You are defending against the painful truth of the violation by wishing you had some control over

the event, when, in reality, you did not. People with a sense of toxic shame and low self-esteem are especially vulnerable to taking on the blame for someone else's action, like a little girl who believes the molester "just couldn't help it" because she "looked so pretty in that dress." Baloney!!

3. Anger can come with the realization that you are not responsible for your hurt, and you feel angry at the one who is responsible. Lewis Smedes wrote that a victim has to hate in order to heal from the hurt. You may have been taught to hate the sin and love the sinner, which sounds fine at first, but makes an artificial distinction between the offender and the offending behavior. Anger is the energy to right a wrong. When you have suffered a violation, then you feel the anger energy to do something about it. Ask yourself about creative options to use the anger for good, *What can I do about this?* If the answer is "nothing," then let yourself feel and express the anger in appropriate ways.

4. Sadness can come when you see the gap between what you want and what you have. For example, if you had trust and intimacy, then were betrayed and cast aside, you would feel the sad gap between the love you once had and the rejection you now have. Loss leaves you crying. Most people do not want to feel the sadness of their loss, like an alcoholic who drowns his sorrows. Allowing yourself to feel sad for a while is a needed step in overcoming the loss and forgiving everyone who made you the "loser." Ask yourself, *What have I lost?*

5. Fear can come through the awareness that this violation happened to you once, and could happen again. The "bottom line" of fear is that you won't be able to handle it, or at least, handle it well. This step is making peace with being vulnerable. Ask yourself, *What am I afraid of?* Some people want control so they never get hurt again. I say, "Okay, take complete control and protect yourself. I dare you!" The paradox, of course, is that none of us can take or keep control (if you don't believe me, take control of your body, and quit breathing; after you pass out, your body will breathe anyway, thank you very much). A healthy step is the courage to feel the fear and do it anyway. The classic example is confronting the bully.

6. Choosing to forgive is a deliberate step when the previous steps are so finished that you are done with all the emotional impact of the violation. To "forgive" means to "untie," as when someone is tied by a debt they owe to you, and one day you choose to release them from the debt. The choice is not made automatically, like you have to choose to forgive the moment that the one who violated you makes an apology. You choose to forgive when you are ready to release the violation. Sometimes you cannot forgive until the mess is cleaned up from the violation, until there has been some amends made to correct the damages. Other times you may do what is called bargaining, which is the "If only" phase of grieving the loss, as in "if only I had done something else maybe they would not have done it." Ask yourself, *What else needs to happen before I am ready to forgive?* If the answer is "Nothing," then you make the choice to forgive.

7. The Consequences of choosing to forgive are accepted, like telling yourself, "I'm not going to get back what I lost." A good metaphor is welding, when two pieces of metal are so joined together that you can no longer separate them or even tell where one ends and the other begins. Forgiving means that you have the violation on one hand, and the choice to forgive on the other, and join them together so that you cannot recall the violation without remembering the day you chose to forgive. And if someone ever asks, "Did you forgive anyone for something tough?" then you can see the violation as well as the process of forgiveness. One important consequence in loving relationships is that when an apology is offered, it requires that the violation not happen again, and when you accept an apology, it requires that you not throw it up in the face of the other person later on. Another consequence is forgiving all concerned: the one who violated you, God, yourself, and everyone involved. Ask yourself, *What are the results of having forgiven?* If your answer is, "It's over," then you've completed the process, and if not, then go back to where you may still need to do some work.

8. The Conclusion of the steps to forgiveness is a sense of peace and wholeness, a release from a burden, and a sense of having accomplished something difficult that leaves you both proud and excited about your ability to forgive again. For the big losses, like the death of a child, the process may be like a bouncing ball of "flubber" that keeps coming up, but not quite as much each time, but for a very long time. A good metaphor might be a physician who "practices medicine" but never claims to arrive at the goal of being a good doctor. You may practice forgiveness of a big loss that hurts for a very long time, but not quite as much each time it comes up. Ask yourself, *What else?* Maybe there are other facets to forgive (like looking at a diamond from different angles to see more facets). The forgiveness muscles you develop forgiving one person or one violation can be used to forgive others. Your conclusion may be gratitude that you have grown through the process.

The Process of Forgiveness

The process of forgiveness takes a broken heart and mends it, a trapped person and frees them, a dirty life and returns it to innocence again.

The process of forgiveness does not require you to confront the one who violated you, nor that there be repentance or an apology before you choose to forgive.

The process of forgiveness does not focus on the violation of the past, but upon a vision of the future, with a sense of peace of mind and of a right relationship.

The process of forgiveness may be the most selfish thing we ever do, because the ones who win if we forgive is ourselves.

The process of forgiveness ends when you are free for giving again, and free for getting again from the one who violated you.

The process of forgiveness is letting go, like if you were tied to a rock that is pulling you under the water, and all you have to do is untie it to be free.