



Syringa Health Centre | 4 Wembley Road | PLUMSTEAD 7800
Tel 27-21 762 2364

FORGIVENESS AND LETTING GO (Extract from book in process)

Forgiveness of others

Before Recovery you may have spent a lot of time feeling like victim a victim, wallowing in self-pity and/or blaming others for your woes. There are few bigger energy robbers than self pity, resentment and blame - and if you think about it it's one part of you doing it to the whole of you! As long as you don't take responsibility for your life challenges and blame others for them, you have no chance of living a fulfilling life. You may protest that you've been on the receiving end of unfair, hurtful or even downright abusive situations. Yes, perhaps you have, and may have been totally unacceptable – whatever the details, the impact of holding onto them is the same. It is not that these incidents didn't affect you - they may have affected you very deeply; so it's quite understandable that you should feel resistance to the idea of forgiveness. It's okay, you're allowed to feel your outrage - the first stage of the process requires that you feel your outrage. If it makes you happy you're even allowed to mentally condemn whoever was involved to a horrible death!! However, if you never move on from this stage you'll never move forward in your life.

At the outset you should understand that forgiving another does *not* make what they did acceptable, nor does it mean that they suddenly become less responsible for their actions. If it was wrong it stays wrong, and the perpetrator is still responsible. The purpose of forgiveness is not to let them off the hook, but to let *you* off the hook. It is your only hope of liberating yourself from the power that the negative aspects of your past have over you. It is ironic that by staying in wounded, blaming Victim mode you're giving your power away to the very people that you most resent. Sometimes the perpetrators are no longer even alive and the incident may have occurred twenty years ago, but you're still allowing them to control your life and wellbeing in the present moment! By holding on to your hurt and resentment, *you* are drinking the poison, often hoping that *they* will die.

Unfortunately you are the one who suffers as the poison leeches energy from your potential and growth. Even worse, your loved ones will suffer and you won't be able to avoid passing some of the poison on to future generations. If a man hurt you, most of your relationships with men will be contaminated, including your relationship with yourself if you are a man, and it works in the same way if it was a woman. If both men and women hurt you, then all your relationships will be affected. Holding on to your woundedness distorts your experience of life and others so that you subconsciously and repetitively re-create the woundedness of the past in the present. Forgiveness is not an easy road, so it helps to know that to let go is largely in your own interests. To hold on to the pain is to guarantee a life of dysfunctional relationships.

Of course there are some apparently compelling reasons for holding onto your hurt, blame and anger – the “shit stinks but it's warm” syndrome. Firstly, it gives you a perfect excuse to continue with your addictions and justify screwing up your life. As long as it's “their fault” you can pretend that you're not responsible for your life. Secondly, you may be afraid that if you let go of the negative impact of your past - especially if that past has defined your identity - on some level the unknown could be worse than the known. “Who will I be if I let go of all this stuff? Perhaps I'll be totally empty, a nobody!” Thirdly, you may fear that if you forgive someone who hurt or abused you

you might make yourself a “soft target” for further hurt or abuse. This is not the case – forgiveness is an “inside job” and leaves you free to walk away from the other person or not – the choice is yours. Paradoxically the experience of my patients suggest that when they’ve forgiven and let go of their hurt and resentment, something about them shifts and they command respect from others. I remember one young woman who had been sexually abused in an adult relationship. When she was attacked while walking through a remote area of the Cape Flats she fought off her attackers and avoided a possible rape situation. She was convinced that if she hadn’t worked through the abuse, she would not have found the power to do this. She had proven to herself and others that she was nobody’s victim.

A final payoff for holding on rather than forgiving is the “revenge factor.” “Perhaps if I hold onto this resentment and hurt for long enough, and screw my life up in the process, it’ll make ‘them’ miserable and they’ll be sorry that they ever did this.”

You can’t change what has been done to you, but you can change your *attitude* to it. Let’s take Allison for example – some of you will remember how she was raped, cut, disfigured and left for dead in the bushes with her insides literally hanging out. Everyone would have understood if she’d physically and mentally collapsed and avoided people (especially men) for the rest of her life. However, through a long process of healing, she not only recovered from that experience, but wrote a book and used the experience to become an advocate for women’s rights and a motivational speaker who inspires others to move beyond their limitations and traumas. Of course, this took enormous courage and a willingness to forgive. Her psychopathic attackers showed no remorse and had she not made a decision to forgive them, *they* would still be in control of her life.

To summarise our discussion so far:

1. Forgiveness does not make what happened right or acceptable.
2. It does not mean that you have to sustain a relationship with someone nor that you should further expose yourself to hurt. The phrase attributed to Christ “turn the other cheek” means to respond to abuse non-violently in order to preserve your own spiritual integrity, not to permit further abuse.
3. By holding on to your past rather than letting it go, you are not getting even; rather you’re damaging yourself and the people you least want to hurt.
4. *The purpose of forgiveness can therefore be seen as an attitude of letting go of the right to get revenge or stay stuck in order to liberate yourself from the past and the power that destructive people and experiences may still have over you.*

There is yet another reason why it is in your interests to forgive others. Through your addictions and compulsive behaviours you will have hurt others, including and especially those who you love the most. One of your greatest hopes in recovery is that you will eventually be forgiven for the hurt you have caused. The universe does not distinguish between one person’s sins¹ and another’s; like everything else, forgiveness is a two way street. Therefore, if you want to be forgiven by others, you need to be willing to forgive those that have hurt you.

Forgiveness of yourself

Your shame and guilt may make it difficult for you to look honestly and accurately at your hurtful behaviour towards yourself and others. When you eventually see it, your shame and self pity may make you feel that you don’t deserve the forgiveness of others, and forgiving yourself may feel impossible. Strange as it may seem, this difficulty with self-forgiveness can reflect a subtle arrogance. When I was struggling to forgive myself for certain behaviours my sponsor pointed out

1 I use the word “sin” in the sense of “to miss the mark.”

that a lack of humility meant that I was holding myself up as different to and better than others (ie arrogance). By doing this I was not open to the fact that like everyone else, I had my weaknesses that could be destructive. I subsequently realized that there were a few payoffs to holding onto what had become a deep sense of “undeservingness:” firstly, as long as I did so I could avoid facing the harsh fact that *I* had done what I had done. It stopped me from looking at myself in the mirror and saying “Peter, you did that, you were responsible for that.” Secondly, it gave me an excuse to avoid getting up, dusting myself off and taking responsibility for getting on with my life. As long as I “didn’t deserve” another chance, I could justify staying stuck in my self-pity and live a mediocre life.

For our own and for their sakes, our loved ones usually want us to make the best of ourselves, and God/Life/the Universe always wants this for you. If you can’t make right what you’ve done, this may be your only way of making amends. So you owe it to yourself, others and your Higher Power to pick yourself up and make the best of your life. I found this little slogan helpful: “*Every Saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.*” Indeed, it is interesting to note that some of the most positively influential people in the world, including some who were sainted, went through stages when they were plagued by resentment, anger, self pity, lust and loss of faith. Great as they were, they were only human. So are you.

By Peter Powis