

Forgiveness as a Way of Opening the Heart

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Open-hearted people are trusting, candid, and a pleasure to be around. They tend to interact more spontaneously, are generous with their time and resources, and are more hopeful and optimistic about their futures. Research shows that there is a correlation between being able to forgive and an open-hearted attitude. It has been documented that people who have learned to forgive actually come to possess many of the qualities of open-heartedness.

From a psychological perspective opening the heart involves a discovery process. People come to discover how old patterns, assumptions, and behaviors adopted in childhood may actually limit spontaneity, distort thinking, and inhibit creativity. Learned childhood behaviors that were created in an attempt to protect the self so long ago may actually cause harm or severe limitation to interpersonal relationships in the present.

For example, if a parent never allowed you to have your own opinion but would criticize or make you prove every point, you may carry some fear around expressing an opinion in adulthood. You might expect a debate or experience every question directed at you as an accusation or a threat. You may be quick to anger, or on the other hand, you may be quick to retreat from any conflict.

When people have been overly controlled in childhood, not allowed to express their feelings openly and honestly, it damages interpersonal trust and leaves scars of resentment upon the heart. Conflict is often avoided, or people may over-react with anger and bitterness. Forgiveness is often difficult to achieve as people tend to keep score or secretly seek revenge.

It is important to remember that conflict (past or present) doesn't disappear. It gets buried or is just under the surface. Although guardedness can manifest differently in every individual, there are some typical defensive responses to watch for with regard to unresolved conflict:

- You walk on egg shells, fearing that you will offend someone. Anxiety and worry that others won't like you can be the result.
- You are anxious to please others but there is little left over for yourself. Burn-out or feeling like a martyr is often the result.
- You are often guarded or suspicious, making people prove their point to you. Lack of trust, isolation, bitterness, anger or contempt can be the result.

Healing the heart in this situation involves releasing the parent, boss, or partner from their position of power and slowly coming to an understanding that not everyone in the present responds in a controlling manner. Once the grip of power is released, it is possible to forgive. Individuals then discover that there are actually people who are kind, non-shaming, and generally want to be helpful. It becomes easier to distinguish supportive people from non-supportive ones.

Attributes of an open hearted person include:

- the ability to set realistic expectations of self and others, guarding against perfectionist standards or trying to “save the world”.
- the ability to engage meaningfully with their own corner of the world, working for the mutual goals of self and others.
- the possession of a sense of humor or a perspective that isn’t deadly serious.
- the ability to allow for differences and also to respect differences of opinion.
- giving the benefit of the doubt and check assumptions before drawing conclusions.
- showing generosity with one’s time and a willingness to give back in a way that works for a purpose beyond the self.
- the ability to see one’s limitations with compassion and humility and to forgive shortcomings and mistakes in self and others.
- remaining conscious of the finiteness of time and limits on all of us in a way that remains hopeful not despairing.
- delivering one’s own truth in a way that does not harm or humiliate others.

Learning to trust trustworthy people is liberating. It cuts through feelings of isolation, fear, and guardedness. Learning to forgive people who have harmed you can lead to releasing yourself from being trapped in the past. It may also be a gift to the offending party. Being treated with compassion and/or forgiveness often creates a situation of openness which can allow for the beginning of new dialogue and/or the other person’s healing as well.

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