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How to Forgive Other People and Yourself

By **Regina V. Cates**

How to Forgive Other People and Yourself



One of my women friends was sexually abused by her father between the ages of eight and eleven. Her mother knew about it and did nothing to stop it, because she was financially dependent on her husband and had been threatened to stay silent or lose the means to live.

Since her mother was frightened into being an unwilling accomplice to the sexual assault, my friend suffered the long-term effects of abandonment by both her parents. She struggled for years to cope with her horrible past. A history which, as a child, she had no power to prevent or change.

Since my friend was physically, emotionally, and psychologically abused as a child, she allowed herself to be mistreated in her adult years, either by other people or by hurting herself. She developed posttraumatic stress disorder, an unhealthy relationship with food, was repeatedly admitted to psychiatric hospitals, and lived in fear and self-doubt. And, today she is enjoying a peaceful life because she chose to heal.

One healing action she took was choosing to forgive herself and those who abused her. Forgiving those who harmed her so horribly does not mean my friend accepted the negative treatment she endured as okay or that she deserved to be abused. She came to realize that forgiving means releasing the resentment she held because she believed her parents should have done better than they did. They did not, so she chose to do better in order to free herself of the resentment that was destroying her life.

Although memories of the abuse continue to surface she is no longer haunted by them. One of the reasons for her dramatic transformation is, my friend intentionally chose to move herself out of a victim mentality. It took effort and much self-love since for many years she ignored her negative behavior and how she allowed herself to be treated. She felt deserving of bad treatment because she was treated so terribly in the past.

One day she realized hurting herself or allowing pent up anger and self-loathing to abuse other people would never get back at the people who hurt her in the first place. Therefore, to heal, she chose to move on from her past by dropping the identification and behavior of being a “victim.”

Although not a religious person, she came to accept and depend on the powerful, kind, and forgiving force (soul) within her to provide the strength and willpower necessary to leave the abuse of her past in the past. She intentionally worked to master her mind with a mind of its own by learning to evaluate each of the negative memories from the perspective of being a witness rather than a victim. And she taught herself to remain aware of her thoughts, to evaluate each, to determine if they are valuable, loving, kind, and self-supportive.

One of her most powerful realizations was understanding that if her parents could have done better they would have. If her mother and father had been in touch with their emotions they would have had empathy for her and would never have subjected her to abuse. She came to know love does not abuse, use, or mistreat - ever. My friend realized people who are hurting, hurt others, just as she had done. She came to be aware of the truth, people who heal the pain of their abuse also choose not to pass their wounding onto others. Out of self-love and respect they stop the cycle of abuse and refuse to hurt themselves and others.

These revelations gave her the power to forgive her father for the abuse and her mother for not protecting her. Acknowledging she was powerless to prevent what happened to her, she also forgave herself for the misguided and self-destructive idea she should have or could have done something to avoid the cruelty. Realizing she could not have prevented the unpreventable or now change the unchangeable, she was able to release resentment over her powerlessness. Forgiveness allowed her to free herself of bitterness, anger, fear, and desire for revenge.

Certainly my friend did not heal overnight. It took years of thoughtful and caring effort. However, when she realized people only do better when they emotionally know better, she began releasing resentment over her past. It was letting go of the bitterness she carried about how her parents should not have done what they did that allowed her to speed up the healing process.

Regardless what happened to you, whether it was in the past or today, releasing resentment and what you think should or could have been is a key needed to unlock the door to your freedom. Freeing yourself of animosity is accepting the reality that once an

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action is done it cannot be undone. No matter how much you may want someone to take back or own up to the harm they caused, they cannot change the past. Just as you cannot take back anything you have done to hurt yourself or others.

Suffering over the past does not allow you to live today. Planning to be free of anger and resentment someday prevents you from creating joy and fulfillment today. Now, today, is the only time to release the past, to have the best present, so you create a fulfilling future.

I promise, through my own experience and by working with people throughout the world, if you choose to respond to life's challenges by releasing anger over what happened to you in life, the need for revenge and restitution vanishes. Discharging resentment over what cannot be changed is a powerful action of self-love. Letting go of bitterness helps heal your emotional wounds so you do not take your pain out on those you say you love or on the strangers you meet each day. Releasing anger over what cannot be changed is truly the only way to take back your power from those who abused, judged, or ridiculed you.

For your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and because you care for yourself, choose to let go of what you cannot control or change. Choose to forgive.

Here is how my friend and I learned to forgive and how you can too.

Define What it Means to Forgive

When I was a child, I got very sick. My mother took me to the doctor, where he and his nurse mistakenly used an adult catheter to get a urine sample. I screamed and cried and tried desperately to pull it out. They ignored my screams, perhaps because I was so young. They only realized the mistake after the fact. My mother was upset, but neither she nor the medical staff could take back what was already done.

I knew from a young age I was different—gay. I quickly found the place intended to provide an accepting, loving and supportive haven for everyone—my Christian church in Texas—actually did not. “Love your neighbor as yourself”

only applied if your neighbor met a list of predetermined criteria which according to them I did not meet. So, attempting to fit in when I was already deemed unworthy became a recipe for anger and emotional chaos.

Around age eleven, a sixteen-year-old male babysitter molested me. He said, “I’ll cut your tits off if you ever tell anyone what I am doing.” I was terrified. He was the son of one of my mother’s friends. Since I was forced to see him often, I felt completely powerless. I had to keep the secret, unable to expose him or to ask for protection.

When I was seventeen, a physician casually ordered his nurse to leave the room so he could molest me in private. He justified his actions as part of the examination. I knew he was touching me inappropriately.

These are only four examples of countless times I have been deeply hurt or betrayed by the actions of others. For years I held onto the pain of being let down, ridiculed, bullied, slandered, persecuted, and abused. A continuous loop of negative memories played in my mind, keeping me shackled to a suitcase of blame and resentment for the unjust mistreatment. Each day I grew angrier and more self-destructive from holding on to what I thought the people who hurt me should have done differently. I was living like a powerless victim of circumstances beyond my control.

Refusing to let go of the fantasy of what could or should have been was like endlessly tearing a scab off a wound, preventing it from healing. I was unhappy and misguided, wandering aimlessly through life focusing on the growing list of ways I had been victimized. Perpetuating an angry victim identity caused me to spiral downward into a state of constant aggravation, blame, feelings of unworthiness, and a lack of self-respect. I was suffocating under the burden of carrying the persistent ill will of resentment against those who wronged, insulted, and injured me.

Frustrated and feeling like a prisoner of the past, I finally sought help. I got other people’s advice. I went to a counselor. I attended support groups. For years I looked outside myself for the answer to how to heal. Yet, no matter who or what I brought in to help, no matter how good the advice, I did not achieve the release I wanted. Then one day,

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like a bucket of ice water thrown in my face, the truth opened my eyes. To heal, I had to intentionally choose to move beyond the resentment I harbored over my abusive past. I had to let go of anger, hurt, and bitterness. Like my friend who was abused by her father and mother, my rage and disappointment was only hurting me. It was not getting back at the people who hurt me in the first place.

No matter what happened to me in the past, I was the one choosing to relive it in the present. It was my choice to keep anger, pain, and desires for revenge alive by dragging them into each new day. Those who mistreated me had moved on, or died, or were oblivious to the pain they inflicted. Even if all of them were to emotionally wake up, assume responsibility for their actions, and beg my forgiveness, the past would still remain unchanged. What was done was done. I was the one permitting the people who hurt me to continue having power over me in the present by reliving the pain again and again with the irrational, anger-driven expectation it would somehow change what could never be changed.

Realizing I was dragging the agony, rage, and animosity into every new day allowed me to wrap my heart around the truth: I was the only one capable of taking the actions necessary to change my present circumstances. To have the best rest of my life, I had to take my power back and let go of the bitterness I carried.

To move on by concentrating on the present, made sense. Yes, I needed to stay present to enjoy life that is only real in the now moment. But it was not possible until the constant negative mind chatter was under control.

Like my friend did, I also began taking charge of my mind by honestly confronting the events of my past. By admitting to the abuse, ridicule, and persecution, I was able to address each of the events from a witness perspective. Even though the abuse and mistreatment happened to me, I was no longer experiencing the mistreatment in real time. Now it was only in my head. To heal, which means to move on without resentment over what could not be changed, I had to quiet my mind. I could no longer allow negative thoughts to dictate my mood, my behavior, and create my life.

To stop giving bad memories power over me I went back and addressed each painful event. But not as a victim. Rather as a powerful adult who now chooses to forgive the negative, abusive actions of others, and myself, in order to be free. To do so, I first had to determine what it actually means to forgive.

According to dictionary.com, to forgive is to: grant pardon for or remission of (an offense, debt, etc.); absolve; cancel an indebtedness or liability of; and cease to feel resentment.

How would it be possible to absolve the people who hurt me and excuse the pain and heartbreak they caused? Wasn't letting them off the hook by exonerating their actions basically condoning their behavior? I could not imagine anyone excusing mistreatment.

While I now know the abusive behavior in my past was thoughtless and self-centered, does emotional unconsciousness release abusers from accountability? Ignorance of the law does not mean we have a free pass to behave as we please; why should it be any different with personal relationships?

The babysitter's threat meant he knew what he was doing was unacceptable. But he was motivated by an arrogant mind. By intimidating me with the threat of violence he thought it would ensure my silence so he would not be caught. The physician was blinded by his ego. He viewed himself as a powerful member of the community, entitled to behave as he pleased. He rationalized the ethical standards and responsibilities applying to those in his profession, and to people of good character in general, did not apply to him.

Likewise, those who continue to perpetuate ancient judgmental religious beliefs about homosexuality are not emotionally aligned with the Divine's axiom "treat others as you want to be treated." They too are blinded by justifications for their prejudice.

Initially, it did not feel right to release those who hurt me from the liability of their actions. It was not like they borrowed money and could not pay me back. The physical, emotional, and mental abuse they inflicted could not be taken back. Imagining the day when the people who betrayed me would own up to their mistreatment was living a dream. Not one of them ever asked for my forgiveness.

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Their being oblivious to the impact of their actions was frustrating. So, the ice-cold bucket of truth remained undeniable.

Regardless how much I wanted those who hurt me to go back and make my life right, it was not possible for them, or me, to do so. I could not be paid back, because they could not make right what they did. Clinging to the idea they were indebted to me kept those people and the pain they inflicted fresh.

Those abusive people had no empathy and therefore assumed no responsibility for the hurt they inflicted. I was not going to get anything I wanted or needed from them. I had to be my own best friend and my own support system by choosing to release the anger and bitterness I carried. Which was the only way to cut the energetic cord that still connected us since I did not want past abusers or the negative memories of mistreatment to dominate my life any longer. Forgiveness allowed me to end the emotional hold those people still had over me.

Yet, to forgive I had to bypass the beliefs of my mind and what I thought should have happened. It was necessary to accept, people who mistreat, persecute, and abuse themselves and others lack empathy – the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Empathy allows us to feel the suffering of others to identify with their pain. This realization about people who lack empathy for others allowed me to wrap my heart around the healing truth of the words of author and poet Maya Angelou, “... when you know better, do better.”

Appreciate the Wisdom: When You Know Better You Do Better

Have you ever considered what Dr. Maya Angelou meant when she said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” This wisdom reminds me of Jesus asking God to forgive those who crucified him because they did not know what they were doing. Of course with their mind they knew they were choosing to kill Christ in favor of releasing the criminal Barabbas. But they absolutely did not know what they were doing with the emotional maturity of their heart’s empathy.

Hearing this story of Jesus’ forgiveness and Dr. Angelou’s similar wisdom motivated me to think

about what it means to not know. As a result, my life completely changed for the better because I came to accept we can only do better when we acknowledge the occasions when we do not do our best. Meaning, we assume responsibility for our actions and outcomes.

When I was a teenager I stole \$20 out of my dad’s wallet. I knew stealing was wrong but my thoughts justified I would get away with it. I told myself dad would not miss the money. But knowing it was wrong in my head did not create a change in my behavior. I rationalized being selfish and irresponsible until I was hit by the truth, knowing better with our heart/soul is a completely different matter than knowing with our head.

Our head does not feel. Our mind has no capacity for empathy. Our thoughts easily rationalize any behavior we determine is acceptable in order to get what we want when we want it. Our head does not consider how it feels to be on the receiving end of hurtful or abusive behavior. Self-centered thoughts do not stop to think of consequences. Only our heart has the empathy and emotional maturity to care that our every action results in an outcome we are responsible for.

To forgive we must overrule our mind and lead with our feeling heart. The values of compassion, consideration, forethought, honesty, gentleness, kindness, reside in our heart. Without calling upon our heart to be the ethical and moral gatekeeper of our mind’s thoughts, we do not take emotional (feeling) responsibility for our actions – before we act. Directed by our egocentric mind we do not stop ourselves from behaving in ways we know are hurtful. Instead, we justify, excuse, and rationalize our negative behavior. Until we receive an emotional wake-up call.

Years after I took the money from my father’s wallet, my purse was stolen. I felt violated. What kind of person would do such a thing? Then I remembered stealing from my dad. For the first time I felt the empathy needed to know what it is like to be stolen from. Emotionally putting myself in the shoes of someone who was subjected to my selfish behavior allowed me to understand what Dr. Angelou, and Jesus, meant. Knowing better on an emotional level allows us to assume responsibility for how our behavior impacts us and others. When we know better in our heart we choose to behave better.

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The frustrating part of our daily interaction with other people is that we cannot grow someone else's emotional maturity for them. Each of us must choose to learn from the pain we cause ourselves and others. We must care how our actions impact us, other people, and all forms of life. Knowing better to do better is a conscious heart-choice we make. This truth of doing better because we know better applies to family members, friends, co-workers, bosses, neighbors, political leaders, everyone. And, we must accept that we have no power to control the actions of others or to make other people change. We only have the power to change ourselves.

On the bus one day, a man verbally assaulted me when I answered his question of how many more stops until the one he wanted. I do not know why he began yelling at me. But, I stayed quiet as the man stood up, took off his sunglasses, got a bit closer, and continued yelling. I concentrated on the cross around his neck, thinking with my heart, *Do what Jesus would do*.

I smiled at the man. He said, "What the hell are you smiling about?" I calmly said, "I am looking at your cross." He barked, "Well I wouldn't know nothing about the Bible, or that kind of stuff." Then he left, moving loudly to the front of the bus and out the door, getting off at the wrong stop.

The old head-driven Regina would have continued the discussion attempting to get him to own his rude behavior. Yet, many years of trying to get other people to wake up to the responsibility they have for their behavior (they should know better and do better) never worked. Not even once. Continuing to butt my head against the unyielding wall of another person's defensive ego taught me the benefit of behaving differently. Our knowing better to do better is choosing to bring a higher awareness than what creates a situation in the first place.

People who are not responsible for how their negative behavior impacts others are not in control of themselves. They may think they are. They may feel they have gotten away with something. They may feel powerful and in control. But without self-control, motivated by the ethical and moral values of our heart, we are not powerful.

Dr. Angelou's, "when you know better you do better," is simple and brilliant guidance for how you

and I can create the best life with the least stress. She imparted the importance of choice to create our lives with purpose. Everything we do in life is a choice. Our best choices are made when we use our heart to ask, "If I do this, how will it feel to be on the receiving end of my behavior?" Knowing better emotionally is based on caring how our behavior impacts us and other people.

It is frustrating but true that we cannot control or change anyone but ourselves. Part of integrating Dr. Angelou's wisdom into our daily lives is to accept we do not get people to wake up just because we call them on their behavior. People who are discourteous, selfish, abusive, and judgmental are being controlled by a self-centered agenda. Ego's reactive tendency is to shoot the messenger. When called on our bad behavior we already know we are at fault, but our ego will not allow us to admit it. Instead of taking an honest look at our behavior, we follow ego's lead and project blame onto those who are being inconvenienced by our impolite behavior. And ego will certainly not listen to anyone who has the audacity to tell us how we are behaving badly. There is no way ego allows us to hear anything negative about ourselves.

This is one downside of stooping to the level of someone's negative behavior with the idea you have to defend your pride or point out their bad actions to teach them a lesson. In relationships (remember, all interactions are relationships) it is not possible to fight fire with fire and not get burned. Sorry, but prideful, defensive ego will justify all sorts of behavior and rationalize all kinds of reasons why you should ego-box with rude, self-centered, abusive, and arrogant people. Yet, we do not get respect from those who are disrespectful. We do not receive politeness from those who are impolite. We do not get rational conversation or thinking from those who are irrational.

I know it is challenging to stay calm, cool, and collected under pressure. And, we can choose to be powerful by behaving better because we know better.

Stop Giving Painful Memories Power Over Your Present

I do not believe it is possible to forget painful memories of abuse and mistreatment. Forgive yes, of course, but forgetting I have not found possible.

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Most likely we will always remember the hurtful and traumatic life-events we experience, just like we remember the positive, wonderful ones. So I encourage you not to worry about or focus on forgetting. Just because you do not forget the painful memories does not mean they must continue to have power over you. I still remember the abuses that happened to me.

The babysitter and physician's sexual abuse. Being bullied. Religious persecution. Being made the subject of lies and hurtful gossip. I have forgiven each of the people and events and in doing so the painful memories no longer have any power over me. I forgave in order to release the emotional power those memories carried.

One day, when I was alone and the house was quiet, I made a list of everyone who had hurt me and every painful thing I could remember. Then I wrote each person or circumstance onto a small piece of paper. In the end, my table was covered with pieces of paper. Gathering them into a bag, I went to my backyard. I took the papers out one by one and read the words written on each. Then I set each on fire.

As I dropped each paper safely into a clay plant saucer, I said, "I accept this happened and it is okay for me to be angry. I also recognize I cannot do anything to change the past. The behavior of the people who hurt me was not my fault and I do not condone their actions. I no longer give negative memories power to continue hurting me. I am reclaiming power over my life and my thoughts."

Certainly the troubling memories of my past did not magically go away with the backyard ceremony. Flashes of events continue to this day. As I said, I do not believe it reasonable to think we can erase our memories. Yet, over time, with purposeful attention, we can retrain ourselves to allow a negative memory to come in and go out of our awareness without emotionally attaching significance to it.

Each time a bad memory comes up for me, I mentally say, "You have no power over me. I have forgiven and released you." Addressing your thoughts this way keeps you from attaching to the negative memory and getting stuck reliving it. Memories only have power if we give them our attention.

I have many wonderful memories too. In order to change the habit of dwelling on painful memories I

had to change my focus from negative to positive. Which means, when I notice my mind going down the victim, negative memory path, I deliberately say to myself, *"No, we're not going back there. I'm living now. I'm not giving those people any power over me ever again!"*

When we reach the point of getting fed up with suffering and feeling out of control we realize it is because of our negative thinking. Steady streams of damaging thoughts keep us victims of our past. An injured mentality keeps us feeling powerless and stuck in negativity. Telling ourselves we are a victim, fuels the fire for revenge and justice. Our ego tells us we will finally have peace when the other person apologizes. But the truth is, freedom from our past comes from changing our thoughts of needing justice or an apology in order to live in peace today.

To break the cycle of life being run by my mind, I had to intentionally slow down and teach myself to think about what I am thinking, while I am thinking it. I had to challenge every negative and limiting thought. By forcing myself to remain aware of my thoughts and to question why I am thinking them, I learned our minds are a tool for our soul. Our mind is great for balancing our checkbook, filling out an income tax report, or working through statistical analysis. It also comes in handy when recalling items we need from the grocery store or learning how to use technology. But again, our mind does not feel. Without the emotions of our heart we become robots. Without the values of empathy, kindness, forethought, responsibility, and honesty we are driven by our unfeeling head.

Our mind thinks it is the wise one and will adamantly defend what it believes to be true and best. And, within our mind's efforts of self-preservation, also lives the distressing emotion of fear, which distances us from our positive emotions and other people. Negative, controlling, and fearful thoughts prevent us from striving to live our best life.

Our mind is not the faithful part of us, no matter how loudly and persistently it tells us it is. Our mind thinks, and our heart's wisdom has the emotional maturity to question those thoughts, to discover how irrational our mind's thoughts can be.

Are our thoughts attempting to limit the cooperative, inclusive, and virtuous motivations of our heart? Are our thoughts self-defeating, judgmental, cruel, or completely inaccurate?

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My friend who was abused by her father and mother was terrified of food, until she began overruling her mind and the irrational thoughts it created. Today she eats with awareness and the goal of nurturing her body rather than abusing it. Taking control of her loud and fearful mind she now hears her quiet and supportive soul.

She stopped feeling unworthy and released the last of her fear when she dealt with the irrational thoughts that the abuse was her fault, or she should have been able to prevent it, or her father and mother should have known better to do better. By unraveling years of twisted thinking she made way for her powerful and peaceful heart to come forward.

Another way my friend and I were able to release the hold negative memories had over us was to realize the young person we were, who was hurt, did not have the skills to heal the adult we are today. The adult I am is stronger, kinder, and more responsible than the people and circumstances who hurt me. The adult Regina understands people who hurt others are emotionally oblivious to the pain and suffering they cause. Which is the knowing better to do better part of forgiveness.

No matter what you have been through in life, your heart, the soul you are, remains whole and ready to help you move past your past.

Addiction, self-abuse, loneliness, fear, jealousy, defensiveness, blame, neediness, despair, vanity, dishonesty, and other negative thoughts and behaviors limit you. Negative thoughts and behaviors do not help you create your best life.

Yes, at times you will become angry, fearful, and have desires to control other people and the uncontrollable situations of life. You will have thoughts of revenge and being a victim. But, you do not have to listen to any of your fear-based thoughts.

No matter what challenges you face, the guidance you need to overcome them is already within you, waiting for you to call upon it. Teach yourself to listen to your supportive heart by learning how to confront your thoughts so you can unravel fear and desire to control others.

I will not tell you this is easy. Mastering a mind with a mind of its own is a full time job. Your mind thinks because that is what it is designed to do. But by

learning to challenge your mind, and each thought it has, you will be able to overrule your mind's negative and limiting thoughts in order to hear the supportive guidance of your soul.

The soul you are has the power to question your thoughts. Soul has the power to guide your actions. Soul has the power to forgive those who hurt you. Soul understands the power of love to heal the hardest hearts and the deepest wounds. Yes, you are a human being. But you are much more than human. You are a spiritual being, soul, on a great human adventure.

There are two major emotions we experience - love and fear. If you truly want the best life, stay emotionally connected to what you are thinking and why you think what you do. In every moment know what you are thinking and determine if it is love or fear motivating the thoughts. Master your thoughts so you feel your way through life. In times of doubt and worry, call upon your wise and powerful soul, because the truth is, soul is whole no matter how wounded your human being.

Regardless of what happened in your past, even if it was yesterday, accept the event(s) happened and there is nothing you can do to change that fact. The negative events that happened in the past can only hurt you in the present if you choose to let them.

Love yourself by changing your negative thinking so you can live in the here and now. Practice remaining aware of and being responsible for your thoughts. Each time an unpleasant memory comes up acknowledge it, then intentionally change your thinking to positive. The realization, I am in control of my thoughts, and can change them to support me, allowed me to see the truth - I can no longer blame other people for my emotional health today.

Embrace Your Emotions

If you have read my book, *Lead with Your Heart*, you will remember the huge aha I had on my 43rd birthday. I was deeply immersed in the largest pity party I had ever thrown when a miracle occurred. From deep within my being, a quiet but familiar voice (soul) asked if I enjoyed feeling so miserable, so out of control, so victimized. This wise inner guidance went on to ask who I actually thought was responsible for creating the peaceful and joyful life I really wanted. In the time it took for me to

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respond, “I am,” the idea something or someone outside me could fix my broken life, heal my pain, forgive others, or right my wrongs, vanished.

Creating the life I wanted was completely an inside job. My soul is the part of me where wisdom, compassion, and kindness reside. By learning to overrule my mind I began to forgive, to release the negativity of my past, and let go of resentment, to focus my energy on being the best person possible so I create the best life possible, in the present.

One of the important steps we take to forgive ourselves and others is to acknowledge our emotions. But, it is my experience and maybe yours too, embracing our emotions is often associated with people who are weak. We have been taught to hide our emotions, to be afraid or ashamed of them. Seriously, how healthy does this sound? Denying our emotions, like empathy, is one reason we justify abusing and mistreating others, and ourselves.

What a limitation it is to believe ignoring our emotions will make the bad we feel somehow magically disappear and we will go on our way filled with happiness, inner peace, and love. That misconception is a huge sabotage to healing our emotional and physical wounds. We are specifically designed to feel our way through life.

When we do not allow ourselves to feel and express emotion in healthy ways we pretend something is not happening. Or we sweep challenges under the rug and end up with unresolved issues, pain, and denial. Living with denial we abuse ourselves and others. We overeat, drink too much, do illegal drugs, abuse prescription drugs, develop compulsive behaviors, mistreat ourselves, others, children or animals, and keep ourselves so busy we do not have time to feel. We keep relationships superficial. We are in our head intellectualizing or rationalizing. We work ourselves to death, have affairs, are tied to technology, and cannot sleep. Abusing ourselves and others is not healthy or positive.

To aid our healing we must embrace our emotions and respect one another for expressing emotion in healthy ways. In fact, I respect women and men who cry. For many years I never saw my father cry. He grew up in a society where men did not cry - ever. I resented him for it. No, to be honest, I despised him for it.

Unable or unwilling to be vulnerable and express healthy emotion made him an angry tyrant. He raged, snorted, and slammed around like a bull in a delicate china shop of two little girls and a scared wife.

“You’re too emotional,” he coldly said, as tears streamed down my face at the cruel and horrific scenes of baby harp seals being beaten to death and the close up, slow motion images of prairie dogs being blown to smithereens in the documentaries my father watched on television in the 1960s.

My father stormed through life not giving a damn about the emotions of other living things. His temper tantrums, sarcastic remarks, and drunken hecklings at my youth softball games further confirmed he was a cold, cruel, uncontrolled, and unfeeling man.

Then one beautiful, crisp, autumn day all that changed - for good. My father was hunting and knew he had fatally wounded a deer but could not find it. Regardless what an ass he was to me, my sister, our mother, harp seals, and prairie dogs, he was a responsible hunter always using what he took from the natural world. It went against his values to just leave the deer, so he searched for hours and hours without success. My father was so exhausted and upset he sat down on a log, buried his head in his hands and sobbed. I believe for the first time ever, or at least in many, many years.

We never know what life-event holds the potential to shake us to the core of our being. The frustration and helplessness of killing the deer and not being able to find it cracked my father’s heart wide open. Years of stuffed emotion came pouring out and through the deer’s death my father was emotionally reborn.

For such a tough guy on the outside he was weakened by fear. He learned true strength is knowing his emotions cannot be bottled up or controlled. He is going to feel what he feels. The only power my dad or any of us has is to learn how to live peacefully with our emotions. We manage them by releasing emotion in positive and healthy ways.

You and I have issues we must deal with to let go of pent up anger, frustration, and disappointment. My father was treated badly when he was a young boy not only by his mother but by other relatives too. He was emotionally, physically, and psychologically

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Forgive Yourself to Forgive Others

In *Lead with Your Heart* I identified twenty-six behaviors we give and receive in the name of love. Forgiveness is one of love's behaviors.



abused. Because of his inability to express his feelings or come to terms with his abuse, he took it out on those he said he loved. But, abuse, mistreatment, angry words, are not love.

As I expressed, we operate under two basic emotions, love and fear. The motivation behind our thoughts are either love or fear. We know fear is driving our emotions when we feel anxious, controlling, angry, hurt, or inadequate. When we feel joy, compassion, satisfaction, and empathy, we know love is the driving emotion.

There may be people in your life who seem to manage normally but then they suddenly explode. Maybe you are the person who is exactly like my dad. Through his example he taught me – repress my emotions and then explode. Emotions always come out, and sometimes inappropriately gush onto the innocent people and animals in our lives.

We do not create healthy self-worth in ourselves or our children if we feel rejected or unworthy because someone tells us how worthless, stupid, ugly we are, or that we are never going to amount to anything, or how they wish we were more like our siblings. Ridiculing, humiliating, and insulting behavior is emotional abuse. Being sarcastic or isolating is deeply abusive. The silent treatment is often used by people to control other people and situations. Remember where there is control there is only fear, not love.

For me, my friend, my dad, and anyone who has been abused, mistreated, or bullied, we have to deal with our emotional trauma. We cannot keep telling ourselves, "Someday I will deal with my pain." We don't heal by perpetuating the idea, expressing healthy emotion is not acceptable. We just need to look around at the world we are creating as a result of being unfeeling.

Whatever you feel – anger, sadness, disappointment, stress – acknowledge those emotions. And support those you love in expressing their emotions in healthy ways too. True healing comes from feeling what you are feeling because to have the best life, to forgive ourselves and others, we have to embrace our emotions.

When it comes to loving others, forgiving yourself is vital so you can forgive others too. Withholding forgiveness to yourself denies you peace. To be free of self-resentment it is necessary to recognize holding onto whatever you did to yourself or other people only perpetuates your pain. Just like the people who hurt you, you injure others, or yourself. Yet, at the time you did not know better with the emotional wisdom of your heart to stop yourself from inflicting pain onto others or yourself. Beating yourself up over something you did in the past because you now know better, is not positive, or productive and causes you to suffer.

For twenty-two years I wanted to quit smoking. My plans were good. Yet hoping to accomplish something did not actually make it happen. After passing up a cigarette or two, I would make an excuse to have just one cigarette. Then I would beat myself up for once again not being strong enough to stop smoking.

I would tell lies, then berate myself for not being honest. For years I allowed myself to be a doormat. People used and abused me and I chastised myself for being so weak and gullible.

How to Forgive Other People and Yourself



Over the course of life, I spent much time criticizing myself for the mistakes and bad choices I made. One day I realized no amount of guilt or remorse has the power to undo what has already been done. Learning the lessons I needed to learn from my bad choices is what allowed me to forgive myself so I could move on.

While attending Sam Houston State University, I was on the softball team. One day, a team member shared something in confidence with me. Although I assured her I was going to keep her secret safe, I told someone. It did not take long for my indiscretion to return to her. Regardless of what I said to excuse, rationalize, or apologize for betraying her trust, she refused to listen.

At practice and during games, she avoided me. Soon other players learned of my bad decision and stayed away from me as well. I was devastated. My ability on the softball field plummeted, and I was benched. My grades fell too.

It was impossible for me to forget what I did. Tossing and turning, I was unable to sleep. Filled with remorse, I punished myself, wasting countless hours fantasizing about ways to take back what I did. I was willing to do anything for my teammate's forgiveness, but she refused to talk to me.

While I now see my hurtful behavior was unconscious and self-centered, aren't I still accountable? Yes, I am certainly accountable for my actions. But I cannot go back in time and undo what is already done. My accountability is in the present, to learn from my mistakes so I do not make the same negative choices again.

To forgive myself, I had to bypass the beliefs of my mind and what I thought should happen, and accept with my heart the truth, I chose to gossip and, at the time, was emotionally oblivious to the outcome of my actions. When I betrayed her trust I did not do better, even if I knew better with my head. I did not choose to behave better.

For too long I justified staying angry with myself because I thought I should have known better. In my head I knew what I had done was not right. Because I now know the dangers of gossip with the emotional responsibility of my heart, does not mean I had the emotional awareness back then to control my actions.

You and I have made mistakes. We have hurt people. We cannot go back and undo what is already done. There is nothing to be gained by continuing to beat ourselves up for what cannot be changed in the past. The only way we can make right what we have done is to learn from our mistakes so we do not make the same mistakes again. Learning from our bad choices so we do not repeat them is what grows our emotional awareness and maturity so we know better and therefore do better.

I forgave myself for behaving badly by making amends. Which means, the next time I was in a position to gossip or betray another person, I refused to do so. Making a different, better choice was the only way to make atonement to myself, and in an indirect way to the woman I hurt.

When I realized the power I have is to not make the same mistake again, I was able to be free of guilt and disappointment. By learning from my mistakes to do better, I was finally able to sleep. Remorse no longer dominated my thoughts. It was by doing better when I understood that no amount of beating myself, or other people up, changed what had happened. Therefore, I began purposely paying close attention to the consequences of my actions before acting, in order to avoid making thoughtless mistakes and having to experience the horrible feeling of self-loathing.

Regardless of the bad choices and mistakes you make, regretting them does not change them. Life is a series of choices. We sometimes make careless, hasty, or selfish choices. Our thoughtless behavior negatively impacts us and other people. No matter what we do to ourselves or other people, we stop being resentful by releasing what we think should, would, or could have been. We redeem ourselves, even if we are not forgiven by others, by not repeating the offense again.

When we choose to intentionally do better we can finally forgive ourselves. Forgiveness allows us to move forward by letting go of wanting to change an unchangeable past. We no longer allow past choices to define our present. Forgiveness allows us to learn from our mistakes to grow our emotional maturity so we stop hurting ourselves and others. Forgiveness, by releasing resentment, is the key to freedom so we move on without the heavy weight bitterness carries.

How to Forgive Other People and Yourself **Workbook**



In my first book, *Lead with Your Heart*, there is a chapter titled "Ask Yourself Hard Questions." To help you embrace the freeing power of forgiveness, take the time necessary to honestly answer the questions below. Remember, the quality of your life depends on learning to leave the past in the past. So, invest in yourself and do the work necessary.

When you release resentment over what you cannot control or change you can move on to create a life of peace and self-acceptance. Because forgiveness cleanses the heart, like rain cleanses the earth.

1. Describe a time you hurt someone that you would now take back if you could.

2. List what you need to forgive about your hurtful behavior toward the person you described above so you can release self-resentment.

3. Describe what you learned about yourself through treating someone in a hurtful way.

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4. Describe how you will treat yourself and others differently as a result of learning to be responsible for your behavior before you act (to do better because you know better).

5. List what positive outcomes you will receive through readily forgiving yourself, and others.

6. List the emotions that arise when you remember past abuse.

7. Describe your current emotional health.

How to Forgive Other People and Yourself **Workbook**



8. List what changes you can make that will improve your emotional health.

9. Spend time with the following list of emotions. Say each word out loud. Allow yourself to feel the power of each word's meaning. After going through the complete list, go back and circle each feeling you want to carry forward from the act of forgiveness. Then put a check (✓) by each feeling you want to release through the act of forgiveness.

- | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Joyful | <input type="checkbox"/> Helpless | <input type="checkbox"/> Defeated | <input type="checkbox"/> Outraged |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cheerful | <input type="checkbox"/> Sympathetic | <input type="checkbox"/> Powerless | <input type="checkbox"/> Rejected |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Content | <input type="checkbox"/> Free | <input type="checkbox"/> Dreading | <input type="checkbox"/> Hostile |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Proud | <input type="checkbox"/> Disgusted | <input type="checkbox"/> Distrusting | <input type="checkbox"/> Bitter |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suspicious | <input type="checkbox"/> Inferior | <input type="checkbox"/> Hateful | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vengeful | <input type="checkbox"/> Interested | <input type="checkbox"/> Cautious | <input type="checkbox"/> Scornful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disliked | <input type="checkbox"/> Spiteful | <input type="checkbox"/> Disturbed | <input type="checkbox"/> Grief-stricken |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Resentful | <input type="checkbox"/> Shocked | <input type="checkbox"/> Overwhelmed | <input type="checkbox"/> Helpless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Enthusiastic | <input type="checkbox"/> Exhilarated | <input type="checkbox"/> Uncomfortable | <input type="checkbox"/> Isolated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Optimistic | <input type="checkbox"/> Dismayed | <input type="checkbox"/> Guilty | <input type="checkbox"/> Numb |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Elated | <input type="checkbox"/> Trusting | <input type="checkbox"/> Hurt | <input type="checkbox"/> Regretful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stunned | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused | <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely | <input type="checkbox"/> Ambivalent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Calm | <input type="checkbox"/> Exhausted | <input type="checkbox"/> Melancholy | <input type="checkbox"/> Insecure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relaxed | <input type="checkbox"/> Interested | <input type="checkbox"/> Depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Indifferent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relieved | <input type="checkbox"/> Insulted | <input type="checkbox"/> Disgraced | <input type="checkbox"/> Uncomfortable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeful | <input type="checkbox"/> Absorbed | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad | <input type="checkbox"/> Pity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pleased | <input type="checkbox"/> Nervous | <input type="checkbox"/> Guilty | <input type="checkbox"/> Revulsion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confident | <input type="checkbox"/> Exasperated | <input type="checkbox"/> Afraid | <input type="checkbox"/> Contempt |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brave | <input type="checkbox"/> Eager | <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely | <input type="checkbox"/> Weary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comfortable | <input type="checkbox"/> Hesitant | <input type="checkbox"/> Trust | <input type="checkbox"/> Bored |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Safe | <input type="checkbox"/> Fearful | <input type="checkbox"/> Depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Preoccupied |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Happy | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> Disoriented | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Love | <input type="checkbox"/> Worried | <input type="checkbox"/> Sorrow | <input type="checkbox"/> Jealous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Neglected | <input type="checkbox"/> Scared | <input type="checkbox"/> Uncertain | <input type="checkbox"/> Envious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aroused | <input type="checkbox"/> Insecure | <input type="checkbox"/> Anguished | <input type="checkbox"/> Annoyed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tender | <input type="checkbox"/> Humiliated | <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed | <input type="checkbox"/> Humiliated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compassionate | <input type="checkbox"/> Horrified | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-conscious | <input type="checkbox"/> Irritated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caring | <input type="checkbox"/> Alarmed | <input type="checkbox"/> Shamed | <input type="checkbox"/> Aggravated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated | <input type="checkbox"/> Shocked | <input type="checkbox"/> Embarrassed | <input type="checkbox"/> Restless |

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10. List the painful memories you have about people or past events that still haunt you.

11. What do you feel is necessary or must happen for you to release resentment over these events and to forgive these people?

12. Describe what you believe must change in your thinking for you to release resentment, to leave the past in the past, even if it was this morning?

13. Describe how it felt to realize you caused another person pain, disappointment, heartbreak?

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14. Describe an occasion when you cared about the consequences of your behavior before you took action? What negative repercussions do you think you prevented from happening as a result of responsible forethought?

15. Describe a time someone told you how to improve your behavior, and you knew they were right, yet you refused to hear the wisdom they offered. What do you feel was the motivation behind your refusing to listen?

16. Describe, in your own words, what it means to do better when you know better.

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17. Describe three memories where you continue to harbor bitterness over the actions of others.

18. What positive has resulted from reliving past abuse and harboring resentment?

19. Describe what you will gain by forgiving (releasing resentment) a painful past and the people whose negative actions caused you pain?

20. In your own words define what it means to forgive.

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21. Describe what you learned from the wisdom of Maya Angelou:

"When you know better you do better."

22. List some negative feelings you have been able to release as a result of realizing there is a difference in knowing with our head and knowing with our heart.

23. Describe the action(s) you will take to control your thoughts and emotions each time a painful memory surfaces.

24. Describe how it feels to embrace your emotions (both negative and positive).

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25. Describe how it feels to be free of the burden of resentment.

26. Ceremony to forgive:

Go to a quiet, comfortable, and safe place where you will not be interrupted. Think back to the times when you were hurt by the actions of others. Write each instance on a separate piece of paper.

Find a safe place to burn the papers, such as a fireplace, outdoor grill, fire pit, or a clay saucer placed on a concrete or dirt surface away from things like leaves or dry grass. As a precaution, have water handy.

Take one paper and read what you have written. Remember the event, not as a victim, but as the powerful person you are now. Feel whatever emotions and feelings come up with the memory. Then imagine you are a colander (strainer, sieve), and allow your emotional attachments to the memory to move through you and wash away.

Once you feel the memories of this event, light the piece of paper on fire, and envision the pain of the event being burned up. See the person who hurt you standing in front of you. As the smoke rises from the paper, envision any anger and resentment you still carry toward him or her, releasing, leaving with the smoke. Do this with each piece of paper.

I welcome you to repeat the same release affirmation I used, or you can write your own:

"I accept this happened and it is okay to be angry. I also accept I cannot do anything to change you or the past. Your behavior was not my fault, and I am not condoning your actions. By forgiving, I release resentment and no longer allow you the power to continue hurting me. I am reclaiming power over my life and my thoughts. You are no longer welcome on my journey."

Repeat this process with all the pieces of paper, until you've worked through and released the pain from your past. I remind you not to focus on forgetting. The troubling memories of your past will not magically go away with a ceremony. It is not reasonable to think you can erase your memories completely. Yet, over time, with purposeful attention, you can retrain yourself to allow a negative memory to come in and go out without emotionally attaching any significance to it.

Each time a bad memory comes up, say, "You have no power over me. I have forgiven and released you." Addressing your thoughts this way keeps you from attaching emotion and energy to the negative memory. Without attaching emotion or energy you prevent yourself from getting stuck reliving it. Remember, negative, hurtful memories only have power if you give them power.