

Frederic Luskin, Ph.D.

One of the most challenging tasks we face in life is how to remain peaceful when something frustrates us. Not getting what we want is one of the main challenges to dealing with illness, abandonment, dishonesty, or any other difficulties that humans experience. Most of us never fully accept that life often does not give us what we want. We often react with outrage or offense when a normal, but difficult, life experience emerges. Most of us will make the situation worse by insisting and complaining that the specific difficulty is wrong instead of focusing our energy on how to best deal with the situation.

We have the choice to either forgive the parts of life we do not like or to continue suffering by insisting that life be run on our terms. Many of us have trouble with forgiveness because there are so many different views about it. To some it means that their religion compels them to get over something that hurts them. To others it means that they have to become friends again with people who mistreated them. Finally, some people think that forgiveness is the same as saying what happened was okay.

Actually, no one has to forgive—forgiveness is a *choice*. Forgiveness means that we release our suffering over difficult situations; it does not mean we have to put ourselves back into hurtful situations. Forgiveness means that even though what happened is not okay, you can move on and make peace for yourself.

There are three different kinds of offenses that can be forgiven. It is common for people to think that different processes of both creating a grievance and learning to forgive are involved. However, in each situation the problem is essentially the same: something we really wanted to happen in a certain way did not.

The first kind is the most common: where another person has committed the offense against you. This kind of forgiveness is called interpersonal forgiveness. The second kind of forgiveness, where you are upset with something that you did, is called intrapersonal forgiveness. In this case, you are forgiving yourself. The third kind of forgiveness is existential, where you forgive God or nature for what they have done to you. Existential forgiveness often is a critical component of either interpersonal or intrapersonal forgiveness and is seen when we ask the question “How could this happen?”

It is my belief that making the choice to forgive can be a liberating practice. Forgiveness is possible only because we have the ability to make choices. We have the choice to forgive or not to forgive and no one can force us to do either. Forgiveness is choosing to take the offense less personally, blaming the offending situation less for how we feel, and changing how we describe the situation to reflect our choice to forgive.

In this model, the development of forgiveness moves along four steps or stages.

## Four Stages of Forgiveness

### *Step One*

You are filled with self-justified anger. At some point in your life, you have been wounded and you are mad or hurt by an experience you feel wronged you. You blame the person who committed the wrong for how you are feeling. It is their action and not your choice of response that you believe to be the cause of your distress. You have forgotten that you have choices about how you can react. Perhaps you are so wounded that you are convinced it would not be right to forgive the offense. At this stage, there usually is both active and submerged anger, as well as a great deal of pain.

### *Step Two*

After feeling upset with something for a while, you realize that your hurt and anger do not feel good. It may be affecting your emotional balance or physical health. You may wish to repair the damage to the relationship and take steps toward forgiveness. You may begin to gain perspective on how common the problem is or you may simply decide to let go of your pain. In either case, after an extended period of time, you are no longer aggrieved and have forgiven the situation/person causing you distress. This process of forgiveness can be applied to anger at oneself, at another person, or at life in general.

### *Step Three*

The third stage of forgiveness comes after you have seen the results of forgiveness in action and choose to let go of a new grievance fairly quickly. In this stage, you choose to feel the hurt for a shorter period of time and then work to either repair the relationship or let go of seeing the situation as a problem. In either case, you decide to forgive because you have had more practice with it and see the clear benefit in your life. This could happen when something simple occurs, such as being cut off by another car on the expressway, or in a complex situation like an affair in a marriage. At this stage of forgiveness, you are aware that the length of time you experience a situation as a grievance is primarily up to you.

### *Step Four*

The fourth stage of forgiveness involves the choice to rarely take offense in the first place. This means you are prepared to forgive in advance of a specific trigger. This stage often emerges simultaneously with all or some of the following thoughts:

- I don't want to waste my precious life in the discomfort caused by anger or hurt, so I will decide to feel differently. I am able to forgive myself, forgive others, forgive life, and forgive God.
- I know how it hurts when people don't forgive me. I do not want to hurt other people by my actions, so I will perceive the problem in such a way that I can either deal with it or let it go.
- Life is filled with incredible beauty and wonder and I am missing these experiences if I am stuck in the remembrance of old hurts or disappointments. I forgive myself for getting sidetracked.
- Everyone, including myself, operates primarily out of self-interest. I must expect that sometimes I, in my self-interest, will be annoyed by someone else's expression of self-interest. If I can understand that

this is an ordinary part of life, what is there to be upset about?

Often, people with cancer have grievances or hurts that fall into each of the three kinds of forgivable offenses. Generally speaking, the way one forgives a specific grievance is the same, no matter whether the grievance is with yourself, another person, or God.

## Nine Steps toward Forgiveness

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate precisely what is not acceptable to you. Then tell a couple of trusted people about the hurtful situation and how you feel about it. After taking these preliminary steps, you are ready to start working toward forgiveness.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you must do in order to feel better. You need not continue to suffer because of some difficult situation. Remind yourself that you deserve to feel better and at peace. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else. No one even needs to know about your decision.
3. Understand your goal. Forgiveness is not simply reconciliation with the experience that upset you, though you may achieve that. What you are seeking is to feel better. Forgiveness can be defined as the “peace and understanding that comes from lessening the blame of that which has hurt you, taking your life experience less personally, and seeing the cost of holding a grudge.” Your forgiveness goal is to find peace in your life now.
4. Get the right perspective on what’s going on. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from your hurt feelings now, not what happened in the past.
5. When feeling upset, practice a simple stress management technique to counter your body’s fight-or-flight response.
6. Give up expectations of other people or your life that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the “unenforceable rules” that you have established for your health or how you or other people must behave. For example, if you have been seeking emotional support from someone who does not provide it, ask yourself, “How many times will I hit my head against the wall of that person’s coldness hoping that that person will be different?” The forgiving response is to stop making demands of whatever it is that has hurt you. Remind yourself that you can actively strive for health, love, friendship, and prosperity and work hard to get them. However, you will suffer needlessly if you demand that these things occur when you do not have the power to make them happen.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to fulfill your goals rather than investing in an experience that has hurt you. If you’ve been waiting for a loving relationship with an indifferent parent, for instance, look for a mentor who can

When you remember an unresolved problem, your heart speeds up, your blood pressure rises, your hands get cold, and you can’t think straight. To counter these symptoms and regain calm, at the very moment you start to get upset or recall what happened, bring your attention fully to your stomach as you breathe in and out for two slow and deep breaths. Then picture something in your life that is beautiful or reminds you of something you love. Hold the feelings that emerge from this visualization in the area around your heart and relax. This simple two-step technique cuts your experience of distress and lets you think more clearly about how to deal with the problem that you are struggling to forgive. Practice doing this whenever you feel upset.

provide the love, guidance, and approval that you crave. I call this step finding your positive intention. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt and distress, seek out new ways to have your needs met as you move on from a situation that is unsatisfying.

8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. A person who lives such a life often finds things to appreciate in each moment. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who has wounded you power over you, look for the beauty and kindness around you. Spend time appreciating the good things in your life and remind yourself of pleasant and loving experiences. One important tool in this

process is to list the things for which you are grateful. The moment you shift your thoughts in this fashion, the less you will feel hurt by life's unfairness. You will start to see that the sun still shines, people still fall in love, and beauty still exists everywhere.

9. Amend the grievance story you are telling and focus on your choice to forgive. By doing so, you reclaim the power you gave to this offending situation to hurt you. When you are able to change the story you tell yourself and others, then you will not give the difficulty so much space in your mind and peace will be the result. That feeling of peace is the experience of forgiveness.