



# Resentment and Forgiveness

## What is the price for holding a resentment?

To experience resentment is to relive an offense that injured you in the past. Broken down, the word “resent” means “re” (again) “sent” (feel or sense). By refusing to give up a “justified resentment,” you may believe that you are punishing the person who wronged you. However, resentful behavior actually leads you to feel hurt and victimized again, disempowered. To let go of resentment would be to experience increased freedom and mental health.

## Why might it be tempting to harbor resentment?

- It gives the illusion of power and control.
- It provides energy and impetus to get things done.
- It is a way to avoid uncomfortable communication.
- It seems to offer protection from vulnerability, a way to feel safe.
- It allows a person to feel “right.”
- It may provoke guilt in others.
- It is a way to avoid the feelings under the anger.
- It is a way to continue to hold on to a relationship that might otherwise end.
- It allows a person to avoid responsibility and stay in the role of victim.



## What is forgiveness?

- The art of releasing resentment
- A shift of perception
- An internal process that can occur with or without anyone else's knowledge or participation
- A decision to see beyond the reactive judgments of your ego
- Letting go of the idea that you could have had a different past
- Remembering that all of us are human; we are imperfect, prone to mistakes

## Forgiveness is not...

- Condoning or excusing hurtful or insensitive behavior
- Suppressing anger and acting as if everything is fine
- Judging or assuming an attitude of superiority or self-righteousness
- Forgetting or denying hurtful or insensitive behavior

## Caveats about forgiveness

Pursuit of a path to forgiveness may be very challenging in the face of cultural beliefs and traditions. Your family of origin may have trained you to see forgiveness as hard won or even unattainable. Beyond the family, some cultures encourage an “eye-for-an-eye” approach, pushing for retaliation in reaction to an offense rather than granting forgiveness.

On the other hand, it can be risky to forgive too quickly and casually. “Cheap forgiveness” is premature, superficial and undeserved. It’s like saying, “I don’t want to struggle. I can’t carry this pain any longer. I can’t face the burden of having to accept and understand these feelings.” In this case, “I forgive you” may only mean “I refuse to look again at the injury you caused.”

Real forgiveness is hard work. It involves taking one experience at a time and really examining it, processing the emotion involved. Done thoroughly and thoughtfully, true forgiveness can be a path to serenity that begins and ends with self-compassion and acceptance of your feelings.

Forgiveness is never about restoring a relationship to a former state. The relationship *must* change as the result of the injury – otherwise, the forgiveness is just a form of denial. It would be irresponsible and dangerous to return to a previous relationship with the original “relationship contract” still in place. The person who was hurtful should not be entitled to the same privileges that used to exist before the offense. Boundaries between the person who was wronged and the wrong-doer need to be reassessed. A return to intimacy may never be possible or appropriate, and forgiveness does not require this.

The job of the person who was hurtful is not to extract forgiveness from the victim; instead, the focus should be on making amends – elaborating upon this general outline: “I have wronged you. I recognize that. I am responsible. I deeply regret what I have done. I will behave in a different way from now on. I hope that someday forgiveness will be possible between us.” An apology in the absence of true repentance is meaningless.



### Steps for Self-Forgiveness

1. Acknowledge the truth of what you have done and how it has affected others.
2. Take responsibility for what you have done without blaming or making excuses.
3. Make amends and repair damage in whatever ways you can.
4. Learn from the experience by acknowledging the deeper feelings that motivated the behaviors for which you now feel guilty.
5. Open your heart to yourself.
6. Let go of the past and bring your attention to the present moment.
7. Heal emotional wounds by taking care of yourself in healthy and responsible ways.
8. Affirm your fundamental goodness.



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