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The Process of Forgiveness©

This is a follow-up article to an article by Joanna Jullien of www.BananaMoments.com
To read Part 1 of this important article please go to
<http://bananamoments.com/blog/wordpress/?p=419>

This article is meant to help you in assessing for yourself where you are in the forgiveness process, and what steps you may wish to take in this important and difficult process.

As you walk this road, please be gracious to yourself in whatever part of the process you are in. What matters is that you are in the process. Forgiveness is the key to freedom from the effects of the pain we have endured.

Forgiveness is a very difficult issue, and it has profound implications for relationships. Spiritually, we are commanded to forgive, but for most of us the process may seem impossible at times. The process of forgiveness is actually a complex issue, drawing on our character, our spiritual depth and commitment, and the depth or degree of pain we experience from the one we are seeking to forgive. Feeling or not feeling forgiveness is often mistaken for other processes that are at work when we have been hurt. It is important to note that the spiritual process of forgiveness and the ability to let go, has deep roots in our relationship with God, and therefore retains a certain mystery and cannot be reduced to a simple formula.

All of us have been hurt terribly in our lives and relationships. We often get stuck in this pain in part because we either haven't known how to forgive, don't want to forgive, or didn't know we needed to forgive those who have wronged us. We may have worked hard to forgive them intellectually, but there is a deeper forgiveness in the depth of our being that needs to occur before we can get unstuck and truly move on.

Forgiveness, true forgiveness --- takes time, and must not be short-circuited. If we forgive too quickly, without adequately working through how we feel about it, and how we've been affected, our forgiveness will be incomplete. For many, forgiveness may be one of the most difficult things we've ever done for very good reasons.

NOW WHAT DO I DO?

- ◆ An important question to ask: Am I ready to consider beginning the painful journey of forgiveness?

This is a good question to ask. Sometimes we're not ready. We may feel too hurt or devastated to consider this process...after so much was taken from us. We have

real hurt, anger, and an often longstanding negative effect from what has happened. At the same time, we only have so much room in our souls. An important question to ask ourselves is are emptiness, hostility, and revenge going to live there, or are we going to make room for other things? We want to demand justice---but that is God's job, and we need to leave it to Him, otherwise we will continue to let the offender hurt us by continuing to fill our hearts with bitterness and grief. Forgiveness helps us get back what was lost.

Forgiveness moves us from a "should" system to a "grace" system. None of us really wants to be on a "should" system. Out of God's grace and love for us He doesn't give us what we deserve. When we release others from their debts we also release ourselves from the powerful effects of what they did to us. When we harbor bitterness against others, that bitterness eats away at us. The only way to get the poison out of our system is through forgiving.

Realize that's it's OK if we aren't at the place to step into this process yet. Just learning about it is an important part. Sometimes we're not "willing to be willing" yet. We can ask God to bring us to a place of being willing to begin this process. It's OK to be in this process.

- ◆ Our ability to forgive starts with God (Matt 6:12, Eph 4:32, Col 2:13)

The forgiveness we show to others comes from the forgiveness God has shown to us. Our forgiveness flows from the forgiveness we have received from God. Jesus' death on the cross freed us. Forgiveness is intimately bound up in the essence of God. He is forgiving by nature, and wants us to strive to be forgiving also. The reason we can ultimately show mercy to others is because He has shown mercy to us. Without a complete dependence on God in this area for His strength and grace, we will be unable to forgive.

- ◆ It begins with a decision of our will...to choose the path that leads to forgiveness.

I am deciding to work toward releasing you from the debt you "owe" me. It is an act of our will that we choose because it is right and healthy, even if we don't feel like it, or can't imagine ever being able to do it. This begins the process of forgiveness...the process by which I not only release you, but by which I also find release for myself. (Analogy: A cop being chained to a fugitive so he won't get away, but the cop is imprisoned as well)

- ◆ Recognize the injury

What happened? Who did it? What effect did it have on me? To let it go with forgiveness we have to know exactly what happened and what we are forgiving. Regarding hurts in our marriage and with our children, it is important to acknowledge the past hurts that have occurred which affect us individually as well as the relationship issues. We can only forgive what we understand happened.

◆ Identify the emotions involved, and begin to feel them

It is important to identify the feelings associated with these injuries. It is normal to feel a whole range of emotions including depression, disillusionment, fear, anger or rage, feeling dead inside, anxiety, confusion, etc. One of the most difficult emotions to feel and understand is anger or rage. There may be a tendency to feel blame and rage as we get an accurate picture of what happened. As disturbing as these feelings are, they may be necessary to allow the forgiveness and healing to eventually go all the way down to our toes. How long this takes varies from person to person and situation to situation depending on many factors. The goal is not to shift the blame, but to eventually do away with the blame. The goal is not to make the other person the villain, but to acknowledge and accept what he/she did, so we can forgive. Most people are astonished at the amount of anger and rage they have carried around for years.

◆ Express our emotions

It isn't enough to just identify our feelings. They must be expressed. It is like getting rid of poison inside of us. There are a variety of ways to do this.

- a. Talk them out...with a trusted friend, counselor, etc. Try to find someone who is willing to listen without trying to problem solve.
- b. Write them out...write as much as we can without censoring, as a way to put into words the hurt and devastation. The goal is to get the feelings out. One tool is to write a letter (or several!) to the person who hurt us, but not send it. Start a journal to aid in the process. A journal is a private place where we can write down our hurts, vent our frustrations, explore our feelings, have a voice to say what was done to us and how it affected us. Consider writing to God in a journal. We don't have to be afraid to reveal even our darkest thoughts and feelings to God. He knows anyway, and will be glad we are including Him in our recovery process.
- c. Imagine ourselves and Jesus together and pour out our feelings to Him. Allow Him to respond with compassion and sympathy.

◆ Share these emotions with the person who hurt us if they are willing and **able** to hear. Do not do so if sharing would result in further harm, or the person is not willing.

◆ If necessary, set boundaries to protect ourselves from further harm. Boundaries are limits intended to protect the people in the relationship from harm.

◆ Cancel the debt

Forgiveness often occurs in pieces as we work through different parts of the hurt. Many people say that after they have done the hard work to feel the emotions and have acknowledged what has happened and how it has affected them, they find themselves no longer holding on to the need to punish or withhold forgiveness. Realize that **this process can easily take years** for deep and devastating wounds.

When we are ready, sometimes it is helpful to write a letter to the one(s) who hurt us, and at the end cancel the debt owed to us. We can then sign the letter, and burn it to symbolically bring closure.

◆ Consider the possibility of reconciliation.

Remember forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. Forgiving someone does not mean we have to reconcile the relationship, or open up our heart to be hurt again. Forgiveness is unilateral, something we do ourselves with God's help. Reconciliation involves two people who are both willing to acknowledge their parts, and who are committed to take active steps to discontinue the hurtful behaviors. Both people need to be truly repentant for us to enter back into a process of reconciliation, which includes increasing levels of "re-bonding" as the trust grows. Reconciliation can only safely occur when both persons repent of their own sin and seek to rebuild a healthy relationship.

Dr. Dan Allender illustrates it this way:

"If someone tracks mud into your beautiful home night after night, forgiving him means the next time he knocks, you go to the door. But if he is still muddy and still willing to track it in, you do not let him in. There has been no repentance, thus there can be no reconciliation. Only repentance (taking off his muddy shoes in respect of your home) can result in an invitation to come in. Forgiveness is simply the willingness to keep going to the door in hopes that repentance may have occurred." from Bold Love, p118

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© Kim Fredrickson, M.S., Marriage and Family Therapist (CA MFC 22635) and Life, Parent, and Relationship Coach is the author of many popular CD's and articles that will help you build **Encouraging Relationships** in your life. To learn more about Kim and sign up for more FREE Relationships Tips like these, visit her site at <http://www.EncouragingRelationships.com>. Also, check out Kim's free weekly podcast "Encouragement for Your Soul" which provides weekly audio encouragement in the areas of relationships, parenting and self-care at www.KimsPodcast.com/kimspodcast/ **NOTE:** You're welcome to "reprint" this article online as long as it remains complete and unaltered (including the "about the author" info at the end), and you send a copy of your reprint to Kim@EncouragingRelationships.com