

Coping with College Series

Forgiveness

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“To err is human, to forgive divine.” – Alexander Pope
“Forgive and forget.”

We have all heard the quotes. Although forgiveness may be a part of our vocabulary, it is generally a foreign concept for a culture based on blame, litigation and revenge. To compound the problem, forgiveness remains largely misunderstood or relegated to the profoundly spiritual or religious. The truth is that forgiveness is meaningful and applicable for all of us.

Life is certainly difficult and we have all been hurt by the words or actions of another. For some of us, this hurt has been catastrophic: the murder of a loved one, child abuse, sexual assault... For others, this hurt has meant a betrayal by a trusted friend or a family member. Do these people truly deserve your forgiveness?

To best understand what forgiveness is, one needs to first understand what it is NOT. The nice thing about forgiveness is that it can't be earned: it is a free gift. And most importantly, it is a gift you give to yourself, not the other person. Does the person who hurt you feel the knot in your stomach or seethe with your anger? Do they stay awake all night as you replay the events in your mind? No. The pain is all yours. To withhold your forgiveness only punishes one person—you. In fact, withholding forgiveness is a decision to remain a victim and to relinquish the control of your life to another. The person you haven't forgiven... owns you. The choice to forgive or not to forgive is entirely yours.

Despite the quote, forgiveness does not mean to forget either. Memories of some hurts may last a lifetime. Forgiveness is a decision to heal oneself and no longer be “controlled” by the memories of the past. With forgiveness, however, the memories no longer come packaged with resentment, bitterness and hate.

Forgiveness does not mean that you condone, excuse or give your stamp of approval on the other person's behavior. To forgive is not to give permission for the hurtful behavior to continue, either. Those who forgive are not “doormats” or weak in character. In fact, it was Mahatma Ghandi who said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.” Forgiveness takes courage—a choice to live for the future, not the past. To forgive does not

necessarily mean reconciliation. You need not tell the other person that you have forgiven them. A decision to repair a relationship is completely separate from the decision to forgive. The forgiveness process is something that happens inside of you, not outside.

To conclude, I would like to briefly mention the one person for whom forgiveness is usually the most difficult- the one person for whom his or her past mistakes always seem unforgivable. Ourselves. Forgiveness is not just about wounded relationships, past or present: it's about us. For some reason, we feel the need to punish ourselves for past mistakes, over and over, again. We believe the myth that the only way to change our "evil ways" is guilt and shame; the problem is that guilt and shame are generally poor motivators of behavioral change. True change can only come with true forgiveness.