

# Did You Know That It Really Pays to Forgive?



**T**he other day, I read an amazing testimonial from a woman—a survivor of spousal abuse—who was struggling with forgiveness until she heard a speaker at a domestic-violence conference. “Many times I have sought counsel, wanting to let go of this hatred in my heart, thinking that I must forgive or else I was the sinner,” she wrote. “What a gift [to know] that is not necessarily the case.”

The conference speaker was Rabbi Mark Dratch, founder of the Jewish Institute Supporting an Abuse-Free Environment, or JSafe ([www.jsafe.org](http://www.jsafe.org)). Rabbi Dratch says that the righting of wrongs and exacting of justice are critical to achieving forgiveness—but some perpetrators may never make amends. They may be unwilling or no longer alive. If withholding forgiveness harms the victim and prevents him/her from moving on with his life, forgiveness should be given without having to be earned.

Psychologist Fred Luskin, PhD, says that no one *has* to forgive, but studies show that it often is the right choice. As he notes in his book *Forgive for Good*, forgiveness benefits the forgiver in countless ways. It improves his/her relationships...reduces stress and boosts immunity...decreases blood pressure...and minimizes digestive upsets. It also has been shown to relieve depression, sleep problems and backaches and other pain.

“Forgiving doesn’t come naturally to many people,” says Dr. Luskin, a senior fellow at Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation ([www.learningtoforgive.com](http://www.learningtoforgive.com)) and codirector of the Hope Project, an organization that helps victims of violence in Northern Ireland. Here is his strategy for shedding angry, vengeful feelings...

**Remember that forgiveness is something you do for you.** While you can’t change the past, you don’t have to keep suffering from it. You don’t have to reconcile with the person who hurt you or condone his actions. The real aim of forgiveness is to let go of

painful experiences and move on.

Once you understand how a hurtful experience continues to affect you, make a commitment to do whatever you need to do to feel better. Think of people who love you. Recognize that you are not alone—that hurt is part of life. Dwelling on your hurt gives power to the other person. Why do that?

**Recognize that your distress is coming from the hurt you feel now—not from the experience itself.** When a grudge resurfaces, take several deep breaths, think of someone you love, imagine a beautiful place or employ another strategy to reduce stress.

**Accept that you can’t control other people.** Mentally reframe your “grievance story”—the recitation of what has been done to you—to put yourself in control. Become a hero in the story, instead of a victim.

**Example 1:** Instead of mentally recounting all the hurts inflicted on him by his in-laws, a man focused on the love he felt for his wife. As a result, he no longer chafed at visiting her parents. Visiting them became an act he did out of love for his wife.

**Example 2:** A cheating husband caused a bitter divorce, offered no child support and cut off contact with his ex-wife. The hurt woman takes pride in her good conduct and her love and support for her children, rather than focusing on the poor conduct of her ex.

Dr. Luskin urges practicing forgiveness on small grievances first. Don’t begin with, say, a hostile, rejecting parent. Pick someone whose actions are easy to forgive—a rude sales clerk or a driver who just cut you off. Then attack the bigger grudges and hurts.

This year, International Forgiveness Day is Sunday, August 6. But why wait to start experiencing the healing power of forgiveness?

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