

EIGHT ESSENTIALS WHEN FORGIVING

Difficulty: **INTENSIVE** | Frequency: **VARIABLE** | Duration: **VARIABLE**

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

We have all suffered hurts and betrayals. Choosing to forgive is a way to release the distress that arises again and again from the memory of these incidents—but forgiveness is often a long and difficult process.

This exercise outlines several steps that are essential to the process of forgiveness, breaking it down into manageable components. These steps were created by Robert Enright, Ph.D., one of the world's leading forgiveness researchers. Although the exact process of forgiveness may look different for different people, most anyone can still draw upon Dr. Enright's basic principles. In certain cases, it may help to consult a trained clinician, especially if you are working through a traumatic event.

TIME REQUIRED

Each person will forgive at their own pace. We suggest that you move through the steps below based on what works for you.

HOW TO DO IT

Make a list of people who have hurt you deeply enough to warrant the effort to forgive. You can do this by asking yourself on a 1-to-10 scale, How much pain do I have regarding the way this person treated me?, with 1 involving the least pain (but still significant enough to justify the time to forgive) and 10 involving the most pain. Then, order the people on this list from least painful to most painful. Start with the person lowest on this hierarchy (least painful).

1. Consider one offense by the first person on your list. Ask yourself: How has this person's offense negatively impacted my life? Reflect on the psychological and physical harm it may have caused. Consider how your views of humanity and trust of others may have changed as a result of this offense. Recognize that what happened was not okay, and allow yourself to feel any negative emotions that come up.
2. When you're ready, make a decision to forgive. Deciding to forgive involves coming to terms with what you will be doing as you forgive—extending an act of mercy toward the person who has hurt you. When we offer this mercy, we deliberately try to reduce resentment (persistent ill will) toward this person and, instead, offer them kindness, respect, generosity, or even love.
3. It is important to emphasize that forgiveness does not involve excusing the person's actions, forgetting what happened, or tossing justice aside. Justice and forgiveness can be practiced together. Another important caveat: To forgive is not the same as to reconcile. Reconciliation is a negotiation strategy in which two or more people come together again in mutual trust. You may not choose to reconcile with the person you are forgiving.
4. Start with cognitive exercises. Ask yourself these questions about the person who has hurt you: What was life like for this person while growing up? What wounds did they suffer from others that could have made them more likely to hurt you? What kinds of extra pressures or stresses were in this person's life at the time they offended you? These questions are not meant to excuse or condone, but rather to better understand the other person's areas of pain, those areas that make them vulnerable and human. Understanding why people commit destructive acts can also help us find more effective ways of preventing further destructive acts from occurring in the future.
5. Be aware of any little movement of your heart through which you begin to feel even slight compassion for the

person who offended you. This person may have been confused, mistaken, and misguided. They may deeply regret their actions. As you think about this person, notice if you start to feel softer emotions toward them.

6. Try to consciously bear the pain that they caused you so that you do not end up throwing that pain back onto the one who offended you, or even toward unsuspecting others, such as loved ones who were not the ones who wounded you in the first place. When we are emotionally wounded, we tend to displace our pain onto others. Please be aware of this so that you are not perpetuating a legacy of anger and injuries.
7. Think of a gift of some kind that you can offer to the person you are trying to forgive. Forgiveness is an act of mercy—you are extending mercy toward someone who may not have been merciful toward you. This could be through a smile, a returned phone call, or a good word about them to others. Always consider your own safety first when extending kindness and goodwill towards this person. If interacting with this person could put you in danger, find another way to express your feelings, such as by writing in a journal or engaging in a practice such as compassion meditation.
8. Finally, try to find meaning and purpose in what you have experienced. For example, as people suffer from the injustices of others, they often realize that they themselves become more sensitive to others' pain. This, in turn, can give them a sense of purpose toward helping those who are hurting. It may also motivate them to work toward preventing future injustices of a similar kind.

Once you complete the forgiveness process with one person on your list, select the next person in line and move up that list until you are forgiving the person who hurt you the most.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Baskin, T.W., & Enright, R. D. (2004). [Intervention studies on forgiveness: A meta-analysis](#). *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 82, 79-90.

Researchers compared several studies that used Robert Enright's "process model of forgiveness," similar to the steps outlined above. All the studies were done in a clinical setting including individual and group therapy. Therapies that used these methods were shown to be effective in increasing forgiveness and in decreasing negative psychological states, such as anxiety and anger. These were often long-term therapies, ranging from six to 60 weekly sessions, aimed at helping individuals cope with serious offenses.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

The above review included studies with [adult children of divorce](#) and [of alcoholics](#), [late adolescents deprived of parental love](#), [women with fibromyalgia](#), and [female survivors of spousal emotional abuse](#) and [incest](#) (all in the U.S.). Additional studies explore how this exercise benefits different groups and cultures:

- [Canadian patients at a forensic psychiatric hospital](#) who completed a process model of forgiveness program showed increases in forgiveness and reductions in anger.
- [Patients with substance dependence](#) at an American rehabilitation center attended 12 twice-weekly sessions of Enright's individual forgiveness therapy and improved in forgiveness, anger, depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and vulnerability to drug use.
- [American parents](#) of adopted children with developmental disabilities decreased in depression, and increased in forgiveness and marital satisfaction, after 36 hours of forgiveness training. These benefits were maintained three and a half months later.
- [American patients with heart disease](#) and [elderly patients with terminal cancer](#) completed a month or more of Enright's forgiveness therapy. Patients with heart disease decreased in anger-driven heart issues, and both groups increased in forgiveness.
- [Elderly American adults](#) showed improvements in forgiveness, mental health, and physical health that lasted up to four months after eight sessions of Enright's forgiveness therapy.
- [American men in a maximum-security prison](#) who participated in 24 weeks of Enright's forgiveness therapy experienced improvements in forgiveness, anger, anxiety, depression, and empathy that lasted for at least six months. [Indonesian adults in prison](#) became more self-accepting after six sessions of Enright's forgiveness program.

- [South Korean female adolescents and young adults](#) with aggressive tendencies in middle school or juvenile detention attended 12 weeks of Enright's forgiveness program. They reported increases in empathy and decreases in anger, aggression, and delinquency that lasted at least eight weeks.
- Groups in China and Taiwan engaged in up to 12 weeks of Enright's forgiveness therapy. [Chinese college students](#) increased in forgiveness, emotional well-being, and satisfaction with life. [Chinese bus drivers](#) improved in road rage and anger management. [Chinese people with substance abuse disorders](#) increased in forgiveness and self-esteem while decreasing in depression, anxiety, and vulnerability to drug use. [Taiwanese young adults](#) improved in forgiveness, hope, self-esteem, and anxiety.
- The [REACH forgiveness program](#) by Everett Worthington is similar to Enright's process model of forgiveness. A wide range of [international and domestic college students](#) in the U.S. showed gains in emotional forgiveness after six hours of REACH training, no matter their culture of origin.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Forgiveness is a long and often challenging process. These steps may help along the way by providing concrete guidelines. Specifically, they may help you narrow and understand whom to forgive—to name and describe your pain; to understand the difference between forgiving and excusing or reconciling; and by thinking about the person who has caused you pain in a novel way, you may begin to feel some compassion for them, facilitating forgiveness and reducing the ill will you hold toward this person. These steps also attune you to residual pain from your experience, and encourage you to find meaning and some positivity in it.

SOURCES

[Robert Enright, Ph.D.](#), University of Wisconsin, Madison

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

