

# LETTING GO OF ANGER THROUGH COMPASSION

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **VARIABLE** | Duration: **5 MINS**

## WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

When we are hurt or betrayed by someone, it's understandable to feel angry and view the person in a negative light. However, persistently dwelling on these painful feelings can keep us stuck in a grudge, which is highly stressful and wreaks havoc on our physical and mental health.

One way to loosen the grip of anger and hostility is to change the way we think about the person who hurt us. Research suggests that when people view offenders as fallible human beings who behaved badly but have the potential to change, they experience emotional and physiological benefits, such as increased positive emotions and a more stress-resilient cardiovascular system.

## TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes. You can repeat this exercise each time you find yourself ruminating on an experience when someone hurt you.

## HOW TO DO IT

1. **Find a quiet place to sit.** Relax for two minutes, breathing in and out naturally. During each exhale, focus on the word “one.” Try to keep your arms, legs, and body still if that is calming.
2. **Think of a time in the past when another person hurt or offended you.**
3. **For the next two minutes, aim to think of the offender as a human being who behaved badly.** Even if the relationship cannot be restored, try to genuinely wish that this person experiences something positive or healing. Even though it may be hard, focus your thoughts and feelings on giving a gift of mercy or compassion. Try to be aware of the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you have as you cultivate compassion, kindness, and mercy for this person.

If this practice does not seem like a good fit, you can also try [Eight Essentials When Forgiving](#) or [Nine Steps to Forgiveness](#).

## EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

vanOyen Witvliet, C., DeYoung, N. J., Hofelich, A. J., & DeYoung, P. A. (2011). [Compassionate reappraisal and emotion suppression as alternatives to offense-focused rumination: Implications for forgiveness and psychophysiological well-being](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(4), 286-299.

English college students (mostly white) instructed to think about a past offense in a compassionate way—to engage in what the researchers call “compassionate reappraisal”—reported greater empathy, forgiveness, positive emotions, and feelings of control, compared with participants instructed to ruminate on or suppress negative emotions about an offense. Compared with the rumination group, the compassionate reappraisal group also showed lower heart rate and less eye muscle tension (which is associated with intense emotion).

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

## WHY TO TRY IT

Instead of just trying to reduce the negative emotions associated with a hurtful event, Letting Go of Anger through Compassion helps us replace them with feelings of compassion and forgiveness. It allows us to develop genuine empathy and concern for an offender, while still acknowledging the hurtfulness of the offense and the offender's need for growth or healing. Rather than relying on emotional suppression, which tends to be taxing, compassion can produce a deeper and more lasting shift in perspective. In some cases, this new perspective may help us better support the offender in making positive changes, or—if reconciliation is not possible or desired—help us find the strength to move on with our lives.

## SOURCES

[Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, Ph.D.](#), Hope College

## FOR MORE

vanOyen Witvliet, C., Knoll, R. W., Hinman, N. G., & DeYoung, P. A. (2010). [Compassion-focused reappraisal, benefit-focused reappraisal, and rumination after an interpersonal offense: Emotion-regulation implications for subjective emotion, linguistic responses, and physiology](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(3), 226-242.

vanOyen Witvliet, C., Hofelich Mohr, A. J., Hinman, N. G., & Knoll, R. W. (2015). [Transforming or restraining rumination: The impact of compassionate reappraisal versus emotion suppression on empathy, forgiveness, and affective psychophysiology](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 10(3), 248-261.

---

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](#).

