NINE STEPS TO FORGIVENESS

Difficulty: INTENSIVE | Frequency: VARIABLE | Duration: VARIABLE

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

We all suffer slights, hurts, and betrayals, and it's natural to be upset with the people who hurt us, or sometimes even cut off contact with them. But holding onto a grudge too deeply or for too long can wreak havoc on our mental and physical health—it can elevate stress, increase our blood pressure and heart rate, and even compromise our immune system.

Forgiveness entails letting go of resentment or vengeance toward an offender and making peace with what happened so you can move on with your life; it doesn't necessarily mean reconciling with that person. Because forgiveness can be a daunting challenge, Dr. Fred Luskin of Stanford University has designed these nine steps to walk people through the process of forgiving someone who hurt them.

The process of forgiveness takes time and should only be initiated when you feel ready and have had time to grieve the wrong that was done to you. Research suggests that practicing forgiveness can not only strengthen relationships but also reduce toxic feelings of stress and anger and boost happiness and optimism.

For more on the benefits of forgiveness, see the Greater Good Science Center's forgiveness definition page.

TIME REQUIRED

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

HOW TO DO IT

To start, bring to mind a harm that was done to you that you would like to consider forgiving. Then do your best to complete the following steps:

1. **Reflect on your experience.** How do you feel about what happened? What about the situation is not OK? Answer these questions in your head as clearly as possible. Then, if you feel comfortable, tell one or two trusted people about your experience.
2. **Make a commitment to yourself to work towards forgiveness.** If it's helpful, remember that forgiveness is a way for you to feel better.
3. **Understand that forgiveness does not mean trying to make up with the person who harmed you or excusing their actions.** In forgiveness, you seek the inner peace and understanding that come from blaming other people less.
4. **Try to shift your perspective on what happened.** Notice that any distress in this moment is coming from

the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, which is not the same as the hurt you felt two minutes—or 10 years—ago.

5. **When you feel upset about a past harm, try calming exercises** to soothe your body's stress response. This could mean taking deep breaths, taking a walk outside, or doing a mindfulness practice—do what works best for you.
6. **Remember that while you can hope and work hard for health, love, friendship, and prosperity, some things—like other people's feelings and actions—are not in your control.** Insisting that things go exactly the way you want can cause you to suffer. Instead, it can help to remember that everyone experiences undeserved pain and loss.
7. **Try not to dwell on the hurt you experienced.** Redirect your energy into making positive changes in your life that will help you prioritize your own well-being.
8. **Look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you.** Try to appreciate what you have instead of thinking about what might feel lost. Focusing on your hurt will only give power to the forces behind your pain.
9. **Remind yourself that you made the brave choice to forgive.**

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Harris, A. H., Luskin, F. M., Benisovich, S. V., Standard, S., Bruning, J., Evans, S., and Thoresen, C. (2006). Effects of a group forgiveness intervention on forgiveness, perceived stress and trait anger: A randomized trial. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 62*(6), 715-733.

Mostly white, college-educated adults who completed Fred Luskin's six-week forgiveness training (90 minutes per session) reported lower stress, anger, and hurt than people who didn't undergo the training. They also felt more capable of forgiving and greater optimism immediately after the training and four months later.

Luskin's training program (Forgive for Good) teaches the core Nine Steps to Forgiveness, including taking less personal offense, blaming the offender less, and offering more understanding of the offender and of oneself.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

Additional studies explore how this exercise benefits other groups and cultures:

- Christian college students at an American university became more forgiving for at least six weeks after learning about Nine Steps to Forgiveness.
- Christians from Northern Ireland with a family member who was murdered learned about Nine Steps to Forgiveness during a week of Luskin's forgiveness training. In addition to becoming livelier and more forgiving, they decreased in emotional hurt, anger, stress, depression, and physical illness symptoms.
- Teachers in Sierra Leone attended a five-day version of Luskin's program that incorporated culturally specific prayer. The teachers became more benevolent, grateful, and satisfied with life, but also decreased in negative mood, stress, and depression.
- Iranian women with marital problems who engaged in Luskin's program became more satisfied with their marriages and developed better relationships with their husbands.

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

WHY TO TRY IT

By reducing feelings of anger and resentment that are not serving a constructive purpose, the steps described above can help shift people's mental attention away from ruminating on negative events in their past; this can decrease stress levels and potentially even improve physical health. In addition, these steps encourage people to focus on and appreciate the positives in their lives, such as experiences of receiving kindness and love—an orientation to life that, research suggests, can increase happiness and improve relationships.

SOURCES

Fred Luskin, Ph.D., Stanford University

FOR MORE

Learn more about Dr. Luskin's work on the Stanford Forgiveness Projects and through his book, *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness* (HarperOne, 2003).

He also elaborates on the theory behind his nine steps to forgiveness in these Greater Good Science Center videos and this article.

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.