FORGIVENESS VISUALIZATION

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

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

As we move through life interacting with other people, we are bound to do things that hurt others. But in the moment, we don't always take the time to acknowledge these mistakes or make things right. We might hang on to excessive amounts of self-criticism and guilt.

We can deal with the situation by apologizing to the person we hurt, but sometimes that's not possible. Perhaps they have passed away or we no longer have a relationship with them. In those cases, we won't receive forgiveness from the person—but we can still imagine it.

Imagining receiving forgiveness affects our bodies, helping reduce our heart rate and reduce sympathetic nervous system activity (related to stress) compared to ruminating about what we did. It can also ease our anger, anxiety, sadness, and guilt.

TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes. This visualization may be particularly suited to situations when you hurt someone but for whatever reason you aren't able to seek forgiveness in real life.

HOW TO DO IT

Bring to mind a situation in the past when you hurt, offended, wronged, or mistreated someone—but that you were not able to resolve, fix, or work out. Spend a few minutes writing about what you did and what happened.

For the next two minutes, consider what it would feel like to accept responsibility and regret for your role in committing the offense. Imagine that you felt so humbled and repentant that you asked for forgiveness and tried to make things right. Imagine that you talked to this person whom you offended, you asked for forgiveness, and they responded by forgiving and showing kindness to you. Imagine they said that you were completely forgiven, and then went on acting as if you had never offended them.

During your imagery, actively focus on the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you have as you think about having your apology completely accepted by this person.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Da Silva, S. P., Witvliet, C. V. O., & Riek, B. (2017). Self-forgiveness and forgiveness-seeking in response to rumination: Cardiac and emotional responses of transgressors. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12*(4), 362–372.

Participants wrote about a time they hurt someone, and then spent two minutes either ruminating about it or imagining they asked for forgiveness and were begrudged, asked for forgiveness and were forgiven, or forgave themselves. People who imagined being forgiven or forgiving themselves had lower heart rates, higher respiratory sinus arrhythmia (a sign of health), and reduced anger, anxiety, sadness, and guilt compared to people who ruminated.

WHY TO TRY IT

When we imagine receiving forgiveness, we may be imagining the resolution to an unresolved mistake in our past, or the restoration of a relationship that was lost.

Visualization is powerful. The activity in our brains is similar whether an event actually happens or we simply imagine it happening. It can evoke emotions, change our physiology, and affect our behavior and feelings in the future.

SOURCES

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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.