

# *Hatred Can Eat Your Spirit Alive*

## *So Forgive But How?*

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*Forgiveness is about letting go of hate.*

It is so difficult to remember that forgiving is something you do for your *own* sake. It is *not* a gift to an undeserving foe. Forgiveness is *not* approval. It is not your way of saying, "Oh, never mind. It doesn't really matter." Forgiveness does not mean that what the other person did was acceptable or even tolerable. Quite the contrary: Forgiveness says, "What you did hurt me deeply and you were wrong to do it. I have hated you for what you did long enough. Now I want to let go of my hatred. I forgive you."

Forgiveness is not forgetting. The idea that you would forget a life event of such significance, one that evoked such pain, is naive. *Forgiveness is remembering, but remembering without rage.* To some degree, time heals. But if the battle never quits, and if you can't remove yourself from the person who hurt you, you will have an even harder time forgiving. However, when you are no longer coping with the person, you will have less motivation to forgive.

You have the most reason to work on forgiveness with people who must remain a part of your life — but they are the hardest to forgive, because each new interaction threatens the possibility of a new insult sometimes on a daily basis. Now you have fresh reasons to be enraged.

If the person is a part of your present life, call a cease-fire. This might mean telling the person directly that you believe the two of you shouldn't meet for a specific period of time. That's right. You call your ex, your father, your mother, your stepson or your friend and you say, "There is so much anger between us that I think we need to take a break. Let's not meet or talk for six months [or whatever time period feels right], and then we can talk and see if we can work things out better."

Or when your husband leaves you for a new love, and the two of them have dinner frequently at your preferred social spots, take an extended vacation from these places. Heal in private, and search your heart for a way to forgive away from the injury.

In some ongoing battles, two persons pass their poison through a third. An in-law battle might be waged only by dumping on or ripping apart the person to whom you are both related.

Whichever mode of expression you use to vent your hatred, whether third-

person or direct assault, a cease-fire would be simple: You've said it all before. Don't say it anymore. For some predetermined period of time, don't vent your anger. Don't confide your feelings if solicited. Don't communicate them if provoked. Keep silent, because silence is a step to a cease-fire. And a cease-fire is a step toward forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a complicated, difficult task. But even if you know how to forgive, there is no certainty that you will do it. First, you'd need to overcome the payoffs of anger: Anger helps you to punish wrongdoers, and protects you from facing other, more difficult emotions like guilt, so (consciously or unconsciously) you fear that if you let go of anger, you'd have to deal with these underlying issues. But you also have other reasons not to forgive:

1. You fear that if you forgive, the other person will take advantage. Sometimes it seems as if only anger makes you strong enough to fight. You may think, *"Give an inch and she'll run over you like a steamroller."*
2. Since rage is part of how you punish those who hurt you, forgiveness feels as if you're letting someone off the hook: *"If I forgive, he gets away with what he did."* But the problem is, sometimes you stay angry forever. That means you punish forever — which is usually out of proportion to the crime.

Besides, your rage is a relatively ineffective punishment. You usually keep it to yourself, or share it with people you feel good about. But even if you do vent it from time to time at the person with whom you are angry, the whole outburst lasts only seconds or minutes. But you are punishing yourself with the anger by living with it for days, months or even years.

*Yes, you are the one most punished by your anger, because you are the one who experiences it most intensely.* When you are able to forgive, the person you let off the hook is yourself.

Often anger is the inevitable by-product of a bitter power struggle. The first person who blinks loses. To forgive is to blink: *"If I forgive, it means I'm weak."*

Forgiveness is not weakness, but it is a way to bow out of the battle. Bickering is usually a struggle for dominance. So you can make a conscious decision: Is it important for me to struggle for dominance in this relationship? If the answer is yes, bicker away until you can find a more satisfactory way to work it out. But if the victory is not as important to you as it once was, don't take the angry route. Forgive instead.

## The five steps to closure and reconciliation.

- 1. First of all, you have to acknowledge to yourself how deeply you've been hurt.**
- 2. Next, you have to admit you feel hatred.** You can't struggle to forgive unless you admit how malignant the feeling is that you're holding inside. You are not mad, irritated, annoyed or any of the other acceptable forms of anger. The form of anger you feel is hatred and hatred can eat your spirit alive. Hatred is what you let go of when you forgive.
- 3. You will also have to see what is happening through different eyes.** This is the most difficult step in forgiveness. It is utterly necessary that you think about the events from another point of view. Yes, you were deeply hurt. But it does not necessarily follow that the person actually intended to hurt you. This shift of focus is critical for your healing.
- 4. You might need to get an idea of how you contributed to the miserable outcome over which you are now suffering so deeply.** This does not mean that whatever occurred was your fault. Whatever occurred was probably less a question of fault than of two persons' acting according to their own conflicting needs, or of one person's acting out of a weakness that deeply intruded on the other.
- 5. Finally, you try for closure and reconciliation.** The last step in forgiving is to communicate your anger, your hatred, your pain and your forgiveness to the person who hurt you. Then you take him or her back into your life, and close the circle broken by rage.

This step is not always possible because the other person is not willing to hear you, or because he or she is still unwilling to be responsible for hurting you in the first place. The point is not for you to accept a blame that your wrongdoer wishes to pass on to you. The point is for you to say you were hurt and enraged over this hurt, and for him to be able to acknowledge that yes, he did hurt you — whether deliberately, inadvertently or unconsciously. After he has acknowledged that he hurt you deeply, then you let him know that you forgive him, and you build a new relationship from there.

This final step in forgiveness depends largely on the other person's capacity to hear the truth, and to be responsible for his actions. If he hasn't matured to the point where he is capable of this level of self-awareness, don't let it stand in your way. Remember, the purpose of forgiveness is to free yourself from the pain and poison of rage. It is true that forgiveness is easier if your persecutor can acknowledge and be responsible for the injury he caused.

Give him the opportunity to do so. If he can't or won't take it, let it go.

The real-life complication comes because, most often, the two of you have hurt each other. It's quite possible that the person toward whom you carry such rage carries every bit as much toward you. Then you have a double duty: You have to forgive how you were hurt, and you have to acknowledge how much hurt you inflicted.

*by Judith Sills, Ph.D.*