

# To Forgive or Not to Forgive: That Is the Question Leader's Guide

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## Objectives

### Participants will

- Define what forgiveness is and is not
- Learn possible steps to achieve forgiveness
- Experience a forgiveness activity

## Materials Needed

### For Leaders:

- Leader's Guide – FCD04-001 including:
  - Forgiveness Quotes
  - Forgiveness Activity Script
  - Forgiveness Oval
- Tape recorder and blank tape (optional)

### For Participants:

- Participant's Guide – FCD04-002
- Forgiveness Attitudes and Beliefs (Assessment) FCD04-003

(use before and after lesson)

### Before the lesson:

Practice reading the script for the forgiveness activity. It is very important to conduct the activity slowly, with enough time for participants to pause and reflect. To make the pacing of the activity appropriate, it may help to record an audiotape of the script that you can play during the lesson.

Make one copy of the Forgiveness Oval for each participant.



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## **Introduction**

*(directions for leaders are in italics)*

*Announce that this lesson will have a pre- and post evaluation. Hand out the Informed Consent letter to all group members. Read the letter to the group. Invite them to ask questions about the evaluation, and answer the questions based on information in the letter. Tell the members they may keep the letter in case they have future questions about the evaluation project. It is fine if some members decide not to participate in the evaluation.*

*Hand out the Forgiveness Attitudes and Beliefs page to the members.*

Say: We will begin the lesson today with a brief pre-evaluation. Please turn to the side of the paper that says “before the lesson” and respond to the statements according to your attitudes and beliefs right now. Just mark your first impression for each of the statements.

*Read the directions at the top to the group, and allow time for them to complete the first “Before” side of the page. Ask them to place the completed page below their chairs so that they can complete the other side at the end of the lesson.*

Say: Many of us know family members and friends who have been angry with others for years, even decades. Some people die without forgiving others who have hurt them. How do we help others and ourselves deal with this issue? Is forgiveness necessary? When is forgiveness appropriate? In this lesson we will learn more about forgiveness and look at some possible processes for reaching forgiveness. In this lesson on forgiveness we will

- define what forgiveness is and is not,
- learn possible steps to achieve forgiveness, and
- experience a forgiveness activity.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF FORGIVENESS**

- From ancient times, spiritual, religious, and moral teachings have extolled the necessity of forgiving others.
- From 1932 to 1980, many papers were published about the theoretical aspects of forgiveness. However, leaders in psychology and mental health, including Freud, Jung, Adler and Frankl, gave little or no attention to the topic.
- From 1980 to the present, more intensive and serious attention has been given and research conducted on the topic of forgiveness.

- Between 1997 and 2003, the Campaign for Forgiveness Research funded 46 innovative research projects on the effects of forgiveness.

*Hand out the Forgiveness Quotes. To start the group thinking about forgiveness, ask the participants to take turns reading the quotes. Ask which quotes are meaningful to them and allow a little time for discussion.*

#### DEFINITIONS OF FORGIVENESS (refer to Participant Guide)

*Say: These definitions come from professionals and researchers working in the field of forgiveness. Again, ask participants to take turns reading the definitions of forgiveness from the participant's guide. Ask which definitions were meaningful to them.*

#### WHAT FORGIVENESS DOES NOT MEAN (refer to Participant Guide)

*Review the points in the “what forgiveness does not mean” section of the Participant Guide. You can ask for volunteers to read each point and ask the group to discuss them.*

#### WHAT FORGIVENESS DOES MEAN

*Review the points in the section of the Participant Guide. Lead discussion.*

#### WHY FORGIVE?

*Ask: What are the benefits of forgiving someone? Allow discussion.*

*Research shows many benefits when we truly forgive someone. Summarize these points:*

- A decrease in stress, anxiety, depression and hostility,
- An increase in hope, self-esteem and well-being, which may or may not be a result of being true to one's religious conviction or personal morality,
- More steadfast relationships with friends and family,
- Improved cardiovascular functioning,
- Less frequent illness,
- Less cynicism and more trust, and
- A greater sense of control, power and resolution.

## WHY PEOPLE DON'T FORGIVE

*Ask: Why do people sometimes not forgive another person? Allow discussion, then share this list (an excerpt from The Unburdened Heart):*

- We lack experience and expertise
- We're angry
- We're afraid of being hurt again
- We've grown comfortable with the victim role
- Our culture doesn't emphasize forgiveness
- We don't want to admit that we were hurt
- We fool ourselves into thinking that we have already forgiven (denial – haven't done the work of forgiveness yet)
- Our egos get in the way
- We think the person doesn't deserve forgiveness
- The offender doesn't apologize
- We believe the apology isn't sincere
- We wait for the wrongdoer to become a right-doer
- We're cynical
- We believe we shouldn't forgive in certain circumstances (whoever is more in the wrong should apologize first)

## SUPERFICIAL/PSEUDO FORGIVENESS

What passes for “forgiveness” among us much of the time really isn't forgiveness at all. At best, it is a social convention used to smooth ruffled feathers. At worst, it is something that buries the hurt even deeper inside us. Here are some examples:

- Absolving the offender. We make excuses for the person's behavior and decide there is nothing to forgive.
- Shaming the offender. For example, saying “I forgive you” and then essentially nullifying what we said by adding “I realize you are still too immature to understand what you did.”
- Asserting self-righteous moral superiority or playing God. You call the offender and say, “I have forgiven you, I absolve you.”
- Guilting the offender. You forgive in such a way that it makes the offender feel awful. “I forgive you....even though you've forever changed my life.”
- Neglecting the offender by withdrawing love and caring.

- Apologizing. “I know you didn’t mean it the way I took it. If only I could get over my sensitivity about things like that.” I end up apologizing to you for hurting me.

As a general rule, if what we say and do makes the other person feel bad, it’s probably not genuine forgiveness.

## STEPS TO FORGIVENESS

*Say:* Many researchers and authors have identified steps to take to achieve true forgiveness. The process outlined in the Participant Guide summarizes the key steps.

*Review the Steps to Forgiveness with the group.*

*Say:* You may want to look at recent books on forgiveness available at the local library and bookstore for other ideas on how to proceed with the forgiveness process.

## FORGIVENESS ACTIVITY

*Distribute the oval sheets and read the script or play the tape that you have recorded. After the activity, invite the group to discuss the activity. .*

## CLOSING STATEMENT

*Say:* Forgiveness is a lifetime process, and a skill we all can learn. The benefits are huge, and it’s never too late to start the work of forgiveness. Take the time to learn more about forgiveness and practice the steps to achieve it. *Optional: close the lesson with one or two quotes from the Forgiveness Quotes pages.*

## EVALUATION

*Ask the participants to pick up the evaluations that are under their chairs, being careful not to look at the responses they gave at the beginning of the lesson. Ask them to complete the “After the Lesson” side of the page, and call their attention to the “Comments” area at the bottom of the page. Collect the evaluations and send them to the local Extension office.*

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## Forgiveness Quotes

“Think of your mind as a radar screen and you as the air traffic controller. On that screen at any minute are all the things you need to think about and attend to at any given moment. And then imagine that on your screen is a plane that has been circling for 9 or 10 years. Think of how much energy it is taking to keep that plane up there. Forgiveness is letting that plane land.”

---*Fred Luskin*

“Expectations are premeditated resentments.”

---*Unknown*

“Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back... in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

---*Frederic Buechner*

“Forgiveness is the key to peace and happiness, and is the greatest healer of all.”

---*Gerald G. Jampolsky, M.D.*

“If I hold onto a grudge because I’m angry, I feel strong. But to set that anger aside takes real strength.”

---*Everett. L. Worthington, Jr.*

“It takes courage and commitment to act in a more forgiving fashion. It is not at all a sign of weakness, but a mark of strength.”

---*Dr. Carl Thorensen, Stanford University*

“Forgiveness is giving up hope for a better past.”

---*John A. Mac Dougall*

“He who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself.”

---*Unknown*

“You and I don’t get a choice about whether we have relatives. And we may not have a choice about how those relatives feel about us. But we do get to choose what our relationship with our relatives will be. Even if there is distance, or a past hurt, we can reach out in love. The other person may not change, but we do.”

---*Mary Manin Morrissey*

“Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others. Ask for forgiveness from others. Forgiveness can soften the heart, drain the bitterness, and dissolve your guilt.”

---*Morrie Schwartz*

“I will have no thought for the future actions of others, neither expecting them to be better or worse as time goes on, for in such expectation I am really trying to create. I will love and let be. All people are always changing. If I try to judge them, I do so only on what I **think** I know of them, failing to realize that there is much I do not know. I will give others credit for attempts at progress and for having had many victories which are unknown. I, too, am always changing, and I can make that change a constructive one. I can change myself. Others, I can only love.”

---*Families Anonymous*

“The man who opts for revenge should dig two graves.”

---*Chinese proverb*

“I think it means...putting yourself in the position of the other person, and wiping away any sort of resentment and antagonism you feel toward them.”

---*Jimmy Carter*

“When a deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive.”

---*Alan Paton*

“Forgiving is an act of mercy toward an offender. We are no longer controlled by angry feelings toward this person.”

---*Robert D. Enright*

“Forgiveness works directly on the emotion of anger (and related constructs such as resentment, hostility, or hatred) by diminishing its intensity or level within the mind and heart.”

---*Richard Fitzgibbons*

“Forgiveness is the key that can unshackle us from a past that will not rest in the grave of things over and done with. As long as our minds are captive to the memory of having been wronged, they are not free to wish for reconciliation with the one who wronged us.”

---*Lewis B. Smedes*

“Across all of the (four) studies, there was not one instance in which a group experiencing forgiveness education showed a decline in psychological health. In fact, statistically significant improvement in such variables as hope and self-esteem, as well as significant decreases in anxiety and depression, were more the rule than the exception.”

---*Robert D. Enright and Catherine T. Coyle*

“Forgiving ourselves is a tough nut to crack. Which is probably a good thing. Forgiving ourselves *should* be hard. Probable, yes, easy, no. If forgiving ourselves comes easy, chances are, we are only excusing ourselves, ducking blame, and not really forgiving ourselves at all.”

---*Louis B. Smedes*

“It is hard to imagine a world without forgiveness. Without forgiveness life would be unbearable. Without forgiveness our lives are chained, forced to carry the sufferings of the past and repeat them with no release.”

---*Jack Kornfield*

“Healthy anger drives us to do something to change what makes us angry; anger can energize us to make things better. Hate wants to make things worse.”

---*Lewis B. Smedes*

“Why do we allow someone who’s nasty to us to rent so much space in our minds?”

---*Fred Luskin*

“Forgiveness demands every mental, moral, and spiritual resource you have. Like love, it never stays the same, never ends, and deepens over the years. Forgiveness is hard, painful work that can take a lifetime.”

---*Jeanne Safer*

## **Forgiveness Activity Script**

Let's take a couple of deep breaths together. Please sit silently and listen. Now, identify someone you want to forgive and get them clearly in mind. It can be someone living or deceased, someone you have not seen in years or someone you see every day.

Take the sheet with the oval shape drawn on it, and put that person's name on the line at the top of the oval. This figure now represents your characterization of that person.

Take a pen or pencil and fill the oval with all of the thoughts, feelings, judgments and attitudes you have about them. Write small if you must, but put everything in that oval. For example, were they critical, sarcastic, mean, and dishonest? How did they drive you or other people crazy with their behavior? What are their character flaws, as you see them? Take your time and leave nothing out. Be as picky, unmerciful and derisive as you like. No one will see this paper but you.

Why dredge up all this old stuff? It's painful and maybe you would rather forget it. However, if you are remembering it right now, it is still there inside you, festering away, and maybe has been there for a long time. It needs to be put on that paper where the light of your awareness can shine on it. If you see it and acknowledge it, you can consciously let it go. Trying not to look at it will only keep it around longer. Grievances denied have a much more profound effect on us than we can possibly imagine. And the more we try to push them down, the more powerful they become.

If you have chosen a person to forgive, please take a moment to realize that you have taken a big step in healing your relationship with him or her. You and I do not usually take the time to look at all the disagreeable things we have to say about certain people. This exercise will not demean or discount you. On the contrary, it will release light into an area of your consciousness that has been in the shadows. Remember that the act of observing is the first step toward understanding.

*(pause for 5 to 10 minutes to allow people to write)*

As you look over what you have written, see if you have left anything out. Add whatever is necessary before continuing. When you have finished,

write: "And everything else." It signifies you are including anything you may remember in the future.

*(pause another 3 to 5 minutes)*

I am going to ask you three questions. Allow yourself to grasp the questions. Then take a moment to get in touch with your true feelings. You may encounter a variety of emotions as you go through this exercise. This is natural, for the emotions coming up have probably been there for quite awhile. Just let them be there. Sit with them. You do not have to do anything with them except give yourself room to experience them.

The answers to these questions are either yes or no. Responding with a 'Maybe', 'I think so', 'I'll try', or any other vague or qualifying answer counts as a "No." This is because qualifications do not come from your heart. If they occur, it is a sign that you are not yet ready to forgive that person. Be aware that you may need to have room to say: "No, I'm not willing to forgive this person," before you can have the space to give an authentic yes.

Close your eyes, and place on your lap that piece of paper on which you have written all your notes about the person you are going to forgive. Let your hands rest on the paper. As you do, you might be able to feel the energy from that characterization sheet.

In your mind's eye, place an empty chair in front of you, facing you ... Allow yourself to see this person coming toward you from the horizon to your right ... Let them sit in a chair in front of you ... How do they look as they see you? Do they appear worried or wary? Now, answer the following questions to yourself as you hear me ask them:

1. Are you willing to forgive this person totally? By this, we mean, are you willing to let go of everything you have written on that sheet of paper, and even things you have not written? You may not want to, may not even think you know how, but are you nevertheless willing, from your heart, to let this person off the hook? Again, are you willing to forgive this person totally? Answer yes or no to yourself.

2. Are you willing to forgive this person absolutely? By this we mean, are you willing to let go of your favorite stories and scenarios about them? Are

you willing to give up permission to use these stories, either with yourself or with others, as the reason you have not achieved your goals and dreams in life? This means that every time you are tempted to use one of these stories, you will say to yourself, “Thank you for sharing, but I have already forgiven this person.” So, once again, are you willing to forgive this person absolutely? Answer yes or no to yourself.

3. Are you willing to forgive this person unconditionally? Now and forever? This means that when you see them again, or think of them in any way, and notice you are starting to voice your old stories and evaluations, you will say, “Thank you for sharing, but I have already forgiven this person.” This person may do what they usually do, which has upset you in the past. But you are hereby giving up permission to use what he or she does or says to form characterizations of them. In answering this question yes, you are willing to see that forgiveness has nothing to do with this person. It has everything to do with what you think or say about him or her. So, once again, are you willing to forgive this person unconditionally? Answer yes or no to yourself.

Whether you have answered yes or no to any of the questions, the fact that you have brought this person to sit in front of you says that you are willing for some healing to take place between the two of you ... We sometimes need room to say no before we can say yes ... There may be something you want to tell them from your heart right now ... Let them know what it is (*pause for fifteen seconds*). There may be something they want to tell you ... Listen to them now (*pause for fifteen seconds*).

If there are any questions to which you answered no, but are now willing to answer yes, allow yourself to do that now. If not, just let it be.

In your mind’s eye, you can hug that person or shake hands. They did what they did. And so did you. That is the way it is with human beings. It is possible that all is well. Are you willing to see that possibility? Now, watch them as they walk away. If you still have any feelings about them, just let those feelings be. Know that healing is now taking place in your relationship with them.

Now, open your eyes. Take that piece of paper, tear it up, and throw it away. This symbolizes that you are complete in this process, no matter how you answered the questions. Figuratively, you are washing your hands of it.

Let's take some time to think about what you have gained from this exercise. You may have answered no to one or more of the above questions. Would you be willing to do the exercise again? If you continue to answer no to any of the questions, it might indicate that some specific work on the matter is needed. Above all, this is a time for compassion for yourself. If you have answered yes, what do you see? Is there a possibility of having a conversation with that person that was not a possibility in the past? (Note that this conversation does not need to take place for you to reap the benefits of forgiveness.) Do you notice a shift in your energy level? If so, what is it?

Learning to forgive is an ability that, with practice, becomes easier and easier. Be forewarned that you will also become more aware of people whom you have not forgiven. This awareness will stick with you until you act upon it and heal the relationship.

**Forgiveness Is Your Business.** People often ask, "Should I tell someone that I've forgiven them?" Think about it for a moment. If I walked up to you and announced, "I have forgiven you," what would your probable response be? Right! Something like: "What for?" Telling someone that you have forgiven them is irrelevant and a mistake. After all, forgiveness is your being willing to let go of what you have thought or said about them. It does not require even a single word from them to complete this process and bring you a sense of closure.

If you are not sure about forgiving a person who has been physically or emotionally violent with you or with a loved one, remember it can feel threatening or dangerous to let such a person off the hook. Remember that forgiveness does not mean forgetting or rationalizing away what they have done. It involves your letting go of a characterization of them that you have created.

(adapted from a presentation by Bernie and Kayla W. at 2002 Serenity Retreat, Rockaway Beach, OR)

