

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Findings on Forgiving \*

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**Forgiving** has long been a virtue in many religions. However, forgiving has only been explored by psychologists in the past decade.



Research has found that people can gain psychological benefits by forgiving somebody who has hurt them. In studies of long-married couples, forgiving is a process that keeps these relationships functioning.

When somebody hurts us, there are many ways we can react. We can defend ourselves. This often leads to resentment, a desire for revenge and a tendency to avoid that person. On the other hand, we can forgive the offender. We can let go of our resentment, anger and spite. We can even feel compassion for the person who hurt us. The tendency to defend ourselves is automatic. However, we have to learn to forgive.

Psychologist Robert Enright (University of Wisconsin, Madison) is one of those who studied forgiving. He views forgiving to be different from either **condoning**

or **excusing** the hurtful behavior. *"We're asking people to forgive despite the knowledge that what was done to them was unfair."*

Forgiveness is not the same as **reconciliation** either. Forgiveness involves only the person who was hurt. Not only does reconciliation involve *both* people, it involves a change in the person who did the hurting.

If somebody has hurt you, why should you forgive that person? First, it is not healthy to carry around a desire for revenge or a tendency to avoid that person. Hostility and aggression lead to many health problems.

In his research, Enright has consistently found that the act of forgiving people reaps benefits. They have more hope, self-esteem and feelings of well-being. They also have less anxiety, depression and hostility.

With Suzanne Freedman (University of Northern Iowa), Enright studied a dozen incest survivors. Those who forgave their abusers had more hope and less anxiety and depression. This difference was still evident one year later.

Michael McCullough, another psychologist, is the director of research for the National Institute of Healthcare Research (Rockville, MD). McCullough believes that forgiveness is motivated by **empathy**. (Empathy is feeling as another does – plus understanding what that person feels and why.) If you are offended by another, feeling empathy for that person makes you more likely to forgive than a person who does not have empathy.

You are also more likely to forgive, if the offender *apologizes*. McCullough thinks that the apology elicits empathy. In turn, this invites forgiving.

McCullough and his associates did a study using 131 female and 108 male college students. They wanted to find out if people who forgive are more agreeable toward, or less avoidant of, their offenders. Subjects gave a written description of a situation in which someone hurt them. They described how hurt they were, how wrong the offender was, and the extent to which the offender apologized. After that, several measures were taken –

- how much empathy was felt toward the offender,
- the degree of forgiveness given,
- how much reconciliation was attempted, and
- how much subjects avoided the offender.

McCullough found that an offender's apology did lead to empathy. In turn, empathy made forgiving more likely. People who forgave were less spiteful and avoidant of the offender.

In another study, McCullough solicited subjects who wanted help in forgiving somebody who had hurt them. Subjects were randomly assigned to seminars offered for eight hours over two days.

- One group was given a seminar that used empathy to promote forgiving.
- The second was given a seminar to promote forgiving, but it did not emphasize empathy.
- The third group was put on a waiting list for a seminar.

Those in the empathy seminar reported more empathy toward offenders than the other two conditions. They were also more willing to forgive their offenders than the other groups. However, much more research is needed in this area.

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**If you have been hurt by another,  
you have the choice of constantly reliving the pain  
or letting it go by forgiving the offender.**

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Of course, you don't need to wait for more research data. Suppose you have offended someone close to you. If you really want to maintain that relationship, it helps to apologize for what you have done. (I know this can be a very hard thing for some people to do.)

However, if you have been hurt by someone close to you, you have to decide how important that relationship is. You can decide to keep the hurt – and sometimes the hate – alive. You can keep playing the scene of the offense over in your mind. You could even seek revenge. This is sure to raise blood pressure, increase anxieties and probably end the relationship.

On the other hand – especially if the offender has sincerely apologized – you could forgive the other person. This is more likely to keep lines of communication open and maintain a positive relationship. It will also keep the blood pressure down and reduce anxiety. The hurt will no longer rule your life.

Knowing this, what are you going to choose?

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\* Adapted from Beth Azar's "Forgiveness helps to keep relationships steadfast," [\*The APA Monitor\*](#), November, 1997, page 14.