

# Forgiveness: Sharing the Journey

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Health Care Professionals, by definition, engage people within all aspects of life. Health Care Professionals encounter persons who are happy and fulfilled, angry and frustrated, hurt and damaged. The goal is to encourage growth, an embrace of life and living, a more productive and meaning-filled life for the seniors. They talk with clients about many intimate subjects: personal health, family relationships, personal goals and desires, even hopes and dreams. These are the intimate encounters that convinced us to become a health care professional and that fuels the energy that is required to continue in this profession.

One of the most pressing issues encountered by health care professionals are clients who are having problems with forgiveness. What is forgiveness? Is it important for a person to forgive? What if forgiving is hard? How can a nurse, social worker, business agent, housekeeper, highly skilled in other issues and disciplines, be of value when the issue at hand is the need for forgiveness?

Forgiveness. We all want it. We all need it. But do we need to give it?

It is easy to forgive until it really counts. It is easy to forgive an unintended slight or an oversight. But when the offense cuts deep, when it is our “blood-on-the-table”, our heart broken, our dreams shattered, then forgiveness becomes more difficult.

- How can I forgive something so terrible?
- How can I forgive that ‘family friend’ who came into my room every night when I was little to do the unspeakable?
- How can I forgive someone who I trusted with my life but who stabbed me in the back?
- How can I forgive what was said, or worse, what was done?

To forgive feels like letting the culprit off the hook...like we are agreeing with the situation...like we deserved what happened. Sometimes, to forgive when it is hard to forgive seems impossible.

Yet the journey of forgiveness is at the heart of every quest for meaning in life. As noted in his book, *Forgiveness is a Choice*, Dr. Enright suggests that forgiveness is essential to good mental health, good spiritual health, and even good physical health. (see “Recommended Readings” below). Contrary to the beliefs of many, to forgive is not necessarily to forget. In fact, to forgive might mean remembering all the more ... remembering so it doesn’t happen again...remembering in preparation for the next time ... remembering in order to learn. No, forgiveness does not necessarily mean to forget.

Forgiveness can also mean releasing the garbage, surrendering the anger, not allowing the offense to continue to live within and poison the soul. A person doesn't have to forget to forgive. Nor does it required that reconciliation takes place. While forgiveness can mean forgetting and reconciling, it can also be a simple (?) releasing, a willingness to give up the pain, to let go and continue on with life, perhaps [is this even possible?] the better and the wiser for the experience.

For what happens to a person who can not forgive? Sometimes these persons become hard and bitter with tunneled vision that lives in the pain rather than the possibilities. Sometimes these persons begin to question other people and other situations in their life, wondering when the 'next shoe is going to drop,' steeling themselves against a hurt that feels immanent. Sometimes people who can't forgive can't trust themselves or their world to be able to withstand another assault or to endure a new betrayal/pain and so withdraw and hide.

How can a health care professional assist a client who needs to forgive self, others, a situation-past, God? Below are a few hints.

*One: Begin with your own need to forgive, remembering how difficult it is sometimes to forgive.* What the client needs and wants within their struggle to forgive is not advice or even information. What they want, even if they can't verbalize it, is someone to walk with them. For being able to forgive is a journey. The ability to forgive is not something that can be turned off and on like a light bulb. It takes time to process the hurt that is always present. It takes time to weigh the situation and decide whether or not it is in one's own best interest to let go, to release, to forgive. A professional can demonstrate the needed patience as we remember our own struggle with forgiving and to give our resident the time they need to work the situation through for themselves. Sometimes the best healer is not the person who knows the right answers or gives the clear insight, but who is one of the also-wounded and is willing to share their own humanity through patience.

*Two: Remember, you can't fix it.* Forgiveness, like any other spiritual growing, can only be accomplished from inside out, never the outside in. I am the only one who can decide when it is time for me to forgive. No one can do it for me. No one can tell me how. It is a solitary journey, an individual journey. Yet, at the same time, it doesn't have to be a journey that is experienced alone. A caregiver can be a companion on the journey. The caregiver can offer insights that have made sense in their experience, but never in the belief that they have *the* answer or the only possible insight. Therefore, the caregiver is to be a non-judgmental listener, sometimes asking questions that help the client to clarify their journey, but always being present as a companion on the client's journey.

*Three: To forgive another can be painful.* At least the hurt that has caused the need for forgiveness is painful. So give clients, on the journey of forgiveness a break, the benefit of the doubt. To be sure, forgiveness, once given, is often liberating and soul-mending and empowering. But the journey towards forgiveness leads through the pain that

caused the need for forgiveness in the first place. To forgive requires that I accept the fact that I have been betrayed, hurt, damaged. To forgive another requires that I accept the fact that their relationship with me, at least sometime in the past, has been important and valued to me, which has made the betrayal and hurt all the more painful and seemingly unforgivable. Lewis Smedes (*The Art of Forgiving*, Chapter 15 p.129ff [see “Recommended Readings” below]) calls this process ‘owning our pain.’ We can only forgive that for which we have truly hurt, unabashedly, without rationalization or making excuses for the behavior. Initially, the path to forgiveness does not lead away from the pain. Instead it leads into a deeper, more real encounter with the pain that has been caused by another. No wonder many people never arrive at forgiveness. The journey of forgiveness hurts and without support, without a caring touch, without a word of encouragement, all of which can come from a sensitive caregiver, some people may remain stuck in the past forever. (Or at least until the pain of not-forgiving exceeds the pain of the perceived unforgivable act.)

*Four: To forgive means to end in a different place.* Many people have problems with forgiving because they believe that things have changed between the person-who-did-the-hurting and the person who hurts. To forgive, they sometimes believe, means going back to the way things were, to life as it used to be, to the same level relationship, but that feels impossible. Truth is, they are right. Forgiveness does not restore life to what it was. Forgiveness creates something new. The remembrance of the pain doesn’t allow one to go back. The only way open is forward.

Now this way forward might or might not include a relationship with the person who did the hurting. If there is no recognition of the need to change on the part of the other, no recognition of hurtful actions, there is no possibility for reconciliation, no chance for relationship. That doesn’t mean that the client doesn’t forgive, release, and surrender the hurt. It just means that the relationship is gone, sad but honest, and one moves on (see Simon and Suzanne Simon, *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with your Past and Get On With Your Life* below). But if there is recognition of hurt-caused, if there is a desire to change, then a restoration of relationship, reconciliation, can take place, but only *knowing what we know now*. The new, restored relationship does not forget the past, but instead takes the past into account. Ideally the relationship *grows* with the embrace ‘sins-of-the-past’ and the choice to renew, restore, even repair what was once destroyed.

But when the client is not willing to resolve the forgiveness issues that arise when talking about financial planning, etc., the only thing that the caregiver can do is to engage the client as openly as possible but then leave the client in their need-for-forgiveness state. It is not the caregiver’s responsibility to get the client to resolve any personal need, forgiveness being only one of them. The caregiver can only be a resource for the client’s action, not the actor themselves. In any case, there can be positive outcomes:

- Perhaps now the relationship can be more honest, more open and supportive than it was in the past because both parties know the destructive power of betrayal and hurt.
- Perhaps now there is a deeper commitment towards relationship because both parties understand the lengths that the other had to journey in order to reach the place of reconciliation.
- Perhaps ... perhaps not ... but if not, the journey of forgiveness, the act of release itself, allows the client to go free!

The health care professional plays a crucial role in the life of a client, specifically because a caregiver is just that: **a person who cares**, not a clairvoyant, or a priest, or even a family member. The caregiver can be effective because of the relationship of trust that has been built with the client, a relationship based upon listening and fulfilling of the client's needs and goals rather than those of the caregiver. The caregiver can be effective in providing service, even companionship along the journey toward forgiveness, because the caregiver does not have 'stake' in the client's decisions. If the client wishes to harbor the pain, refuse to reconcile or even release the past, the client can do so. Bluntly put, the caregiver does not have to live with the client. The caregiver does not have to experience the consequences of the client's forgiveness or refusal to forgive. The caregiver is free to truly stand with the client, listen to the client, engage the client, always knowing that whatever decision is made, it is the client's to make, and to live with.

### **Recommended Reading on Forgiveness**

Enright, Robert D. Ph.D *Forgiveness is a Choice* American Psychological Association: APA Lifetools

Smedes, Lewis *The Art of Forgiving* 1996 by Lewis Smedes, New York: Ballantine Books, ISBN 345-41344-X

Simon, Sidney B., and Simon, Suzanne 1990 *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with your Past and Get On With Your Life* New York: Times Warner ISBN 0-446-39259-6