

Handout 7.1: Common Myths About Forgiveness

Myth 1: Forgiving means condoning behavior and letting someone off the hook.

Forgiving lets you off the hook—not the other person. It frees you from bitterness and from the past that cannot be altered in the present. When you forgive, you give up the anger and resentment that stops you from healing, but you do not condone the behavior. When you forgive someone, you let go of the expectation that he or she was able to be healthier, and you refuse to be a victim anymore.

Myth 2: Forgiving is mostly a gift you give to others.

Forgiveness is primarily a gift you give to yourself. When you forgive, you accept that a person's unacceptable behavior is due to his or her own limitations, and acknowledge that people cannot give you what they do not have inside. By letting go of the grudge, you let go of your negativity and bitterness—which is like poison to you, not the other person. Letting the negativity go will let you move forward in life without the chains from the past holding you back.

Myth 3: Forgiving means forgetting.

Why would you want to forget something that helped shape you into who you are today? It is much better to learn than to forget, because you will decrease the chances that history will repeat itself. There are times to hold on, and times to let go—and in healing from the past, letting go is not forgetting, but giving up the hold that the memories have over you. When you forget, things are more likely to happen again. When you forgive, but don't go back for more, you can improve your future by keeping in mind lessons from your past.

Myth 4: You can forgive only when you no longer hurt.

There are some things in life that will always hurt, such as the death of a loved one or a traumatic situation where you were completely victimized and had no control. However, that doesn't mean you can't move on and be happy in life despite the hurt. But in order for you to grow from

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the hurt, you need embrace forgiveness. As actress Lily Tomlin said, "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past."

Myth 5: To be forgiven, the person needs to be sorry.

Those who wait for their transgressors to feel remorse might wait for a lifetime. That gives the transgressor too much power over your ability to heal. Some people are just too mentally crippled to take responsibility for their actions, or have some type of personality disorder, and lack of remorse is one of the hallmarks. They think that their problems are everyone else's fault. When people can't or won't take responsibility for being hurtful, you may need to protect yourself and set good limits, distance yourself, or even completely take them out of your life, depending on the situation. However, you can still exercise forgiveness.

Myth 6: If you forgive, you are being weak and not standing up for your rights.

To the contrary, forgiveness is a sign of strength. Letting go of the control someone has over you requires you to be strong and courageous. Forgiveness allows you to become stronger because of the hurt, not weaker. Through lessons learned and building on the pain to move past the hurt, you will gain strength of character.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."