



L A K E F R O N T
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Abundant Living... Discover the Possibilities!

TO FORGIVE OR NOT TO FORGIVE?

The Battle Between the Will and Emotion

By Dr. Beth Johnson

Forgiveness for serious trauma is a difficult choice and the healing may take a long time. At Lakefront Wellness Center, we are trained in assisting you with this process. We are sensitive to the difficulties involved in achieving forgiveness but we do feel that it is a main key to your wellness. In addition, our experts have training in advanced techniques such as Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) which helps the brain reprocess traumatic events. We use EMDR along with forgiveness in helping people recover from the wounds of abuse, infidelity, and all types of trauma.

Why do we need to forgive?

There is a new thrust in psychology these days and it's about forgiveness. Psychologists definitely did not discover it but they are confirming its power. Psychologists are pointing out research that demonstrates that those who are exposed to forgiveness groups score better on measures of anxiety and depression as compared to those with similar traumas who are not exposed to forgiveness in their treatment. Measures of unforgiveness have a stronger correlation with heart disease than do measures of hostility (Enright, 2001). Mental health professionals spend much time bandaging the wounds of people who have been traumatized by someone or multiple someones, and without forgiveness we only can do just that - bandage someone. With forgiveness, we have at our grasp the healing that will not just bandage, but it will set people free and change the face of their personality and life.

I'm assuming that if you are taking the time to read this article that you have suffered some serious injury that has now preoccupied your mind. These kinds of trespasses, when allowed to penetrate, create devastating emotional effects. I like to call them 3rd degree burns. As a psychologist, I treat the emotional aftermath of some of these trespasses. Some of the milder emotional aftermath is sadness, behavior changes (e.g., avoidance, sarcasm, and negativity), discouragement, disappointment, irritability and decreased energy and enthusiasm for life. When the devastation is severe and out of control, I frequently observe more severe symptoms such as nightmares, obsession with the person who hurt them, poor concentration, depression, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, isolation and impaired functioning.

When we are children we learn the basics about forgiveness. We can observe the beginnings of learning to forgive by watching children play. It isn't long before one child trespasses against the other, simple, obvious trespasses. One child takes the other's toy, pulls the other's hair or eats the other's cookie. The other child cries to the adult present. The adult intervenes and hopefully, orchestrates the mechanics of apologizing and accepting the apology. The children are almost immediately playing again and they seem to have no recollection of what just happened. They don't necessarily review the event like adults do. It's as if they haven't learned how to resent. **They haven't learned how to analyze their playmate's actions and judge their moral character.** *They feel at peace with each other once again.*



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As adults, we use this childlike principle of forgiveness. When we have forgiven someone, we make the mistake of looking to our emotions to respond neutrally or peacefully to the person who has offended us. *This confuses the choice or act of forgiveness with recovery from the wound.* In the case of very serious trauma, what usually occurs is that the very mention of the name of the person who has wounded us causes us to inwardly recoil and/or feel that familiar pang of resentment. And we question whether we have truly forgiven because that resentment should not be there if we had but this is not necessarily true.

When our will chooses to forgive it does not mean that the pain that resulted from the sin committed against you will always instantly go away.

Consider this example. Let's suppose that a friend is pouring you a cup of steaming hot coffee and she gets distracted for a second and pours the coffee over your hand. You immediately forgive her for the accident but the hot coffee has left 2nd degree burns on your hand! The pain of the burn persists for several weeks and you have difficulty carrying out tasks with that hand. Now here's the point: You don't question your forgiveness of your friend because the wound still hurts, right?

It's not quite that simple with emotional pain. Re-living the anger and pain after one has chosen forgiveness *can* point to leftover unforgiveness; however, I believe the same principle can be applied to emotional pain. There is real physical change that occurs in our brains when we are seriously wounded. Even in a normal response to trauma, the biochemistry of our brain is affected from the stress of the event. There may be constant surges of adrenaline while someone is going through a painful period. These surges eventually deplete the body and the brain and put it in a state of imbalance. When our brain chemistry is out of balance, we may become depressed, anxious, have difficulty sleeping, experience changes in appetite, experience nightmares, etc.

Sometimes people respond to a trauma in a way that can lead to serious psychological maladjustment and develop symptoms of a disorder called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It's as if the brain can't process the event and the person's life is disrupted by flashbacks of the event, nightmares, obsessions, depression, anxiety and many other problems.

Our brain records information and memories in neuro-pathways in the brain. When information is frequently remembered or used, it deepens that neuro-pathway in the brain. New trauma pathways in our brain are established as a result of the human instinct to obsess over the wound as a means to understand it and get control over it. When we are traumatized, our brain sometimes acts like it has a skip in a record. It repeats and repeats and forms a new pathway. Overused pathways are a "Catch 22:" the more we use them, the more they control our thinking and our emotions. This is not so helpful if you are trying to release someone to forgiveness. This is a physical change to the brain that will take time and lack of rehearsal to change.



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Despite our choice to forgive, we cannot always convince our emotions and our thought processes to instantly line up and behave. Some of us have gone through mental gymnastics in an effort to “feel forgiveness.” The emotional self has been damaged and it needs time to heal just as the burn to the hand; however, if we wait until we are emotionally healed before we choose to forgive, I think we are in danger of not ever truly receiving the healing that comes through forgiveness. ***The healing in the emotions is what takes time, not necessarily the choice to forgive. We can choose to forgive before we have started recovering from the wound.***

The choice to forgive is the ointment to the burn. It speeds the healing and reduces scarring. In addition, the ointment of forgiveness may need to be reapplied liberally and often. The damaged incurred may have resulted from many incidents over time. It is normal that you may have to return to the choice of forgiveness as new layers of hurt are uncovered or re-remembered. I think it is a mistake to equate forgiveness with the absence of pain in our emotions.

Peace in your emotions is a possible result of forgiveness. It is not forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a choice, an act of the will. Forgiveness forfeits revenge and judgment and leaves that to God.

Matthew 7:1-5 states:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

To judge has two meanings that are subtle in distinction. One meaning of judge is to make a judgment or decision concerning someone or something, as in a judge determining a sentence of someone. Another meaning of judge is to hold or form an opinion of someone or something. We are to judge behavior (hold an opinion) without assigning a sentence. The sentence can only come from the only Judge who is capable of judging accurately, GOD. **We have God’s permission to be angry** but we don’t have permission to hold it against the person and long for their punishment. To long for their punishment is to feed our bitterness and this becomes our own sentence for someone else’s wrong deed.

Forgiveness is refraining from giving others what they deserve (punishment and justice) and offering something they don’t deserve (mercy and compassion).



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I believe that there is sacrifice involved in forgiveness. It involves sacrificing our need to judge and hang onto our rights. It involves suspending your need for justice and giving it up to God. I believe it goes against human instinct to give up our need for justice and our need to hang onto our hurt. Our hurt reminds us that what that person did was wrong; and we need to know what they did was wrong so it gives us a sense of justice.

Robert Enright (2001) explained that resentment is re-living the original anger. Resentment is a means of keeping our original anger alive indefinitely. Choosing to live a lifestyle of forgiveness WILL interfere with the resentment process setting in. It should interfere with us going back to the same hurt over and over and re-living it. It may require that we stop ourselves by saying to ourselves, "***I'm not going to rehearse what that person has done. I have chosen forgiveness.***" If we don't rehearse something as much it doesn't change our brain as much, it doesn't hurt as much.

*Excerpted from Johnson, B. (2001).
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