

The Deepest Act of Forgiveness: Forgiving Yourself

A friend forgives another friend for gossiping about her. A husband forgives a wife for lying to him about her intimate relationship with another man. A mother forgives the man who murdered her daughter. The human capacity to forgive even the deepest wrongs is awe-inspiring.

For many people, forgiving others is liberation from anger and grievance that leads to a richer and happier life. But psychologists and others in the helping profession say there is an even deeper peace to be found through what might be the hardest act of all—forgiving ourselves.

The first part of any conflict we must resolve is not between “me and my neighbor”, but between “me and me.” So believes author and therapist Thom Rutledge, who has written extensively on forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

In his book *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook: A Practical and Empowering Guide*, Rutledge writes that the resentment and grudges we hold against ourselves are every bit as destructive as those we harbor towards others. Every time we tune in to the inner dialogue that says we are not (smart, thin, rich, successful,

good, etc.) enough, or berate ourselves for what we did or didn't do, we are choosing to live in blame and resentment—only it's towards ourselves and not others. As Buddhist monk and author Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, to truly practice forgiveness we must first forgive ourselves for not being perfect.

Philosophers, religious leaders and others have known this for thousands of years; one of the basic tenets of most major religions is to love others as we love ourselves. If we can't forgive and love ourselves, how can we truly forgive and love others?

In her book *The Unburdened Heart: Five Keys to Forgiveness and Freedom*, author Mariah Burton Nelson writes, “When we treat ourselves with love and compassion, we become nicer to everyone else. We become less defensive. We don't worry so much what others' judgments might be, because we're not judging ourselves.”

Forgiving ourselves is not a selfish way to let ourselves off the hook for behaving

badly. Rather, it is the result of looking deeply within ourselves, accepting our mistakes and failures, taking responsibility for our actions, and loving ourselves in spite of it all. Fred Luskin, psychologist and cofounder of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, writes, “Forgiving is

not about condoning bad behavior; it's about taking responsibility and becoming a hero and not a victim in the story you tell.”

To be able to say, “I behaved (thoughtlessly, unkindly, foolishly, etc.) and I forgive myself for not being perfect” could be the biggest—and most healing—act of all. For when you can forgive the imperfection in yourself, it's a lot easier to forgive them in others.

“Self-forgiveness is a commitment to love yourself no matter what,” Nelson says. “It's the generous act of giving yourself a break. Remembering that you're human. Offering yourself the loving kindness that you might offer, on your best days, to those you love the most, no matter what they've done.” ■

"Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit."
—Peter Ustinov

10 Sources of Stress

Ask people why they're stressed, and they're likely to say that it's these infernal deadlines or too much work and too little staff, or perhaps the family's overpacked schedules. And while these can certainly add to a pressure-cooker atmosphere, they're not really the greatest cause. At fault more than anything is the tremendous internal pressure and anxiety that we create for ourselves through the following:

1. Self-criticism. Tame your inner

critic, focus on your strengths and forgive yourself.

2. Feeling powerless. We are all powerful beyond measure. Open your eyes and see all the choices available to you.

3. Perfectionism. Do your best, but let the elusive “perfect” go.

4. Worry. Faith and action are the best antidote to worry, especially about situations we cannot control.

5. Unrealistic expectations. Life can never be problem-free. Our outlook can be.

6. Insecurity. What we need to be

emotionally secure is inside each one of us. Stop looking to others to provide it.

7. Hurrying. Try walking slower, chewing slower and working at a steady, but not frantic pace. You might be surprised to find yourself performing better.

8. Comparing to others. The question should be whether you have met your own standard.

9. Pessimism. When we expect the best of life, life has a way of providing it.

10. Competition. Find a way to turn every encounter into a win-win situation rather than a win-lose one. ■

A Letter From Yvonne Blockie M.A. MFT



It is said that the road to forgiveness is a journey toward freedom. If so, then the first step is to forgive ourselves. For most of us are our own worst critics, and the harshness we heap upon ourselves can be a huge burden. As the cover article points out, it is only after forgiving and loving ourselves that we can truly forgive and love others.

While examining ways to be kinder to yourself, consider the Top 10 and quiz in this issue. The Top 10 looks at the ways we create internal pressure and anxiety for ourselves, while the quiz explores the difference between zestful work toward a cherished goal and workaholism.

The page 3 feature in this issue speaks to the task of working on a relationship alone. While it may seem impossible to affect a relationship when your partner refuses to seek counseling or to engage in improving the relationship in other ways, the article points out what *is* possible when you're working solo. The results may surprise you!

Finally, the back page article addresses assertiveness and the fears that keep us from speaking up when we need or want to. When we don't speak up, we minimize ourselves and hand over personal power that really belongs to us.

Here's to an expansive and abundant 2005, illuminated by the gifts of insight, support and courage.

Do You Have Workaholic Habits?

There is a clear difference between enthusiastic, energetic work toward a highly valued goal and workaholism. That difference lies primarily in the emotional quality of the hours spent. Workaholism has a treadmill, joyless quality, not the bouncy, fun energy of a trampoline. And while working long, hard hours may help you accomplish a primary work goal, it likely will leave other areas of your life—family, friendship, intellectual stimulation, etc.—in shambles.

"Workaholism is an addiction," Julia Cameron says in her book, *The Artist's Way*, "and like all addictions, it blocks creative energy." Take the following quiz, adapted from Cameron's book, to help you figure out if you have workaholic habits. Even better, ask a few members of your family, or a few friends, to answer these questions for you. You may be surprised by what you discover.



True False

- 1. I work beyond normal office hours.
- 2. I cancel dates with friends or family members to do more work.
- 3. I postpone outings until my deadline project is done.
- 4. I take work with me on vacations.
- 5. I take my laptop with me on vacations.
- 6. I take work home with me on weekends.
- 7. I rarely or never take vacations.
- 8. My family and/or friends complain that I always work.
- 9. I seldom allow myself free time between projects.
- 10. It's a challenge for me to finish tasks.
- 11. Procrastination often keeps me working longer.
- 12. I set out to do one job and start on three more at the same time.
- 13. I work in the evenings during family time or time I could be reading for pleasure.
- 14. I allow calls and email to interrupt—and lengthen—my workday.
- 15. I don't make time for creative work/play a priority in my day.
- 16. Work always comes before my creative dreams.
- 17. I always take calls on my cell phone; it is never off.
- 18. I rarely allow myself down time to do nothing.
- 19. I use the word "deadline" to describe and rationalize my workload.
- 20. I often take a notebook or my work numbers with me when I go somewhere, even to dinner.

If you answered more true than false, you may benefit from exploring your attachment to work. For people with workaholic tendencies, work is often synonymous with worth, so the more the better. Work can also be a way to avoid looking at issues in your life—"Who's got the time?" the workaholic asks. If you would like assistance fighting your workaholic streak, please don't hesitate to call. ■

Working on Your Relationship—Alone

As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. It also takes two to make a couple. It takes two to make a relationship and, it follows, two to work on that relationship.

But what happens when one person in a relationship doesn't want to do the work—especially if that work means going to couples counseling?

First, it's important to make sure your mate really doesn't want to go. Lorna Hecker, Clinic Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Center of Purdue University, lists these tips for asking your partner to join you in marital/relationship therapy:

- **Ask your partner to join you in therapy.** Most people are just afraid to ask. Express your concern about your relationship in a non-blaming way. Don't let the myth that "he/she will never go to counseling" dissuade you. As a therapist, I hear this all the time, and 90 percent of the time, it just isn't true that someone will never go to therapy.

- **Don't let your partner pull you into an argument.** Try a broken record technique such as: "We disagree; and we disagree a lot. That's why I would like for us to go to marital therapy." Say it over and over (like a broken record), rather than get pulled into an argument. Also, ask for what you do want from your partner, rather than what you don't want.

- **If you have previously asked your partner to go to therapy before and he/she refused, ask again, but ask differently.** Most people have great difficulty asking their partner to counseling in a non-defensive, caring way because they are hurting. Try, "I love you, I care about us and I need some help in learning how to communicate to you better. I would like to try counseling." Select a time when there are no distractions, and your partner is rested.

And if your partner absolutely refuses to try couples counseling? Go yourself. At the very least you can change how you are managing your relationship problems. Even if only one person in a relationship sees a counselor or therapist, change can happen.

"The overall relationship you have together may or may not improve, however your own attitude about it will," says Larry James, author of *How to Really Love the One You're With!* This alone is a positive step in the right direction."

Dr. Phil C. McGraw puts it more bluntly. In his book, *Relationship Rescue*, he urges all partners who are unhappy in a

relationship to first tend to themselves before trying to change a spouse, lover, partner or boyfriend/girlfriend.

"It is not possible for you to have a seriously defective long-term relationship unless you have generated and adopted a lifestyle to sustain it," he writes in *Relationship Rescue*. "The reality of your relationship along with your overall lifestyle and your relationship with yourself are one hundred percent inextricably intertwined."

In other words, how are you doing with your own relationship with the #1 person in your life—you? Although it's important to acknowledge your disappointment that your partner won't go to therapy or read about relationships with you, it's even more important to move on to the next step.

"The most important relationship is the relationship you have with yourself," James says.

If taking care of you means going to counseling, first make sure you are truly committed to changing. Counseling can be very emotionally challenging because you are forced to come face to face with some painful realities about the ways you interact with your mate. A "what can I do to be a happier person and maybe improve my relationship, too?" approach will probably be more effective than a "what do I do to get him/her to change so I can be happier?"

Alabama mediator and divorce lawyer Lee Borden urges his clients to seek counseling, even if it means going alone. He even urges couples who have decided to divorce to seek counseling to understand what went wrong and perhaps avoid certain behavior patterns in the future.

As he puts it, "As you work to know yourself, and particularly as you do it under the guidance of a caring professional, you may discover what makes you tick and find yourself on the road to healing and wholeness." ■



The Three Cs of Change

Any change begins with courage, clarity and commitment.

Courage. It takes courage to be truthful about your own part in keeping the relationship "stuck." For some people, being "right" is more important than creating a new and better relationship. It takes courage to jump off that pedestal.

Clarity. Who are you and what do you want in your relation-

ship? When you can clearly see how you helped create your relationship, it's a lot easier to change.

Commitment. Change requires taking the leap and sincerely dedicating yourself to creating a shift. Your partner may or may not cooperate with you, but in the end, you will have made the necessary changes to be ready and willing for a productive relationship. ■

What's That You Said?

The Fears That Prevent Us from Speaking Up

Do you value being seen and heard? Do you want to have truly successful relationships?

Do you want to make an impact on others? Then speak up!

Of course, for some people, that's easier said than done. You might prefer to train wild lions than tell another person what's really on your mind. But it is possible to develop an assertiveness connected to head and heart that clears the way for honest, empowered living—without being rude to others or surrendering to “nice-itis.”

“We all need to learn to dance in rhythm to the beat of our own soul,” writes Kelly Bryson in his book, *Don't Be Nice, Be Real: Balancing Passion for Self with Compassion for Others*.

Those who stay mum when they would be better off speaking their mind do so for a variety of reasons:

- **Fear of being rejected.** Any time you risk disclosing yourself, you become vulnerable. Communications skills, such as those taught in Non-Violent Communication (NVC) or Powerful Non-Defensive Communication (PNDC), teach how to combine vulnerability with strength and

compassion for powerful connections.

- **Fear of what you would tell yourself if you or any requests you make are rejected.** If you speak up and tell your officemate how much you would like to go out with her, you definitely risk rejection. But if you are rejected, does that *really* mean you're unlovable? Destined to a life alone? Or is that just a story?

- **Fear of hurting feelings.** Related to this is the belief that it is better to please others, even at your own expense. As Bryson points out, being Mr. or Mrs. Nice Guy or Gal is actually a form of violence to yourself and others, and an escape from a fully lived life.

- **Fear of “rocking the boat,” or upsetting the status quo.** The writer Muriel Rukeyser spoke to this fear in her memorable quote: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.”

- **Fear that you have nothing worth saying.** Years of poor self-image can lead to this.

- **Fear of sparking a conflict.** If you have an abusive or volatile family history, you may have learned to keep quiet or be invisible to avoid confrontation. And yet

the danger is that constant suppression of powerful feelings can lead to frustration and possibly aggressive or abusive behavior.

As Rollo May writes in his book, *Power and Innocence*, powerlessness is the precursor to violence.

It is important to distinguish between being assertive and being aggressive. Aggression trespasses on another's boundaries without regard for feelings. Assertiveness, on the other hand, communicates feelings, thoughts and needs clearly and directly.

Speaking up after years of zipping your lips may not be easy. You may need to take baby steps—take classes or workshops, consult with a counselor, join an assertiveness support group. But the payoff is more effective relationships, genuine intimacy and, more than anything, an increased feeling of self-respect and empowerment. ■



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