

Steps to Forgiveness

1. Assess the personal cost of not forgiving.

- Holding on to anger can weaken the body's immune system and lead to depression, heart attack, cancer, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and other serious medical conditions. Stewing over old hurts drains your energy, your enthusiasm, and your ability to engage fully in life. Forgiveness boosts your self-esteem and makes a positive change in your attitude. Some cardiac patients who received forgiveness education even had improved heart functioning. So instead of asking, "How could they do this to me?" maybe you should be asking, "How can I continue to do this to myself?"
- Refusing to let go of hurt can also take a toll on other relationships. You bore your (remaining) friends to death when you continue talking about the person who hurt you or your latest plot for revenge. You may also become distant from those you really care about, have difficulty maintaining emotional intimacy, and be reluctant to trust again.
- By holding a grudge, you give control over your life and your happiness to the person who wronged you. You allow toxic thoughts and feelings to dominate today and tomorrow as well. As long as you are wrapped up in playing the victim, you miss the opportunity to take back control by leaving the person and the ability to hurt you behind.

2. Start forgiving, even if you're not sure you can finish.

Perhaps the most difficult part about the path to forgiveness is that the destination can seem so far away, you think you'll never get there. Take the leap of faith and begin the journey, knowing that you will eventually find your way, one step at a time.

3. Forgive yourself first.

If you're having trouble forgiving someone, it may be because you also need to forgive yourself for trusting the wrong person, for the way you reacted when things got ugly, etc.

The anger, disappointment, and shame we feel toward ourselves sometimes eats away at our ability to love and accept ourselves. While it can be easy to cut someone else out of your life, you can never walk away from yourself. By acknowledging that you make mistakes, too, you can recognize your own limitations and love yourself anyway.

4. Cultivate compassion for the person who hurt you.

When you consider where those who have hurt you are in their lives, and the emotions and issues they have, you realize that they may not be able to make different choices.

5. Learn lessons from the experience.

Most people who have been able to forgive point out the benefits of replacing the toxic thoughts with something positive they have learned from the experience. When they tell the story of that episode in their lives, they describe their own contributions to the problems, identify the missed signals they now watch for, or express pride that they made it through the pain to find happiness on the other side. Of course, it is easier to forgive if you find yourself in a better place, professionally or personally.