

SIX STAGES OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a process, sometimes a lengthy one. To help navigate this journey, Dr. Ilene Cohen defined six stages of forgiveness: identification, acknowledgement, empathy, self-forgiveness, release, and reflection. Each state includes suggestions and activities to help reduce hurt and increase forgiveness.

STAGE 1: IDENTIFICATION

Identify your feelings: Journaling or sharing with a trusted confidante can help facilitate the process of identifying and expressing.

Make space for facts: Along with identifying our feelings, it's just as important to hold on to the facts and ensure that our feelings are not causing us to exaggerate.

Acknowledge any responsibility on your part: We also want to look for any role we may have played in creating the situation. We need to ask ourselves, *"Is there any way I could have handled the situation differently?"*

Gain awareness into underlying beliefs about forgiveness: In your family of origin, was forgiveness regularly practiced or was it more typical for family members to harbor long-term resentments? How does that impact your current view about the practice of forgiveness?

STAGE 2: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This stage entails the process of gaining greater awareness about how your pain expresses itself, how we react to it, and how we can better address it.

Name your pain: Giving your pain a voice can help you understand its impact on you. Journaling about the questions listed below is a great place to start.

1. What is the name of your pain?
2. If your pain could talk, what would it tell you?
3. How has what you want to forgive impacted your life?

Acknowledge your pain: When you validate your feelings without judgment, you are more likely to take a kinder approach toward yourself. Activities in this stage include:

1. Just listen to the pain.
2. Don't try to fix anything.
3. Don't minimize or disregard your emotions.

STAGE 3: EMPATHY

Engaging in these activities can help foster empathy and compassion for ourselves and the other person.

1. **Practice the in-their-shoes visualization:** Visualize the person who harmed you and put yourself in their shoes while envisioning their answers to the following questions:
 - *What happened in my life that caused me to engage in this action?*
 - *How do I justify my actions? Why did I do what I did?*

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While we may never know the answers to these questions, this activity helps bring about greater compassion and empathy for the other person.

At the same time, we also want to have compassion and empathy for the pain their actions caused us. To do this you can:

- 1. Write a thank-you letter to yourself:** It's easier to experience empathy and compassion when you are grateful and appreciative of yourself. Write a letter thanking yourself for how far you've come and for remaining open no matter how hard it's been.
- 2. Recite loving affirmations:** Positive affirmations prompt us to be kinder to ourselves, especially during a challenging time. Write down a few self-compassionate affirmations on note cards and repeat them to yourself in front of a mirror daily. Use these or make up your own.
 - *I am doing the best I can.*
 - *I am able to show compassion and forgive others.*
- 3. Apologize to yourself:** Not getting an apology after being hurt can often add pain to your wounded heart. To help you move on, write out the ideal apology you are seeking.

STAGE 4: SELF-FORGIVENESS

The *self-forgiveness* stage focuses on forgiving ourselves and apologizing to others.

- 1. Feel deserving of forgiveness:** If we are unable to forgive ourselves, we will continue to carry shame and guilt that will prompt us to continue to behave in destructive ways.
- 2. Address shame:** Shame is the humiliation or guilt felt when we know or perceive that we did something wrong. By being still and present, we can observe these uncomfortable feelings nonjudgmentally and allow them to come and go.
- 3. Reflect on self-expectations** We can also self-forgive by gaining greater awareness of rigid expectations we have ourselves to be 'nice' or to please others. Then, we can choose to prioritize our self-care more and lessen our need to please others.
- 4. Offer a caring apology:** We can heal from guilt and shame by apologizing to a person we have caused harm to. Strategies include:
 - Acknowledge what we have done, accept full responsibility, and convey empathy for the hurt we have caused to another.
 - Convey a sincere desire to repair the relationship. If the person is open to it, collaborate to develop a solution(s) to heal the hurt and prevent a future reoccurrence.
- 5. Be kind to yourself:** Self-kindness involves intention, perseverance, and self-compassion. Specific practices can be found at: www.self-compassion.org

STAGE FIVE: RELEASE

- 1. Avoid taking things personally:** One way to deal with hurt, anger, and resentment is to not take the other person's words/actions personally. Others often engage in harmful acts toward us due to numerous factors that have nothing to do with us.
- 2. Acknowledge reality:** In accepting the fact that although someone else's actions may be the cause of our pain, it's our responsibility to respond to those feelings appropriately.
- 3. Reframe and redirect:** Reframing is choosing to view a negative experience or interaction as an opportunity for growth. Examples of reframing include: *"I'm choosing to learn from my experiences,"* or *"I choose to let this pain pass and move forward."*
- 4. Let go:** Letting go honors the loss, grief, or betrayal we feel and makes space for us to heal.

STAGE SIX: REFLECTION

Once we have successfully navigated the first five stages of forgiveness, we can begin to live with a sense of gratefulness, peace, and intention. By freeing ourselves of guilt, shame, and resentment, we create space to make choices that are congruent with our life's purpose.

- 1. Live with purpose and intention:** Living on purpose and with intention is choosing to act in a manner that adheres to our underlying values and beliefs. When we are intentional about cultivating greater forgiveness while maintaining healthy boundaries in our lives, we increase contentment.
- 2. Take responsibility for your emotions:** By choosing to take full responsibility for our emotions, we can feel and express them without being controlled by them.
- 3. Build self-esteem:** By strengthening our self-esteem and lessening the need to seek out others' approval, we are more able to forgive ourselves and others.
- 4. Practice gratitude and forgiveness:** When we think about the person who has wronged us a whole and not just the harm, we can appreciate them for their strengths. At the very least, we can appreciate how our experience has helped us become more resilient.