

Dare to Forgive

By Edward Hallowell M.D.

Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness but of strength. It's also healthy, brave, contagious—and it sets you free. Everyone needs to forgive, whether it's your parents, your neighbors, your dog, the man who cut you off in the traffic this morning or the criminal who murdered your loved one. In this clear, concise and inspiring book, bestselling psychiatrist Dr. Edward Hallowell shows you how.

In his typical lively and engaging style, bestselling author Dr. Edward Hallowell leads you through a series of definitions and situations to an understanding of the true nature of forgiveness. He shows how and why forgiveness is the basis of a happy and healthy life, and then gives you a practical four-step program to create more of it in your own life.

Maybe you're letting the small insults of daily life pile up and cause you stress.

Dr. Hallowell will show you how his own frustration over a Porsche stealing his parking spot on a busy street led him to do something reckless.

Maybe you're hurt by the thoughtless actions of those you love.

Dr. Hallowell shows how a lack of forgiveness has stunted a marriage and how it has torn a family apart—even after all the family members have long forgotten what they disagreed about.

Maybe you're feeling let down by your own thoughts or deeds.

Dr. Hallowell shows how finally forgiving himself transformed an accidental killer into a productive member of society.

Or maybe something truly terrible has happened that, over the years, has eaten a hole in your soul.

Maybe you're one of the people who think they can never forgive. . .

"This might be the most important book you will read this year. The absence of forgiveness in our lives cripples us and it is crippling our society. Ned Hallowell does not gloss over how hard it is to forgive. Yet through his deep insight, practical steps and rich stories, he invites the reader into the sweetness of forgiveness. This is a graced achievement!"

- The Rt. Rev. M. Thomas Shaw, SSJE, Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts

"Why forgive? And how do we go about it? Dr. Hallowell addresses this age-old question with tremendous wisdom and heart. He is a compelling and generous storyteller, and he provides the reader with not only tools, but also a larger sense of hope and possibility."

- Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., Author, The Dance of Anger

"Ned Hallowell is a healing writer. He possesses the most inspiring and optimistic voice emerging from the medical community today... Dr. Hallowell brings his scientific knowledge and his generous heart to bear on

the problems that afflict our lives and those of our children, and we are better for his unique vision."

- **Michael Thompson, Ph.D., Author, Raising Cain and Best Friends, Worst Enemies**

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Review

"Forgiving doesn't mean caving in; it means ceasing to be a victim... This book is a well-written, accessible, heartfelt reminder that we all have the power to emanate good."

About the Author

Dr. Edward Hallowell is a psychologist and internationally recognized expert on ADD and other behavioral problems. He is an instructor at Harvard Medical School and director of The Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health. He lives near Boston, MA.

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Part One

What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness Is a Gift You Give to Yourself

When a well-known sportswriter in Boston died not too long ago, something terrible happened, a terrible something that happens so often that nobody usually comments on how terrible it is. The terrible thing was that a man who had once been a close friend of the sportswriter stayed away from the funeral. The erstwhile friend was still bitter over a disagreement the two of them had had a couple of years before the sportswriter's death. An argument blew up and burned them both. Resentment took root, and like the weed that it is, it grew fast. Soon, what had been a trusting, fun-filled friendship was overrun by an impenetrable thicket of anger and self-justification. Two men who'd been good friends for years became enemies. As so often happens, one of them died before they could find a way to forgive each other and resume the friendship they both had so much enjoyed.

It's hard to find the right word for that situation: sad, silly, tragic, foolish, understandable, spiteful, petty, human, absurd, a waste. In any case, it happens all the time. An action leads to anger, which leads to the end of trust and warmth. Close friends turn into cursed fools. Everybody loses. It is so stupid, so wasteful, so sad, so wrong.

What would it have taken for the sportswriter and his friend to make up? That question gnawed at me enough to start me researching and writing this book. Soon I was going to bed and waking up wondering, What does it take for any of us to make up with those we can't forgive? What is it about forgiveness that is so difficult?

Even when we know it is in our best interests to do it, we agonize over it.

What does it take to forgive? The diplomatic skills of a secretary of state? A miracle from above? Or is forgiveness simply never to be when the deeds are really bad? Is forgiveness of grievous wrongs a naive idea that only superficial sentimentalists unschooled in the ways of the world still believe in?

On the other hand, might forgiveness be worth a try? If so, why? How can a normal person do it?

Recent research has given us important information about forgiveness. We now have reliable, empirical data, not just our subjective musings. Based on that data, I now know that what happened to the sportswriter and his friend has a practical remedy, as does what happens to the millions upon millions of the rest of us who become stuck in grudges, anger and resentment.

Forgiveness is a remedy we rarely use. As a result, we suffer when we don't need to. That sportswriter and his friend could have made up. Like so many of us, they didn't. Instead they dug in, each convinced of the rightness of his position.

We've all seen this happen. A spat becomes a grudge becomes a feud becomes a schism. Along with precious heirlooms, parents bequeath to their children resentments they inherited from their parents. Partnerships dissolve over a silly squabble, and great businesses crumble. A murder begets other murders, which beget wars.

Why? What about the remedy? Why don't we use that? Isn't forgiveness better than family feuds and failed businesses and ruined friendships and cycles of murders and wars?

Well, of course it is. But it is a devilishly difficult remedy to apply. It's so hard to use, we'd sometimes rather die than try, especially when the hurt runs deep and has run for a long time. Millions of dead people have shown us their preference to die rather than forgive. You might logically conclude that forgiveness of great crimes is pretty near impossible, especially if the best of your life has been ruined by what someone else has done.

But forgiveness is never impossible. Never. If you manage to do it, you're the one who benefits the most.

Still, we tend not to forgive. We get mad at a close friend, carry a grudge and refuse to attend the funeral when the friend dies. That's the way of the world, isn't it? this silly, silly world, a world in which we're bent on wasting the best that we have? After a fight, instead of making up, each participant furiously details why he is in the right and the other person is a rotten, no-good, dirty rat? even though they loved each other just days before, not to mention the years and years before that.

All of a sudden, for us stubborn humans, being right becomes more important than being close. It becomes more important to justify our case than to make peace. We invest our energies in defaming the other person, the very same person we recently treasured as a dear friend. What's gained by being so stubborn and self-righteous? I'm not sure what's gained, but whatever it is, we defend it with our lives.

In so doing, we can destroy the best of life: friendship and peace. If only we could get better at forgiving, at not taking extreme offense so quickly, at being willing to come back into the room after we have stormed out of it, then we would live longer, happier, less complicated and less foolish lives. We wouldn't waste the best of what we have.

We weren't brought up to be as foolish as we become. Most of us were brought up to forgive. The problem is, no one told us how to do it when we were children, or even why we should. Forgiveness was just one of

those 'oughtas' we all heard. 'You oughta forgive your brother.' 'You oughta forgive your friend.' But since we weren't told how, we had to wait for forgiveness to appear, as if by magic.

Of course, we didn't hold our breaths. We really didn't care very much, because we didn't know why forgiving was such a good thing, other than that parents and teachers and religious people recommended it. While they recommended it, we couldn't help but notice they usually didn't practice it. So we turned to what came to us naturally and was a lot more exciting: holding grudges and seeking revenge.

I have since found out that it is worth learning the act of forgiveness, even though it never comes naturally. Now that I have grown up and become a doctor and actually researched the topic, I have learned a lot. The grown-ups back when I was a kid may not have known the hows and whys of forgiveness, but, like a good night's sleep or a balanced diet, they were right to recommend it. Medically speaking, it is really good for you to forgive. It's much, much better than holding a grudge or seeking revenge. Learning how to forgive ranks near the top of the practical steps you can take to improve your life, your physical health and your emotional health. Furthermore, the price is good; it's free.

It's also freeing. When you forgive, you free yourself from mind-forged manacles. You start to derive benefits as soon as you gain release from the anger and resentment that have held you down.

Among the many health benefits, your blood pressure may go down, your resting heart rate may decrease, your immune system may get stronger, your susceptibility to a heart attack or a stroke may decrease, headaches and backaches and neck pain may abate, your need for medications may diminish, and even your sexual self may gain strength. If this sounds like a lot, it actually isn't anywhere near a complete list of the potential physical benefits of forgiveness.

I haven't even mentioned the emotional benefits. Forgiving lifts your spirits. It makes you feel happier, and it clarifies your thinking. No longer must you carry a lodestone of anger and resentment. The lift returns to your step, and your day does not dawn in a shadow of grievance.

Compared to other measures people take to improve their lives, forgiving is at least as good for you as losing weight, getting the right amount of sleep, taking supplemental vitamins or wearing seat belts. However, as I have mentioned, forgiving is hard to learn to do. We need help.

Unlike most other steps we can take toward a better life, there isn't much written to offer us help on how to forgive. We find we're still where we were when we were growing up: lots of people recommend forgiving, but they neither tell us how to do it nor do they show us in their own lives.

I want to change that.

Here's good news. However difficult it may be, forgiving is a skill anyone can learn. If you have the desire and are willing to practice, you can learn how to do it, even if you're a stubborn alpha male! While mystery may surround forgiveness, and while magic or grace or luck may propel it, forgiveness is nonetheless a skill that anyone can acquire if they want to. I offer many examples in this book.

But first, let me tell you a story about forgiveness that ironically illustrates the dangers of avoiding it. I have a friend in Seattle who hates the man he used to work for. He has hated him for years. He hates him because this man humiliated him, publicly firing him in a hideously demeaning way. To make it worse, my friend had once considered this man his buddy, often going out drinking with him, and to ball games and dinners. Then, out of nowhere, the man turned on my friend and betrayed him, setting him up to take the fall for business mistakes he, not my friend, had made. Ever since then, not a day passed in my friend's life without his thinking of his old boss and filling up with rage. Five years passed.

Late one night, my friend was walking down the street where the man he hated lives. As he drew near the house, the familiar hateful feelings took over. He started to recall the details of what happened, the peremptory e-mail, the refusal to discuss the matter, the public announcement at a motivational rally at work that my friend had 'failed to meet expectations in a company committed to meeting expectations,' followed by the public request blared over loudspeakers that my friend leave the meeting immediately, pick up his belongings at the front desk and never return. Even though the events had happened five years before, it still felt fresh and cruel and wrong.

On this particular night, as he walked past his old boss's house, my friend decided to do something. Nothing major; just something. He had never been able to take any revenge at all, even though he thought about it at least once a day, sometimes more. Although he'd thought about it a lot, he knew he would never do anything big, like hire a hit man to kill his old boss, or cleverly slander him or set him up in an embarrassing tryst. That wasn't my friend's style. But tonight, just for the fun of it, he decided to do something small, something he could easily get away with, something that would do no serious harm but would make him feel good, at least for a minute or two. He decided to do what kids have been doing for years to neighbors they hate. He decided to throw a rock through a window in his old boss's house. It was childish and silly, but the idea felt as good as a strong drink.

Kicking around in the dirt that bordered the sidewalk, my friend looked for the proper stone as this emerging David imagined, if not slaying his own Goliath, then at least bothering him a bit. He told me later that he carefully chose a jagged rock, big enough to do some damage, but small enough to throw hard. Once he found his stone, he wound up and let it fly, rage propelling the rock out of depths of humiliation up into the moonlight toward a corner window of the house of the hated man. For a moment, my friend felt happy. Victorious. Avenged.

But his aim was not David's. Instead of smashing the window, the rock hit a drain pipe right next to the window and ricocheted back. My friend, standing on the sidewalk below, his face eagerly upturned, grinning, expecting to savor this moment, suddenly became the target of the very rock he had thrown. Unable to duck in time, he took the ricochet head-on, as if he had planned to be hit by it all along. The stone struck him on the bridge of his nose, slicing open a cut that took several weeks to heal fully.

He felt foolish, humiliated by this man once again, as he held his arm up to his bleeding nose and hurried home. When he told me about it he laughed, but it was clear that he did not enjoy this bit of laughter. He was the victim of his own hatred.

I wanted to tell him something that Confucius said, but it didn't seem tactful to say it just then. Confucius said, 'When you start down the road to revenge, first dig two graves.'

If my friend had found a way to forgive his old boss before he took his walk that night, his nose would have been spared, not to mention his pride. But, like all of us sometimes, my friend couldn't forgive.

Most of us don't like to forgive. I don't know anyone who does. It's not fun, and it's difficult. When the stakes are high, forgiving can seem as difficult as performing surgery on yourself, and equally painful. Just thinking about forgiving can make you wince and say, 'No way.'

Yet in this book I will urge you to try it. Why? Think of my friend who threw the rock. Think how his hatred of his ex-boss owned him and tormented him. Taking a stroll at night, he plotted revenge instead of enjoying the summer breeze. Imagine how many moments in his life had become contaminated with those toxic feelings. Imagine how much time he gave over to nursing his anger and keeping it alive. Through it all, he was the only person who suffered. That is the pitiful irony in being unable to forgive. You are the one who gets hurt.

I wish I could have told my friend how to forgive, but who was I to say what he should do? I was not the person who had been fired, humiliated and betrayed.

I wish I could have told him stories from my own life, or given him the scientific facts I knew from my own medical training about the physical danger of carrying grudges and resentments. I wish I could have told him what I have put into this book, information that could have made his life so much better. I did try, but when I tried, he listened to me no more closely than if I had been a flight attendant announcing how to fasten a seat belt.

In this book, I am going to make another attempt, this time in writing, to explain why and how to forgive.

Perhaps you consider your own case so special, the offense so dire or the situation so complex, that no book or other advice could help. But we all think our own anger is special. The longer you nurse it, the longer you keep it in your heart, the more parasitic it becomes. It grows more powerful as it drains you of your health, gradually turning you into a nasty creature like itself. You feed it with your brooding and pacing and clenching of your teeth. Reliving in your mind what happened to make you so angry, you revive your hurt over and over again, each time re feeling your rage and refining your visions of revenge. Gradually, you ruin your sense of joy in life, which is bad for you in every conceivable way.

To put an end to it, you need a radical cure, a cure that reaches in and takes hold of the parasite of rage and rips it away from what it's sucking on: the walls of your own heart. Forgiveness, not revenge, is the only radical cure.

When you forgive, you cut the parasite from its food supply. Now you can watch it wither and slowly die.

Forgiveness is a gift you give to others, but it also a gift you give to yourself.

Question: How can I keep the peace in my friendships and minimize potential relationship-ending disputes?

Answer: Listen. Fess up when you are wrong. Tell the truth. Try to imagine yourself in your friend's shoes when you disagree. Don't let problems slide. Never put being right above all else. The most bitter disputes are always between two parties who are 'right.'

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