

FROM OUR READERS: Power of forgiveness

By Laura L. Barry, MBA, MMsc, and Maureen Sirois, RN, MSN, CEN, ANP

NURSES ARE DEDICATED to healing others. But what about healing ourselves? What about using the power of forgiveness to heal our own mind, body and spirit? The sole purpose of forgiveness is healing. It is the greatest gift, not to another, to self.

The circumstances before getting to a place of forgiveness are uncomfortable, emotionally messy, and sometimes heart breaking. We give or want forgiveness after anger or resentment as a way of getting through our emotions, to get unstuck and to move on.

Often when the subject of forgiveness is approached, people think that "I" (because of how wonderful I am), am willing to forgive you (let you slide this time). I am coming from some place of superiority in my forgiving you. This is not forgiveness, it is not authentic and does not allow us to honor our emotions let alone for true healing to begin.

Forgiveness is a powerful tool to explore our emotions, sit with being uncomfortable, and remove blame from the equation. Most of the time, the way we think about forgiveness, requires blame. We are either blaming others and thus we need to forgive them, or perhaps we are blaming ourselves and think we need their forgiveness. Either way, we are blaming and looking externally for change in order to feel better internally.

Changing perspectives

A radical shift in perception is called for so that healing may begin. How about a shift to looking *internally* for forgiveness? How about a shift in the use of the word forgive, as in: I am grateful to you *for-giving* me

This client-centered counseling technique helps people "talk themselves into change."

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an opportunity to heal a wound I was ignoring?

While we are operating in "they" did something wrong, or "they" need to forgive me, we are outwardly focused. Forget the other. Pay attention to self.

Please note: Forgiveness differs from saying I'm sorry. We may want or need to express that we are sorry for something, and this is fine.

Just know that true forgiveness needs to come from within.

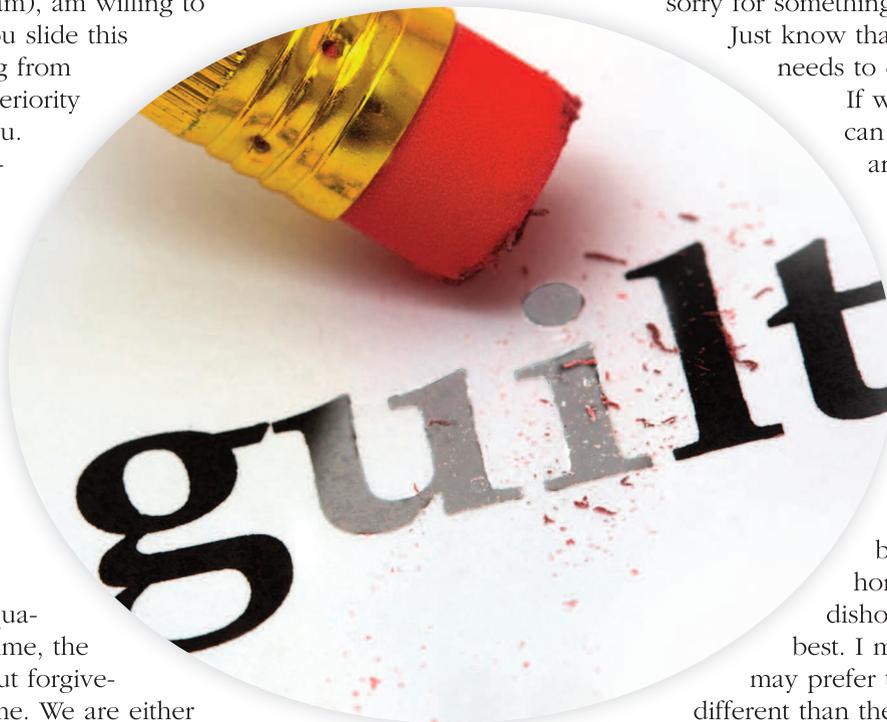
If we all do the best we can for who we are, at any given moment in time, then there really is no need for forgiveness. Why would we forgive someone for just doing his or her best? We are all doing our best in perfectly imperfect ways.

If someone's best does not include honesty, then being dishonest is his or her best. I may not like it and I may prefer the other person be different than they are. I may get annoyed, disappointed and downright angry!

But why? Why get this emotional about the situation when I know that dishonesty is just what they do? Why not get angry with me for being dishonest with myself? I already know that dishonesty is their best. Why do I continue to expect "them" to be different?

Sometimes it is so very simple... and sometimes it is painfully simple. We have the choice in the painful part, every time!

This is not to say that the circumstance that caused you pain is acceptable. This is not excusing anyone's



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actions, rather being honest with ourselves is the process by which we free ourselves from the suffering and stress that the event/situation caused.

Blaming keeps me stuck, powerless, and at the mercy of the situation or person. When we blame (another or self) we get to be the victim. Being the victim often serves us in some way, even if it is a way to avoid our feelings. If it didn't serve us, we'd be able to move past it. (Not necessarily get over the hurt of something immediately, but certainly beyond being a victim and on-to healing.) Again, I'm not suggesting that what ever someone experienced wasn't hurtful, scary, abusive or cruel. If we are really looking to get unstuck from a situation, then we need to reach that compassionate place where we are willing to be honest and vulnerable with ourselves, not judgmental and righteous. We need to step into a place of truthfulness with ourselves!

Remember that Shakespeare quote in Hamlet: *This above all: To thine own self be true?*

The truth is, for many of us, it is easier to brush off how we really feel than sit with and express our discomfort with something that has happened. Brushing off our feelings may seem like the best thing to do at the moment, but it may start—or continue—an unending pattern of dismissing our true feelings and behaving in a way that does not support ourselves. This is instant gratification—meaning it is only gratifying for that instant.

Forgiveness is about reaching that compassionate place where we are willing to be honest and vulnerable with ourselves. We can only be responsible for *ourselves*, for *our* actions and thoughts. And, we too have always done the best we can for who we are at any given moment. My “best” today differs from my “best” last week or 10 years ago.

My 40-year-old self wouldn't go back to my 5-year-old self and beat me up for not knowing how to ride a 2-wheeler without training wheels. I wouldn't say, “How stupid you were back then, what dumb muscles and coordination you had. I can't believe you needed those training wheels, how embarrassing.” This sounds funny, yet we do this to ourselves in other ways. We use our current wisdom to evaluate a situation in our past and then beat ourselves up or blame. I promise, if you could have done it differently back then, you would have. Have gratitude and compassion toward yourself that you now have greater wisdom to do things differently.

When is forgiveness needed?

So, how do I know what needs forgiving? Anything

that brings up bitterness in me, or a mental finger pointing at others is worth looking at from a forgiveness perspective. Sometimes it helps to take a look at our participation. Please note: I am not blaming here. I am

simply suggesting that we can take a look at how we participated or were involved in something, and then hold that younger version of ourselves in a place of compassion. Perhaps we knew no other way, perhaps we were only a child. Remember no blame! By taking a look at the truth of the situation at the time, we can use our current wisdom and knowledge to see how we've grown, not beat ourselves up. We can tenderly see how we didn't know any better back then and remind ourselves that now that we have greater wisdom and awareness. We can and will make different choices.

Sometimes we wonder “How can I ever get over something if ‘they’ don't say they are sorry?” This is outward thinking. Needing anything outside of me for happiness is a slippery slope into greater hurt, disappointment and possibly anger. “They” don't need to do anything, and besides, we cannot control anything “they” do. “I” however can look truthfully at the situation and make loving and supportive decisions for me. Maybe the really hard questions to ask are: Why am I holding on to this? Or, why did I let this happen? The answer is usually because of some fear that no longer serves you—no longer needs to be part of you. Or perhaps we need to face the fact that this person or situation no longer is a healthy one for you.

It is important to understand, we are not dependent upon others for our ability to heal. Also, and importantly, ask yourself “How is this victim role serving me?” By focusing on *being the victim*, what are you NOT looking at?

One may ask: Shouldn't “they” know how much they hurt me? Once you know how hurt you are, how truly hurt and sad and maybe angry you are, and take care of yourself, it will no longer matter to you what “they” know or don't know. Their views and their thoughts will be inconsequential. You will have taken care of the most important person in the situation—you! You will have spent quality time being compassionate, loving and understanding to you.

Sometimes when we forgive, and think about the situation at a later time, it's possible to have strong feelings arise all over again. Each time a situation from our past comes up again, it is an opportunity to clean it up some more, to dig deeper and see if there are other underlying issues to be addressed. Perhaps there are some things still left unsaid or undone. Not unsaid or

undone with the other person, but with ourselves. Perhaps there is more to examine and to be sorry about for us! Perhaps our inner child—or younger self-version—needs more loving, tenderness and attention.

Take the time to give yourself all the attention and compassion you need!

I like to say, “Be Your own L’Oreal Commercial! You are worth it!”

The importance of forgiveness

Why is forgiving myself so vital? Because the most important relationship we have is with ourselves. Your inner you is with you all the time; this is your spirit, ignoring it doesn't make it go away. It only makes you feel and react in ways not loving and peaceful.

Researchers have found forgiveness has physiological and psychological effects. Feeling bitter interferes with the body's hormonal and immune systems and harboring anger and resentment tends to increase blood pressure. Forgiveness improves physical and emotional well being. For example, studies have found that forgiveness lowers blood pressure and heart rate, improves sleep quality and immune function. Those who forgive report improved mental health. The process of letting go of blame, bitterness and victimhood is healing to self and others.

Forgiveness is not about right and wrong. Forgiveness is about valuing ourselves enough to know that each day we have new wisdom, and then willingness to use that new wisdom to support and love ourselves, not judge and blame others or ourselves.

So for today, I will look at forgiveness situations in my life with tenderness and gentleness toward the other *for giving* me the awareness of new wisdom and a growth opportunity. And you? Is there willingness to get unstuck, replace blame with the tender thought that we all do the best we can for who we are at any given moment in time? ★

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