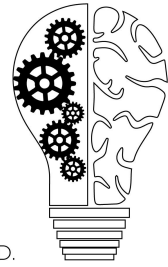


“What is Forgiveness”

David Puder, M.D.

This PDF is a supplement to the podcast “Psychiatry & Psychotherapy” found on [iTunes](#) or [Google Play](#): episode 42 “What is Forgiveness”



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**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Forgiveness is not:

- It is not approving.
- It is not excusing the action, denying it, or overlooking it.
- It is not just moving on (particularly not with cold indifference).
- It is not forgetting or pretending it did not occur.
- It is not justifying or letting go of possibly needed justice.
- It is not calming down.
- It is not a bargain or negotiation.
- It is more than ceasing to be angry.
- It is more than being neutral towards the other.
- It is more than making oneself feel good.
- It is one step towards reconciliation, but it is different from reconciliation, which requires a sincere apology from all parties.
- It is not dependent on the one you forgive—that would give the other power to control you, by keeping you in your bitterness. Consider Corrie Ten Boom, who forgave the Nazis after losing her family in the Holocaust, or Marietta Jaeger who, after her daughter was kidnapped and brutally murdered, was able to forgive. People can forgive, even when the person who wronged them is unknown or dead.
- It is not a one time event, but may need to be repeated (sometimes the hurt comes back, sometimes you need to start every morning with forgiveness).
- It is not a restoration of full trust (trust takes time to develop or to be reinstated).

How can you forgive?

1. Acknowledge the offense was unfair, that you have the right to feel the emotion.

Acknowledge your emotions (anger, sadness, disgust), body sensations, triggers.

Now, see the tree drawing below. In the tree, insert the names of the people who have done unjust things to you. Consider the wrongs that come to mind when you think about needing to

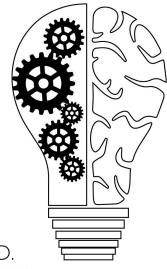
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forgive.

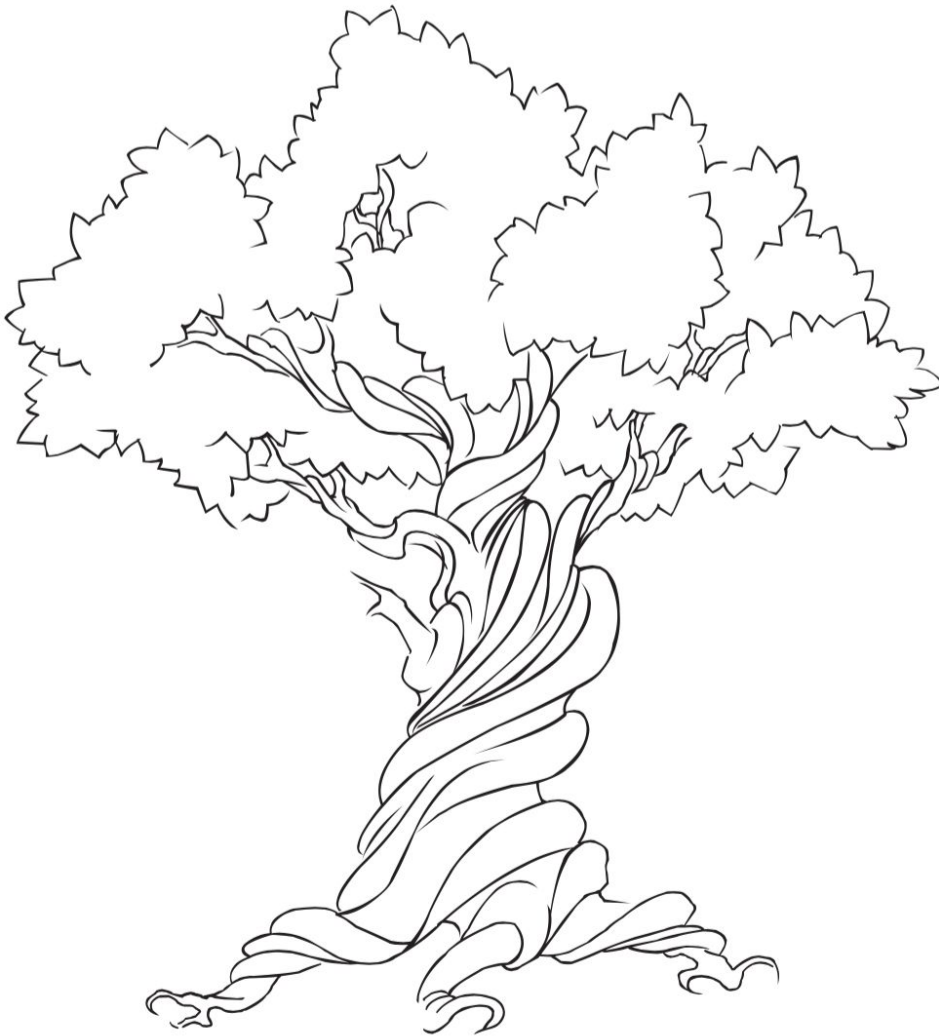
Put things that happened earlier in your life towards the bottom of the roots and the things that are more recent in the branches. When you feel emotions or body sensations, put them in brackets - [sadness]. If you start to feel light headed, take a break.

Acknowledge the offense, the loss involved for you, how your life would have been different. Consider your family of origin, previous marriages or significant others, current family, school days for you, school days for your children, work, religious activities, and people in your community.



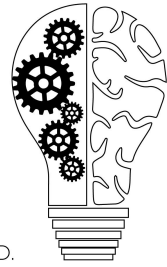
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2. Have you created some defense mechanisms? Let's journal them.

Grab a journal or piece of paper and take some personal notes on ways that you may have protected yourself because of the hurt that was done to you, or even protected yourself from your own anger.

- Have you denied that the event actually happened (disregarding all evidence to the contrary)?
- Have you blocked it out of your mind through numbing in various ways?
- Have you sided with the person who hurt you?
- Are you even adopting their point of view (idealizing them and justifying their behavior)?
- Are you projecting your emotion onto others (someone else is angry, I am not)?
- Or even focusing on body issues rather than emotions (emotional pain residing in the body and becoming bodily felt pain)?

During this process it is normal to feel strong emotions. You may feel guilt: “I did something bad.” Or shame: “I am bad, weak, or defective.” These are often the messages that get inserted into our trauma and need to be talked about so they don't cause further emotional damage. Talk to your therapist about these feelings you have.

3. Reflect and assess whether to make the decision to forgive.

In the space below, deliberate about forgiving and appreciate how forgiving will not only help you, but will stop others from continuing to hurt you. Consider how it can also help your loved ones who are affected by your bitterness and anger. Because forgiveness is a decision, you can decide not to forgive, you can hold onto the grudge, or you can forgive.

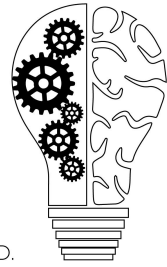
Reasons to forgive:	Reasons to remain angry, bitter, and hurt:

Based on the sections above, write out a description of your life experiences relative to

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forgiveness. Describe your worldview; formulate your definition of forgiveness and the role forgiveness is going to play in your life.



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4. Continue the commitment to forgive.

Forgiveness is a process, there are layers, and it may take weeks of daily forgiving. By forgiving, we decide to give an act of mercy—a gift. We may fill the void we feel with compassion, benevolence, and love towards the offending person.

- We can learn to understand that the person we are forgiving also possesses both good and bad qualities. Example: “He is a product of his inherited temperament, and has been influenced by family upbringing and environment.”

5. Consider reconciliation.

Reconciliation is an option, if you want it. It usually consists of you expressing the wrong done, and the other party apologizing. This does not mean you will trust the other person—that may take years, or may never happen. The other person might not have the capacity to validate/admit that they did anything wrong. This can make it very unsafe to even approach them. Either way, you will have dealt with your own emotions by working through your trauma and making the decision to forgive, whether they wanted or deserved it or not.

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