

**Session 11: Forgiveness**

We have all been hurt by someone and some of these hurts can be very deep. It can be very hard to think of forgiveness. Very often it doesn’t feel like they deserve to be forgiven. The problem is, when you hang on to our resentment, bitterness, and anger, it doesn’t hurt the other person, it hurts you. Hanging on to this anger is liking drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. It just doesn’t work that way.

Forgiveness means different things to different people. Generally, however, it involves a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you might always be with you, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help free you from the control of the person who harmed you. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean you forget. In many cases, that would be dangerous because we might then put ourselves in a situation to be hurt again. We want to remember so that we can avoid a similar event but with forgiveness, we let go of the anger, resentment, or bitterness so that the event does not continue to hurt us over and over again. Forgiveness doesn’t necessarily mean reconciliation, either. In some cases, it is safer to emotionally and physically to you’re your distance from a toxic person. Forgiveness is simply a process of accepting the situation and not letting it continue to hurt you. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life.

Letting go of grudges and bitterness can make way for improved health and peace of mind. Forgiveness can lead to:

* Healthier relationships
* Improved mental health
* Less anxiety, stress and hostility
* Lower blood pressure
* Fewer symptoms of depression
* A stronger immune system
* Improved heart health
* Improved self-esteem

A friend once told me that pain was inevitable, but suffering was optional. When I think about forgiveness, this thought holds true. We are all going to suffer hurts or injustices in our lives, but we don’t need to allow these events to continue to hurt us, we don’t need to suffer.

The process of forgiveness begins with reflecting on what and how the event happened and accepting that it did happen and your initial feelings about it. Next, try to put yourself in the other person’s shoes. It’s not that you excuse their behavior, but you try to understand it from their context. What choices did they have? Why did their act make some sense to them? You might not have made the same choice they did but try to understand the situation from their perspective. As humans, we are all flawed, we all make mistakes, we act selfishly, and in the process, we hurt others. Humanizing the behavior helps to reduce the sting. It still not okay but it doesn’t feel quite so personal. You can then choose to learn from the experience. What might you do in the future? How can you protect yourself the next time? What signals will you watch for? Then, let the negative feelings go and decide what your next steps will be. How will you grow? What can you do to create your new normal? Who are you in your new situation?

This process of forgiveness requires that you pause and see the situation from the other person’s point of view. This can be extremely difficult to do, especially if we feel slighted in some way. Practicing mindfulness is an important part of this process. When we are angry, hurt, resentful, or bitter, we are trapped in a constant stream of negative chatter obsessed with things that cannot be undone or unsaid. This perpetuates our suffering. Mindfulness teaches us to be fully present in the moment, to notice our thoughts and to accept that a thought is just a thought and as such, we can let a thought go. We don’t have to follow any one thought. We can let the past be the past and fully engage ourselves in the present. In doing so, we can free ourselves from the prison of regret and resentment and move forward. Our past does not determine our future. It just defines our starting point and it is up to us to decide steps we will take to move toward a better future.