

## **THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS**

If you're feeling stuck in your divorce recovery, you may need to forgive your ex -- and yourself. Here's how.

By Pamela D. Blair Ph.D., MStH.

I never thought about forgiving myself or my spouse until I got into therapy after my second marriage ended. Naturally, anger was an important part of the healing process. My therapist told me I had to honor my anger to get the work of divorce done, to make sense out of it all, and ultimately move towards forgiveness -- to forgive not only my husband, but also the situation and, most of all, myself. By allowing room for my anger at my husband, I was able to create a place where forgiveness and understanding could be born.

Before I discovered the healing power of forgiveness, I was having trouble letting go enough to move forward -- I was still wrestling with demons in the night. There's a passage in the Bible that reads: "I will not let you go unless you bless me," (Gen. 32:27). I believe we benefit the most from divorce if we choose not to "let it go until it blesses us" -- until we can see the growth potential in it, and until we can understand our attachment to the past. Pain remains pain until our consciousness grows because of it. Then, it becomes power: the "blessing" that grows out of wrestling with the pain.

Some days, just surviving alone was an excruciatingly frightening experience. I felt victimized, traumatized, and paralyzed. In those early days, it never occurred to me that I had done anything that needed forgiving, and the thought of forgiving my husband was not even in my consciousness.

Then I began to look at the role I had played in my marriage, and realized I was responsible for giving away my power in the relationship. I began to see that my husband left in response to some of the dynamics that I had created in the marriage. For the first time, I could see the meaning of forgiveness. I forgave myself for thinking that the only way I could be loved was to abdicate my personal power, and I forgave him for not being able to love me the way I wanted to be loved.

I think the greatest awareness around this forgiveness process came when I realized my contribution to the ending of my marriage, and that divorce, for us, was inevitable.

### **The Meaning of Forgiveness**

What does it mean to forgive? Webster defines it as "to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; stop being angry with; to give up all claim to punish or exact penalty." If we are to forgive, then we must first surrender the right to get even. We then cease defining the one who hurt us in terms of the hurt that was caused. Keep in mind, there's nothing in Webster's definition about the need to reach approval of the injurer's actions: you can forgive your spouse's infidelity, for instance, without approving of that infidelity.

If we forgive, then we can also reach a point where we wish our injurers well; this act of forgiveness then becomes some kind of miracle after we've made meaning of the situation.

How do we get to "meaning making"? One way to make sense of your divorce is to realize that your choice of partner may have been based on an old and unhealed need (probably from your childhood) -- not on a current or realistic expectation. During the first seven years of our life, we usually internalize that parent from whom we need the most approval; later on, this internal parent influences how we choose relationships.

According to Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. -- one of North America's leading authorities on relationships and the author of the bestselling book *Getting the Love you Want* -- you unconsciously chose your partner because he or she had some of the same traits as your primary caregiver(s). "We are attracted to people like our parents in order to finish the business we didn't finish with them," he says. "Unconsciously, we feel like we're in survival mode, and so when we meet someone who is similar to our parents, we go into a kind of euphoria because deep down inside we believe we're now going to get what we didn't get in childhood. That's what triggers the impulse most commonly called 'romantic love.'"

If you're willing to acknowledge that your choice of partner was "beyond your control," then it becomes easier to forgive yourself.

## Letting Go

"Forgiveness is integral to letting go. We are bound to the people we cannot forgive. Holding even a small grudge takes up space in the soul and captures the energy needed for moving on. To bless the people who are our oppressors is the only way to heal the wounds they have inflicted and to break the chains that bind us to them," writes Elizabeth O'Connor in *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*.

Letting go means letting go of the resentment, pain, and hate that has probably been an important "driver" -- one that helps you stand up for your rights in the divorce process. However, holding on to resentment for too long will eventually consume you. How long is too long? I don't like imposing deadlines on grief work, but the short answer is that you should let go when you're tired of it -- when you feel your energy so depleted that it's hard to get out of bed in the morning. Look at how much hating the other person is draining your own internal resources and blocking your growth.

Holding on to a dead relationship is usually the result of feeling a need to put closure on unresolved issues. The desire to resolve issues in the present is a good one, but it becomes a problem if we get stuck in a determination that we must resolve the issue in a certain way. For instance, you might think: "I'm not letting go of this until my ex says he/she is sorry, or gives me all his/her money, or suffers as much as I have." Holding on can literally permeate your life, keeping you from living in the present; it can cause illness and can prevent you from experiencing new things. When you're stuck in anger, you become a slave to a kind of circular living and thinking, going around and around without attempting to move ahead. If you continue in this circular mode, you risk becoming hopeless, depressed, fatigued, and chronically negative.

You may be using your resentment to hold on to the relationship. It's common for people going through the pain of divorce to maintain their anger stance because it enables them to at least remain connected to the relationship in some way: they'd rather have a horrible relationship with their ex than no relationship at all.

The relationship has come apart, but in some way it still exists -- especially if you have children. And you may still be in love with your ex-spouse. Letting go does not mean forgetting the good times, or that you must move from love to hate. Some part of you may always love your ex, and that's okay.

Letting go of your past is not the same as avoiding it. If you ignore or repress the painful events in your past because you believe they'd be too painful to relive, you prevent yourself from moving past them.

### **Stuck in the Past**

Another way of getting stuck is by clinging to positive feelings or events. If you've blocked everything except your happy memories of the relationship, you might be afraid to move on -- afraid that nothing will compare to the past. Recognizing and accepting this fear as normal is the first step to creating a world full of new experiences. You also need to allow plenty of room for the grieving process before you can trust there's a new world full of opportunity waiting for you.

Getting free from the hold the past has on you doesn't mean you have to forget the good times (or the bad). Remembering can serve some very important purposes. Remembering can occupy your mind with pleasant thoughts for a much needed "vacation from pain," and most important, it can generate learning that will serve you in the future.

One key to letting go of past hurt is to focus on meeting your own needs in the present. Keep reminding yourself that forgiveness is a process, and it might be a longer one than you'd like. Have you forgiven yourself? Most of us in the process of divorce or its aftermath find it more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive our partners.

Being able to let go of negative feelings towards others is highly dependent on your ability to let go of negative feelings towards yourself. When you've developed the ability to let go of your own past mistakes and to acknowledge your humanness, it's almost magical how effortless it becomes to let go of the mistakes of others.

### **Suggested Actions**

- Write the following affirmation out on a piece of paper and place it where you'll see it upon awakening each day: "I am now ready and willing to release, let go, and forgive myself for any contribution I have made to the ending of my relationship."
- Write down what you have difficulty forgiving yourself for. Now look at what you've written, noticing how you judge yourself, and make a conscious effort to understand and forgive yourself.

- Light a candle and say the following words as you look into its flame: "I release you, \_\_\_\_\_ (ex-spouse's name), into the light, and I do this for my highest good and yours."

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Pamela D. Blair is a counselor and therapist in general practice who specializes in divorce recovery and relationship issues. She is the director of the Divorce Resource Network in Hawthorne, NY, and publishes a newsletter called "Surviving Divorce."