

Addiction Recovery Tools: Why You Want to Learn to Forgive in Recovery

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Forgiveness is an essential but often overlooked part of the healing process in recovery. Many people mistakenly equate forgiveness with forgetting, but true forgiveness is about letting go of the need to punish. One of the best definitions of forgiveness is simply "giving up the need to punish." This definition does not imply forgetting or condoning the hurtful act; it means releasing the compulsion or fantasy of punishing the other person.

We've all heard the saying, "resentments are like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." Holding onto resentment—rehashed, recycled hurt and anger—only harms us. If you find yourself constantly replaying scenarios of how you'd like to punish someone or fantasizing about their eventual downfall, you are the one suffering.

Consider a hurtful experience from high school that you've carried with you. Over the years, you may have added to this resentment, continuously rehearsing the hurt and blaming the other person for subsequent painful experiences. This venomous resentment can take on a life of its own, like a snowball rolling downhill. Meanwhile, the person who hurt you likely doesn't even remember you. They're living their life while you're the one suffering. Hanging onto old resentments robs you of peace and joy in the present and keeps you anchored in the past.

In recovery, we seek to be at peace with others. Healing the pain from the past often necessitates forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a favor you do for someone else; it is an act of self-liberation. If holding onto resentments is rooted in self-pity or blame, we must let go to embrace recovery. The price of not forgiving is too high.

Forgiveness does not mean allowing others to trample our boundaries and reinjure us. It does not mean accepting the unacceptable. Sometimes, an inability to forgive involves clinging to the fantasy that we will eventually receive something we need from that person—whether it be positive regard, love, amends, or closure. Forgiving may involve letting go of this fantasy. Forgiveness helps break cycles of relationship hurts and harms by fostering a more positive and constructive approach to dealing with past wrongs and moving forward. It can help repair and strengthen those relationships and promote understanding and empathy. It facilitates healthier and more supportive connections with family, friends, and others.

If you struggle with forgiveness, ask yourself whether the payoff is worth the cost. Holding grudges and harboring negative feelings impacts your physical and mental health. Forgiving others can reduce stress levels and promote a sense of inner peace.

Forgiveness has many other benefits for recovery. It allows you to release feelings of anger, resentment, and bitterness that may have served as triggers for relapse. Instead of holding onto these negative emotions, which can hinder your emotional healing and personal growth, forgiveness promotes moving forward in recovery. It is a vital step in personal development, encouraging self-reflection, self-compassion, and a commitment to positive change—all essential recovery components.

For many, forgiveness is an essential part of spiritual growth and development. It aligns with spiritual and religious teachings emphasizing compassion, mercy, and letting go of past grievances. By integrating forgiveness into your recovery journey, you pave the way for a healthier, more peaceful, and fulfilling life.

Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.

