

# **Recovery and Forgiveness: Breaking Free from Resentment**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Forgiveness remains a crucial aspect of resolving resentments and healing emotional pain. Yet, it often receives very little attention. Forgiveness is frequently mistaken for accepting or approving someone's behavior and is usually closely associated with forgetting.

A particularly insightful definition of forgiveness is "giving up the need to punish." This definition doesn't center on the actual act of punishment or forgetting but emphasizes releasing the compulsion or fantasy of seeking retribution.

A famous quote, "Resentments are like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." is pretty apt. Clinging to resentment, which involves reliving and recycling past hurts and anger, inflicts harm upon oneself. If one continues to craft mental scenarios of revenge or fantasies about the other person receiving their due, it is the individual harboring these thoughts who faces the consequences.

Consider an instance of lingering hurt and anger from a high school incident. Over time, this resentment accumulates as you repeatedly revisit the pain, attributing subsequent negative experiences to the original offense. The person who caused the hurt may not recall the incident, having moved on with their life. Meanwhile, you bear the burden of piling more injury on top of the one inflicted so many years ago, by continuing to relive it. Whose well-being is affected by this lingering resentment? Whose problem does it become? Clinging to old resentments deprives us of peace and joy in the present, anchoring us in the past.

In the pursuit of peace in recovery, addressing lingering pain from the past becomes imperative. Sometimes, achieving this healing requires the act of

forgiveness. Importantly, forgiveness is not a favor bestowed upon others but an act of self-liberation. If holding onto resentments stems from self-pity or blame, it becomes essential to relinquish them to embrace the path of recovery. The cost of not forgiving is prohibitively high.

Forgiving does not entail offering an open-door policy for others to violate our boundaries and cause further harm. It does not suggest accepting the unacceptable. The inability to forgive often stems from a reluctance to release the fantasy that the person who wronged us will eventually provide something—positive regard, love, amends, or closure. Forgiveness may necessitate releasing such fantasies.

For those struggling to forgive, it's valuable to ask, "What's the payoff?" Identifying the reasons for resisting forgiveness and examining the perceived rewards of holding on can illuminate whether those rewards are genuinely beneficial or if letting go would lead to a more positive and fulfilling outcome.

