

Practical Life Coaching Column #1554 A LITTLE ABOUT FORGIVING

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A LITTLE ABOUT FORGIVING

By Lloyd J. Thomas, Ph.D.

In our progress toward peace of mind and freedom of spirit, one of the most difficult skills to learn and practice is "forgiveness." Many people simply do not understand what forgiveness means. Nevertheless, forgiveness is essential to psychological health. As long as we are unable to forgive, we keep ourselves chained to the unforgiven. We give old hurts, resentments and anger rent-free space in our minds, shackles on our hearts, and the right to torment us in the small hours of the night.

When you are in a close relationship with another, forgiveness is required quickly and often. You cannot expect to dance closely with a partner and never have your toes stepped on. If you hang on to the pain and never forgive the other's misstep, the relationship is emotionally cluttered and diminished. When it is time to forgive, to move on in our lives, but still too hard to do, you may want to try some (or all) of these steps below

1. Understand that forgiving does not mean giving permission for the hurtful behavior to be repeated. It does not mean saying that what was done was acceptable. Forgiveness is needed for behaviors that were not acceptable and that you should not allow to be repeated.

2. Recognize exactly who is being hurt by your non-forgiveness. Does the other person burn with your anger, feel the knot in your stomach, experience the cycling and recycling of your thoughts as you re-experience the painful events in your mind? Do they stay awake as you rehearse in your mind what you would like to say or do to "punish" them? No! Focusing on revenge is like taking poison and hoping the other person will die.

3. Do not demand to know "why" as a prerequisite to forgiveness. Knowing why the behavior happened is unlikely to lessen the pain, because the painful event came at a time when you did not know why. Occasionally, there are times when knowing why makes forgiveness unnecessary, but those times are rare. Don't count on it. Don't even count on the perpetrator knowing why s/he did it.

4. Make a list of what you need to forgive. What was actually done

that caused your pain? Include what you may have done that caused your pain. Do not include what you only felt was done.

5. Acknowledge your part. Were you honest about your hurt or did you hide the fact that the behavior hurt you? Did you seek peace of mind by reassuring the perpetrator that what s/he did was "all right?" If so, then you too have some responsibility. Forgive yourself and you start to move away from being a victim.

6. Make a list of what you gained from the relationship prior to, and because of the painful event. Looking back, you may be focusing only on the negatives (hurts). When we focus our attention only on the negatives, we strengthen the painful memory and it comes alive again in our minds.

7. Write a letter to the person who hurt you (no need to mail it). Acknowledge what you gained from the experience, and express your forgiveness for the hurts. However, allow yourself to express all your feelings fully. Do not focus only on the hurts.

8. Develop a ceremony in which you get rid of your lists and the above letter. The ritual should symbolize the end of the link between you and the painful event now past. You may choose to visualize placing all your resentments on a raft and watching it drift gently away down a river. You may prefer to burn them and scatter the ashes. You may invent some other form of ritualized separation.

9. Visualize the person you are forgiving being blessed by your forgiveness. Keep in mind that forgiveness is for your sake alone, for your own healing, and not for the sake of the perpetrator. Your forgiveness frees you from the behavior that hurt you and diminishes the pain of the memories.

10. Now that you are free from the painful links between the past event(s) and of your memories about them, you feel yourself growing lighter and more joyous. Feel yourself free to move on with your life without that burden of hurt. Do not look back in anger. You cannot change what has happened in your past. Nevertheless, without dragging all your painful memories along with you, you can move into your future free in spirit and with a peaceful mind.

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Practical Life Coaching Column #1553 HEALING THE BROKEN HEART

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HEALING FROM A BROKEN HEART

By Lloyd J. Thomas, Ph.D.

During the last three months of 2011, two of my closest relatives died. My brother-in-law was one of those relatives. His spouse is going through the normal grieving process. As I searched for something to share with her, I came across a column I wrote in 2005. I share it again with you in the hope my sister-in-law will be comforted.

"It happens to us all. The pain of a loss. The ache of a rejection. The anguish of a loved one dying. The suffering of poverty, hunger, and loneliness. Everyone has felt sadness, anger, grief, fear, and doubt. These emotions are powerful internal experiences. They often "break our hearts."

"Almost all of us learn to suppress our most powerful emotions. As our minds become more developed, we begin to play mental games in order to lessen the felt intensity of our painful feelings. These games form a kind of hardness, a kind of mental armoring around our hearts. They seem to protect us from hurt. They seem to prevent others from touching us where and when we are most vulnerable...in our heart of hearts.

"The armoring of our heart is really composed of suppressed emotions, blocked energy in our bodies, unfinished business of the mind. The discarded, the denied, the unhealed. These are the feelings, the states of mind, the defenses, the hardening, the posturing, compressed over the years into habits of avoidance...avoidance of perceived or anticipated pain. Suppressed emotions are the cement with which we harden our hearts.

"In ancient Chinese calligraphy, the symbol for the mind and the symbol for the heart are the same..."hsin." When we close our minds, when we close our hearts, they become the same, like the two halves of the shell which surrounds the English walnut. These two parts are hard, sealed together, protecting the soft inner core...the inner nature of the walnut...the nourishment for new life when the seed opens and sprouts.

"In order for the walnut to sprout, to grow, to develop into the large tree it was meant to be, the hard shell must break. In order for us to grow, to develop into the persons we were meant to be, we must allow our hearts to break open. It can be a terrifying thought...to allow our hearts to break, to open to all the possibilities of our internal experience. To be vulnerable to all that life has to offer, whether it be joy or sadness, pain or

pleasure, hurt or healing. A broken heart is an open heart.

"Once, I was told of a fourteen-year-old, schizophrenic boy, mute for some years, who began to practice yoga while listening to music in the background. As the relaxing sounds of the music played, he approached his teacher and spoke for the first time in years, "That music is enough to break your heart." It was the beginning of his healing.

"The broken heart is the open heart. The heart which has allowed the armor to crack, to break, and to fall away exposing the soft inner core. Sometimes it takes pressure, pain, or absolutely overwhelming emotion before a heart is broken. Sometimes it takes only a firm, caring hug. Sometimes it takes only a thought, a memory, a mental image. Sometimes it takes an offered gift of caring, of being there, of support. We are always invited to allow our hearts to crack, to break, to remain open to life.

"Keeping the heart open to the physical pain of injury or illness is probably the most difficult task we have in our desire to keep open to life. The "natural tendency" is to shrink back, to close up, to tense and withdraw, to harden against further pain. Yet, to do so often leads to further pain, further tension, further illness. Opening the heart means allowing the usual filters of fear, loathing, anger, and hate to soften so we can allow ourselves to take in the pain, the illness and surround it with tenderness, gentleness, and with love.

To open our hearts with a kind of merciful curiosity about our loss, our pain, our fear, our rage, is to open ourselves to the heart of healing. It allows more and more of our life to be lived with our hearts instead of only our bodies and minds. It is sending love to us. It is sending the possibility of new growth, of freedom, of developing our true human nature. Without a broken and open heart, we remain shut out of life, isolated from ourselves and from others. With a broken heart we are open to love, to healing, to life and all its aspects. Life is the most precious of all gifts. During 2012, allow your heart to break so you might fully receive that gift!

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Practical Life Coaching Column #1552 ELEMENTS OF LOVE

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ELEMENTS OF LOVE

By Lloyd J. Thomas, Ph.D.

Last month, we celebrated St. Valentine's Day. It was a day to acknowledge the influence that love and romance may have on our lives. This month, I am wondering if we really know what "love" is all about. Is our understanding of love too shallow? How does love influence our lives as adults? Is it more than romance? Are we more concerned about how we love rather than how much we are loved? In order to be more loving, do we need to learn new attitudes and new interpersonal skills?

During the holidays of December, 1998, I received from a reader of this column the following "Top Ten Secrets of Love." These "secrets" were so psychologically healthy and so powerful, I want to share them with you today. Perhaps we can use these "secrets" to answer some of the above questions.

"The first secret: the power of thought. Love begins with our thoughts. We become what we think. Loving thoughts create loving experiences and loving relationships. Affirmations can change our beliefs and thoughts about ourselves and others. If we want to love someone, we need to consider their needs and desires. Thinking about your ideal partner will help you recognize him or her when you meet.

"The second secret: the power of respect. You cannot love anyone or anything unless you first respect them. The first person you need to respect is yourself. To begin to gain self-respect ask yourself, "What do I respect about myself?" To gain respect for others, even those you may dislike, ask yourself, "What do I respect about them?"

"The third secret: the power of giving. If you want to receive love, all you have to do is give it! The more love you give, the more you will receive. To love is to give of yourself, freely and unconditionally. Practice random acts of kindness. ...The secret formula of a happy, lifelong relationship is to always focus on what you can give instead of what you can take.

"The fourth secret: the power of friendship. To find true love you must first find a true friend. Love does not consist of gazing into each other's eyes, but rather looking outward together in the same direction. To love someone completely you must love them for who they are, not what they look like. Friendship is the soil through which love's seeds grow. If you want to bring love into a relationship, you must first bring friendship.

"The fifth secret: the power of touch. Touch is one of the most powerful expressions of love, breaking down barriers and bonding relationships. Touch changes our physical and emotional states and makes us more receptive to love.

"The sixth secret: the power of letting go. If you love something, let it be free. ...Even in a loving relationship, people need their space. If we want to learn to love, we must first learn to forgive and let go of past hurts and grievances. Love means letting go of our fears, prejudices, egos, and conditions.

"The seventh secret: the power of communication. ...To love someone is to communicate with them. Let the people you love know that you love and appreciate them. Never be afraid to say, "I love you." Never let an opportunity pass to praise [and acknowledge] someone. Always leave someone you love with a loving word...it could be the last time you see them.

"The eighth secret: the power of commitment. If you want to have love in abundance, you must be committed to it... Commitment is the true test of love. If you want to have loving relationships, you must be committed to loving relationships. When you are committed to someone or something, quitting is never an option. Commitment distinguishes a fragile relationship from a strong, loving one.

"The ninth secret: the power of passion. Passion ignites love and keeps it alive. Lasting passion does not come through physical attraction alone. It comes from deep commitment, enthusiasm, interest and excitement. ...The essence of love and happiness are the same, all we need to do is to live each day with passion.

"The tenth secret: the power of trust. ...You cannot love someone completely unless you trust them completely. Act as if your relationship with the person you love will never end. Trust is

essential in all loving relationships." Trust yourself, trust others and trust the world. It is the foundation for love."

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