

Exploring Forgiveness

by Pete Dalton

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Forgiveness is a concept that we are all familiar with to some extent, however, how many of us really take the time to reflect on what forgiveness really means? I offer some perspectives on the subject of forgiveness.

What is forgiveness?

A common dictionary definition of forgiveness is to:

stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence, flaw, or mistake

Forgiveness to others involves changing your feelings—particularly anger and resentment towards someone for a past event or action that has violated your own personal rules or boundaries. Self-forgiveness may involve also changing feelings of guilt around an action you have taken. Forgiveness, then, is not simply a cerebral activity—it is something that is felt in the body through changes in our emotions. When unforgiveness is present, it is noticeable at a mental, emotional and physical level.

In the Hawaiian language there are a few words relating to forgiveness. Some of the definitions of these words provide a rich picture of what forgiveness is. These include:

Kala - to loosen, untie, free, release, unburden, absolve, let go.

Huikala – to absolve entirely, forgive all faults, excuse cleanse and purify morally; pardon.

Wehe -to open, untie, undo, loosen, uncover, unfasten, unlock, unfurl, unhook, exorcise; to solve as a problem, forgive, satisfy

Makala - to loosen, undo, untie, open a little, liberate or set at liberty; to open or unfold as a flower.

The common emphasis is clearly on releasing, letting go, liberation, resolution and freedom which really is at the core of forgiveness.

Why Forgive?

It is important to remember that it is you who experiences the release, freedom and resolution of forgiveness, regardless of whether whoever you are forgiving is aware of it or not. There are many compelling reasons to practice forgiveness and as far as I can tell no good reasons not to.

Research has postulated a range of benefits to practicing forgiveness. These include: boosting the immune system through the production of antibodies and reducing the level of adrenaline and cortisol in the body; aiding recovery from traumatic events; increasing oxytocin which is associated with pleasurable feelings and which lowers blood pressure and heart rate; improving cognitive function; better sleep, reduced anxiety and stress; strengthened spirituality; and healthier relationships just to name a few.

Studies have even shown that forgiveness may have an impact on our perceptions and abilities. For example, research participants were asked to write about a time they were able to forgive or not forgive someone. Participants were then brought to the base of a hill and asked to estimate its steepness. Those who had written about forgiving perceived the hill to be less steep than those who wrote about not forgiving. In addition, participants were asked to jump on the spot five times. On average, those who had written about forgiveness jumped higher than those who had written about not forgiving.

Holding on to anger, resentment and guilt drains you of your energy, increases stress; reduces personal presence and scatters focus.

I recall a time when someone had deliberately acted with malice in a deliberate attempt to deprive me of a significant amount of money. In Hawaiian terms this could be considered an act of '*ino*' which refers to intentionally causing harm to someone else. On discovery of this, and with the realisation of the potential difficulty I would face and effort I would need to put into recovering the money, my natural reaction was to feel extreme anger and resentment toward the other person. Despite this, at an early stage, I worked on forgiving the person, which gave me emotional freedom and meant I was more effective in successfully taking action to recover the money owed.

To sum it up simply: forgiving gives you back your power; brings personal resolution, provides health benefits and increases your personal effectiveness. So, there are a huge range of ways to answer the question: 'what's in it for me?' when it comes to forgiveness.

Challenges to forgiving

With all those obvious benefits, why do some people find it hard to forgive? There are a few misconceptions and beliefs that people hold which may prevent them from practicing forgiveness. These include:

Believing that forgiving is a sign of weakness. The opposite is actually the case. By forgiving you are freeing up energy and increasing your personal power and effectiveness. You are also taking responsibility for your own feelings rather than believing that someone else is in control of how you feel – a clear sign of strength. Forgiving does not mean that you think what was done was right or that you won't learn from what happened before and let it happen again. It is a chance to learn and reinforce new boundaries.

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”
- Mahatma Gandhi

Believing that by not forgiving, the other person is being punished. While it may be possible in some cases that the person you won't forgive may feel bad because of it, that may not often be the case and of course not forgiving will cause you more harm than it will the other person. Often the person who someone seeks to punish by not being forgiven is not aware of it or may not even be alive. The only person then suffering as a result is you. An analogy I like is that this is like you drinking poison and expecting the other person to die! It just doesn't work like that.

Of course, if someone is hanging onto this belief and you want to help them move toward forgiveness you might want to remind them of the sentiment expressed by the following quote:

“Always forgive your enemies—it annoys them so much.” - Oscar Wilde

Although slightly provocative, it is not unknown for a cunning Huna adventurer to use such reframes to assist someone in reclaiming their personal power!

Believing that not forgiving provides a sense of control. You are more likely to be out of control when there are people and situations that you have not forgiven. Not forgiving binds you to an event or events in the past which means it is more likely to have an ongoing effect on your life and increase your level of disempowerment.

Believing that forgetting is enough. One of the meanings of forgiveness is concerned with resolution. Forgetting is not forgiving. You may try and suppress the feelings of anger, resentment and guilt but they will have a habit of resurfacing over time and it will take energy to suppress things. Also, even

when you are not consciously aware of what you are suppressing, it will still have a detrimental effect at an unconscious (Ku) level.

Believing that it's impossible to forgive. Forgiveness is a choice and choice can be considered as our main superpower. We always have the opportunity to refocus and make new choices so it is never impossible to forgive – we just need the intention to do so.

Applying the seven principles of Huna to forgiveness

The seven Huna principles can be usefully applied to forgiveness as follows:

Ike—Awareness

Become aware of any resentment, anger and guilt that you may have as a result of not forgiving.

Kala—Freedom

Allow yourself to forgive, release blocked energy, find resolution and be free of the binds of the past.

Makia—Focus

Realise that forgiveness is a choice that you can make at any time through harnessing this aspect of your Lono.

Manawa—Presence

Realise that whatever has happened has happened in the past and that forgiveness is a way of reclaiming your power in the present.

Aloha—Love

Realise that forgiving is an act of self-love. It also frees up more energy to increase loving connection with others.

Mana—Power

Realise that you are in control of how you feel and that forgiveness is part of taking personal responsibility.

Pono—Effectiveness

Understand that forgiving increases personal effectiveness on a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level.

A simple forgiveness process

When you have a feeling of unforgiveness, a simple way to forgive is as follows:

1. Take a moment to focus on the many benefits that there will be to practicing forgiveness.

2. Say the following to yourself with intent to forgive.

I choose right now to forgive (name) for everything he/she has done to cause me harm and offence. I forgive (name) for (specific thing/or 'everything he/she has done).

If there is more than one person then list them and run through the list of all the people and things that you want to forgive.

3. After any specific people that you want to forgive, you can add in a catch all statement of forgiveness e.g.

I choose right now to completely forgive anyone who has ever offended me or caused me harm. Anyone who has ever offended me or caused me harm is completely forgiven. I have let go of the past and am free. Pau (It is finished, it is done).

4. Focus on the sensations in your body and, if necessary, repeat this process until you get a sense of release or 'letting go' in your body. You should be able to recall any specific incident and no longer feel anger, resentment or guilt.

5. When you have reached this point take a moment to reflect on all the benefits you will now receive as a result of the forgiveness you have performed. For example, begin to notice the increased sense of well-being, the sense of newly invigorated energy and the exciting opportunities that there will be to focus on new and exciting things. Congratulate yourself and, if appropriate, give yourself a Ku treat (do something pleasurable).

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