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Forgiveness: Letting Go of Bitterness and Grudges

When someone you care about hurts you, you can hold on to anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge — or embrace forgiveness and move forward.

Nearly everyone has been hurt by the actions or words of another. Perhaps your mother criticized your parenting skills, your colleague sabotaged a project or your partner had an affair. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness or even vengeance — but if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly.

By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

What is forgiveness?

Generally, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you might always remain a part of your life, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life.

What are the benefits of forgiving someone?

Letting go of grudges and bitterness can make way for compassion, kindness and peace. Forgiveness can lead to:

- Healthier relationships
- Greater spiritual and psychological well-being
- Less anxiety, stress and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse

Why is it so easy to hold a grudge?

When you're hurt by someone you love and trust, you might become angry, sad or confused. If you dwell on hurtful events or situations, grudges filled with resentment, vengeance and hostility can take root. If you allow negative feelings to crowd out positive feelings, you might find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice.

What are the effects of holding a grudge?

If you're unforgiving, you might pay the price repeatedly by bringing anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience. Your life might become so wrapped up in the wrong that you can't enjoy the present. You might become depressed or anxious. You might feel that your life lacks meaning or purpose, or that you're at odds with your spiritual beliefs. You might lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others.

How do I reach a state of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. To begin, you might:

- Consider the value of forgiveness and its importance in your life at a given time
- Reflect on the facts of the situation, how you've reacted, and how this combination has affected your life, health and well-being
- When you're ready, actively choose to forgive the person who's offended you
- Move away from your role as victim and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in your life

As you let go of grudges, you'll no longer define your life by how you've been hurt. You might even find compassion and understanding.

What happens if I can't forgive someone?

Forgiveness can be challenging, especially if the person who's hurt you doesn't admit wrong or doesn't speak of his or her sorrow. If you find yourself stuck, consider the situation from the other person's point of view. Ask yourself why he or she would behave in such a way. Perhaps you would have reacted similarly if you faced the same situation. In addition, consider broadening your view of the world. Expect occasional imperfections from the people in your life. You might want to reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who've forgiven you. It can also be helpful to write in a journal, pray or use guided meditation — or talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, or an impartial loved one or friend.

Does forgiveness guarantee reconciliation?

If the hurtful event involved someone whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness can lead to reconciliation. This isn't always the case, however. Reconciliation might be impossible if the offender has died or is unwilling to communicate with you. In other cases, reconciliation might not be appropriate. Still, forgiveness is possible — even if reconciliation isn't.

What if I have to interact with the person who hurt me but I don't want to?

If you haven't reached a state of forgiveness, being near the person who hurt you might be tense and stressful. To handle these situations, remember that you can choose to attend or avoid specific functions and gatherings. Respect yourself and do what seems best. If you choose to attend, don't be surprised by a certain amount of awkwardness and perhaps even more intense feelings. Do your best to keep an open heart and mind. You might find that the experience helps you to move forward with forgiveness.

What if the person I'm forgiving doesn't change?

Getting another person to change his or her actions, behavior or words isn't the point of forgiveness. Think of forgiveness more about how it can change your life — by bringing you peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing. Forgiveness can take away the power the other person continues to wield in your life.

What if I'm the one who needs forgiveness?

The first step is to honestly assess and acknowledge the wrongs you've done and how those wrongs have affected others. At the same time, avoid judging yourself too harshly. You're human, and you'll make mistakes. If you're truly sorry for something you've said or done, consider admitting it to those you've harmed. Speak of your sincere sorrow or regret, and specifically ask for forgiveness — without making excuses. Remember, however, you can't force someone to forgive you. Others need to move to forgiveness in their own time. Whatever the outcome, commit to treating others with compassion, empathy and respect.



Alcohol Use: If You Drink, Keep it Moderate

It sounds like a mixed message: Drinking alcohol may offer some health benefits, especially for your heart. On the other hand, alcohol may increase your risk of health problems and damage your heart.

So which is it?

When it comes to drinking alcohol, the key is doing so only in moderation. Certainly, you don't have to drink any alcohol, and if you currently don't drink, don't start drinking for the possible health benefits. In some cases, it's safest to avoid alcohol entirely — the possible benefits don't outweigh the risks.

Here's a closer look at the connection between alcohol and your health.

Health benefits of moderate alcohol use

Moderate alcohol consumption may provide some health benefits. It may:

- Reduce your risk of developing heart disease
- Reduce your risk of dying of a heart attack
- Possibly reduce your risk of strokes, particularly ischemic strokes
- Lower your risk of gallstones
- Possibly reduce your risk of diabetes

Even so, the evidence about the possible health benefits of alcohol isn't certain, and alcohol may not benefit everyone who drinks.

Moderate alcohol use may be of most benefit only if you're an older adult or if you have existing risk factors for heart disease, such as high cholesterol. If you're a middle-aged or younger adult, some evidence shows that even moderate alcohol use may cause more harm than good. In fact, if you're a woman and drink alcohol, talk to your doctor about taking supplemental folate to help reduce the risk of breast cancer associated with alcohol use. You can take other steps to benefit your cardiovascular health besides drinking — eating a healthy diet and exercising, for example.

Guidelines for moderate alcohol use

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that if you choose to drink alcohol you do so only in moderation — up to one drink a day for women or two drinks a day for men.

Examples of one drink include:

- **Beer:** 12 fluid ounces (355 milliliters)
- **Wine:** 5 fluid ounces (148 milliliters)
- **Distilled spirits (80 proof):** 1.5 fluid ounces (44 milliliters)

When to avoid alcohol use

Keep in mind that moderate use of alcohol doesn't mean that using alcohol is risk-free. For example, if you binge drink — such as having four or five drinks in the space of a few hours — you face serious health problems. Likewise if you drink and drive.

Here are other situations in which the risks of alcohol use may outweigh possible health benefits:

- You're pregnant or trying to become pregnant
- You take medications that can interact with alcohol
- You've had a previous hemorrhagic stroke
- You've been diagnosed with alcoholism or alcohol abuse
- You have liver or pancreatic disease
- You have heart failure or you've been told you have a weak heart or dilated cardiomyopathy
- You're planning to drive a vehicle or operate machinery

Some situations are less clear-cut. Use alcohol only with great care and after consulting your doctor if:

- You have a family history of alcoholism
- You take prescription medications for a health problem
- You use over-the-counter pain relievers or fever reducers
- You have a family history of breast cancer
- You have precancerous changes in your esophagus, larynx, pharynx or mouth

Consequences of heavy alcohol use

Although moderate alcohol use may offer some health benefits, heavy drinking — including binge drinking — has no health benefits. Excessive drinking can cause potentially serious health problems, including:

- Certain cancers, including breast cancer and cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus and liver
- Pancreatitis
- Sudden death if you already have cardiovascular disease
- Heart muscle damage (alcoholic cardiomyopathy) leading to heart failure
- Stroke
- High blood pressure
- Cirrhosis of the liver
- Suicide
- Accidental serious injury or death
- Fetal alcohol syndrome and other health problems in an unborn child

Drink alcohol only in moderation — or not at all

The latest dietary guidelines make it clear that no one should begin drinking or drink more frequently on the basis of potential health benefits. So don't feel pressured to drink alcohol. But if you do drink alcohol and you're healthy, there's probably no need to stop as long as you drink responsibly and in moderation.



Ahhh....mazing Gifts to Soothe Stress

So, you've made your list, checked it twice, but still don't know what to get for your closest friend? Between a rocky relationship and late nights at work, you know the last few months have been stressful for her. A soothing gift may be just the ticket, especially during a busy holiday season. Read on for some ideas to relieve her stress.

Thrifty yet thoughtful

During the holidays, it's easy to feel pressured into spending more than you wanted to on a gift. Ads hint that the amount we spend on a gift is a measure of how much we care about someone. And sometimes, we feel the need to reciprocate after receiving a pricey gift.

But overspending can cause stress. Before you treat your friend to a hot stone massage at that new spa, consider this: A gift doesn't have to cost a lot of money to be meaningful. In fact, of the best gifts you've received, chances are it's the handmade ones that still floor you. The cozy blanket your mom spent hours knitting. The vibrant, hand-painted teacup from your sister. You can find scores of tutorials online for stress-relieving do-it-yourself gifts – from scented eye pillows to fabric heating pads. (Try searching for “DIY spa” or “handmade spa.”)

Pressed for time? Skip the long lines and crowds and buy these affordable stress relievers online instead:

- Assorted teas with a unique mug
- Book of local walking trails or pedometer
- Handheld massager
- Colorful flower pot with seed packet
- Soothing sound machine
- Eyemask, lavender oil and candles
- Annual pass to a national/state park
- Bubble bath and bath puff
- Fleece blanket
- Watercolor/oil painting set
- Anti-stress neck pillow
- Meditation cushion or a yoga mat; or a meditation, tai chi or yoga video
- Gratitude journal
- Trio of funny videos and popcorn

- Lava lamp or tabletop fountain
- Flannel sheets or pajamas
- Memory foam slippers or plush bath robe

A site such as Etsy (www.etsy.com), a trove of one-of-a-kind handmade gifts, may be a good place to start. You may also be able to find online deals through websites such as Retail Me Not (www.retailmenot.com).

A priceless gift

One of the best gifts you can give someone is your time. Does your friend love the ocean? Pack a picnic and explore a hidden beach together. Does she rarely eat out? Give her a break from cooking by whipping up her favorite meal. Is she adventurous? Take a spontaneous road trip to an outdoor hot spring.

Bottom line: If your friend has been stressed, chances are she will enjoy time together or a gift that helps her relax. But keep your perspective when it comes to gift-giving. Searching for that perfect – and often pricey – gift may only create stress for you.



Stress, Depression and the Holidays

The holiday season often brings unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. The holidays present a dizzying array of demands — parties, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few.

But with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.

Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's okay to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.
2. **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.
3. **Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.
4. **Set aside differences.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.
5. **Stick to a budget.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Try these alternatives: Donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.

6. **Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.
7. **Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.
8. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and physical activity.
9. **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.
10. **Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Take control of the holidays

Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. Learn to recognize your holiday triggers, such as financial pressures or personal demands, so you can combat them before they lead to a meltdown. With a little planning and some positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays.

Getting Started is Easy!
Call your EAP for more information