Forgiveness: what it is and what it is not

What forgiving someone does and does not mean, and why it is your choice.

Being hurt by someone leaves a mark. Anger and resentment are natural, and often they are fair. Forgiveness is one way of loosening the hold the hurt has on you. It is a choice, it takes time, and nobody else gets to decide when or whether you make it.

Forgiveness is...

- Letting go of the wish to make them pay
- Something you do for your own peace
- A process, often with steps backwards
- Possible without ever telling the other person
- Compatible with remembering clearly

Forgiveness is not...

- Saying that what happened was acceptable
- Forgetting, or pretending it did not hurt
- Trusting the person again
- Going back to the relationship
- A duty, or proof that you are a good person

Forgiving and reconciling are different

Forgiveness happens inside you. Reconciling takes two people, and it needs the other person to be safe, honest and willing to change. You can forgive someone and still keep your distance. Where there has been abuse, your safety comes first.

If you are not ready, or do not want to

That is allowed. Being pushed to forgive too early usually just buries the anger. There are other ways forward:

- Accepting that it happened, without forgiving it
- Putting it down for now, and picking it up when you have more strength
- Putting your energy into your own life, so the hurt takes up less of it

If you want to move towards it

1. Say fully what happened and what it cost you. Out loud, on paper or in therapy.
2. Let yourself feel the anger and the sadness. Forgiveness comes after them, not instead of them.
3. See the person as a whole human being who did harm. That explains it. It does not excuse it.
4. Decide what, if anything, you need from them, and what you will do if you never get it.
5. Expect to do it more than once. Old anger comes back. That does not mean you have failed.

What carrying this costs me now

What I would want forgiveness, or acceptance, to give me

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Forgiving myself

Taking responsibility without punishing yourself for life.

Name _____ Date _____

Guilt has a job. It tells us we have acted against our own values, and it pushes us to put things right. Once we have listened, it has done its work. Punishing yourself for years does not help the person you hurt, and it does not make you a better person. Forgiving yourself is not letting yourself off. It is taking responsibility, and then allowing yourself to carry on.

What I did, or did not do. In plain words, without excuses and without insults.

What I knew and could do at the time

What I know now that I did not know then

The part that was mine

The parts that were not

Other people, circumstances, chance

Who was affected, and how

What I have done to put it right, and what I could still do: say sorry, repair it, or do some good elsewhere

What I have learned, and what I do differently now

What I would say to a friend who had done the same and felt as I do

A sentence of forgiveness to myself. Write it even if you do not fully believe it yet.

If what happened involved serious harm, or the guilt will not ease, bring it to therapy. Some things are too much to work through alone on a page.

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