

How to forgive your enemies: long-standing disputes can stress you out, increase your risk of heart disease, and even trigger headaches and back pain. Free yourself and feel better - Your Hate is Only Hurting You

by Erin O'Donnell

WE ALL HAVE THIS IN common: At one time or another, we've been hurt deeply by another person. But while some of us hold tight to the anger and pain, others choose to let it go. New research suggests that taking that route--forgiving the person who wounded you--can help you live a happier, healthier life.

Take, for example, Catherine O'Brien. For seven years after her divorce, the 54-year-old video producer from Pacifica, Calif., felt furious with her ex-husband. First she was upset that he'd cheated several times during their 16-year marriage.

Later she hated him because he stole the life she'd imagined they'd share into old age. "I never got over the death of that dream," O'Brien says. She's certain the hostility affected her health. Not only did she sense her blood pressure skyrocketing each time she saw her ex-husband, but "I got every virus that went around," she says. "I'm sure it was the stress."

Then a friend gave O'Brien an audiotope and insisted that she listen to it. The tape featured Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, a series of research studies in Palo Alto, Calif. Luskin believes forgiveness can improve your emotional and physical health. Skeptical, O'Brien ignored the tape for several months, but one night she played it, just to appease her friend. What she heard stunned her. "The thing that really hit me was that my being mad didn't hurt him," O'Brien says. "It just hurt me." She did the calming visualization exercise recommended on the tape and called her husband. She told him she forgave him.

Her ex-husband was surprised and glad, but O'Brien felt even better than he did. "I felt totally relieved," she says. "It was like a weight had lifted." She says the phone call changed her. "We're not best friends or anything, but I can talk to him now and not have my blood pressure go up."

Researchers agree that, over time, the stress of a grudge does threaten your health. In response to stress, your body releases chemicals, including cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline, that can disrupt your immune system and set you up for hypertension and coronary artery disease, says Everett Worthington, Ph.D., director of the Campaign for Forgiveness Research in Richmond, Va., a nonprofit organization that funds forgiveness studies, and author of *Five Steps to Forgiveness* (Crown Publishers,). "Negative emotions increase your risk of health problems," he says. "If you forgive, you will decrease those negatives."

Forgiving is difficult, but it's possible and worth it. "Forgiveness is not about letting anyone off the hook but yourself," says Luskin, who is also author of *Forgive for Good* (HarperCollins, 2002). You don't even have to confront your enemy to succeed. Here's expert advice on how to do it.

Tell Your Story.

Before you can forgive, researchers say, you must give yourself time to feel angry and wounded. Tell your story to trusted friends, family members, or a therapist, recommends Luskin. You need a clear sense of what happened to you before you can forgive someone for it, he adds. Experts warn that you cannot avoid this step. Minimizing your pain or suppressing your outrage will ultimately prevent you from healing.

Reframe Your Story.

Once you've articulated your anger and hurt, try to look for the good in your experience, Luskin says. You might, for example, realize that the event has made you stronger. One of the best ways to practice this is to

revise the story you tell yourself and friends about the way you were hurt. Instead of seeing yourself as the victim, Luskin says, change the tale so "you're somebody who's a hero, who's overcome this horrible difficulty."

Your goal is to recall the true (and painful) parts of what happened, without conjuring up bitter feelings. Remember, you're working toward forgiving, not forgetting. "We need to remember the hurts from people who burn us so we can prevent future harm," says Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, Ph.D., a forgiveness researcher and assistant professor of psychology at Hope College in Holland, Mich.

This is obviously easier said than done. But a technique called Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique, designed by Luskin, can diffuse the pain and help you think differently, in part by halting the production of stress chemicals in your body. Use the following technique--which can take as little as 20 seconds--every time negative feelings surface. Practice it 10 to 20 times a day if need be.

Breathe in through your nose, making your belly expand, and exhale through your mouth, allowing your belly to grow soft. On the third inhalation, picture someone you love, something you're grateful for, or a beautiful scene in nature. As you study this mental picture, continue the deep breathing and ask yourself how you might think about the offense without feeling pain. If nothing comes to you, just concentrate on this positive image.

O'Brien says she's proof that you can rethink your hurt. She no longer feels furious with her ex-husband. Although he still annoys her at times, "he just doesn't take up much of my mental space," she says.

Take a Break from Your Pain.

Luskin suggests that you look for the beautiful and good in your life: something funny your child said, the kind act of a friend, or a deep blue sky. Making a habit out of focusing on these kinds of things gives your body and mind a rest, he says.

O'Brien agrees that letting go of her hostility has given her more time and energy to focus on the positive aspects of her life. "I couldn't get what I wanted [from my marriage], but in the long run, I have had better things," says O'Brien. She's now in a much healthier relationship and has had opportunities in her career that she believes she would never have had if she'd stayed married.

Revise Your Expectations.

To help yourself continue to heal, remind yourself that you can't change the past. The person who hurt you cannot take back what he did. Imagine, for example, that your business partner lied to you. It's healthy to feel a range of emotions about what happened, including anger and sadness, but wishing that he hadn't lied is a wasted effort, Luskin points out.

And acknowledge that there's no guarantee that the offender will change his behavior. Although you may hope that your partner won't lie in the future, there's no way to prevent him from doing so. But it's important to see that you have the power to choose how you'll react if you're hurt again. You can decide to end the relationship if your business partner lies again. Thinking this way helps you take responsibility for your own feelings, Luskin says. It also helps you cope better if you're wounded in the future.

Make Forgiveness a Habit.

Luskin recommends that you get in the habit of practicing forgiveness. Start with very small events, he says. "Let's say someone in front of you has an extra item in the express checkout line," Luskin says. "You say to yourself, 'This is no big deal. I challenge myself to have no bad feelings toward that person.'"

You can also try to be more forgiving on a daily basis with people you love, Luskin says. Don't allow negative

events from your past to overshadow the good things about your relationship in the present. Maybe your spouse argued with your mother last week, but allow yourself to feel pleased that he cleaned the house yesterday and invited you for a walk after tonight's dinner.

Finally, if you find yourself getting stuck rehashing a hurt, try thinking for just a few minutes about what it might feel like to forgive the person who hurt you. In time, Luskin says, you may grow comfortable enough with the idea to try it for real.

Proof that Forgiveness Heals.

Recent research shows there are great benefits to giving up a grudge. During the past four years, Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project in Palo Alto, Calif., has conducted forgiveness studies on three different groups, including mothers in Northern Ireland who lost children to religious violence. His studies show that those who forgave people who wronged them experienced a 70 percent reduction in feelings of hurt and a 27 percent reduction in the symptoms of stress, including backache, headache, and stomach pain.