

# insights

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## The Mental Health Benefits of Forgiveness

**The recent sentencing of a 22-year-old white supremacist who murdered 9 black parishioners at a church in Charleston, South Carolina reminds us that forgiveness is both a misunderstood and controversial concept. The almost immediate expressions of forgiveness and mercy offered by some of the victims' family members and friends were as stunning as the massacre itself was horrific. Others, however, quickly condemned both the murderer and those who so readily spoke of forgiveness.**

While most of us will never experience this level of trauma, everyone has experienced mistreatment at the hands of another, ranging from small slights to extreme abuse. Many believe that the purpose of forgiveness is to offer comfort and peace to the one who has done harm, but psychologists who study forgiveness emphasize that its value lies in the mental and physical health benefits to the one who forgives.

Researchers in the field of positive psychology (the study of human thriving and well-being) define forgiveness as letting go of bitter, angry and vengeful thoughts and feelings while cultivating empathy, understanding and/or compassion for the offending person. Contrary to popular belief, forgiveness does not include forgetting, condoning or excusing the wrongdoing, nor does it require reconciliation with those who have wronged us. Forgiveness, therefore, is a process that occurs within the forgiver, and is not an interpersonal process.

Numerous studies have documented the benefits of forgiveness, including reductions in anxiety, depression and overall stress level, fewer physical health symptoms, and a lower mortality rate. The process of forgiveness helps people let go of the toxic anger that can take its toll on heart health and the immune system. And, forgiveness can boost self-esteem as individuals redirect the emotional energy that was devoted to holding on to anger and hurt to positive emotions and life goals.

Releasing hurt, anger, and the desire for revenge is not an easy task; in fact, it requires considerable strength. While people vary in their ability to forgive, research on

psychotherapy strategies to promote forgiveness suggests that anyone can learn to be more forgiving. Parents and teachers can help children cultivate a stance of forgiveness in a number of ways:

- Teach students the definition of forgiveness and emphasize that it is for their own benefit, and does not require a continuing relationship with the person(s) who have hurt them.
- Start small in practicing forgiveness; forgive the person who cut in front of you in line, your sister who ruined your shirt, your friend who forgot your birthday, before working on more hurtful things.
- Cultivate empathy; e.g., journaling about the perspective and motivations of the offender, and the factors that might have impacted his/her behavior, can help.
- A short prayer or meditation offering mercy for the offender can bring immediate relief.
- Practice forgiving yourself, while acknowledging faults and imperfections.
- Be prepared to keep at it – forgiveness is not a one-time event and may take considerable time depending on the level of harm inflicted. ■

### Resource:

Weir, K., (2017). *Forgiveness Can Improve Mental and Physical Health. Research Shows How to Get There.* Monitor on Psychology, January 2017.

Wade, N. G., Hoyt, W. T., Kidwell, J. E. M., Worthington, Jr., E. L. (2014). *Efficacy of Psychotherapeutic Interventions to Promote Forgiveness: A Meta-Analysis.* Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, Vol. 82, No. 1, 154-170.

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