

Exercises for Forgiveness

It has been our experience that many betrayed spouses feel uncertain about forgiveness. It could be that it is too early in the healing process, or they feel that the cheater has not suffered enough, or that forgiveness could create a halt to any marital changes that have been occurring. It is therefore, very important that neither the betrayed nor the cheater be forced to forgive too quickly.

First of all, it's important to understand what forgiveness is, and what it is not.

Counselor and educator Leslie Karen Sann defines it as the process that brings us to a place of peace in our hearts and acceptance that the past cannot be changed. That acceptance liberates us to become present in our lives and to be a creative force as we move forward.

By not forgiving we tend to rewind ourselves because we replay the circumstance in our mind over and over. Essentially, we become a prisoner to our own story telling and are stuck in the past and hurt ourselves as a result. We cannot get back to a place of connection in a relationship if we withhold forgiveness.

Sann goes on further to describe just what forgiveness is and is not:

FORGIVENESS IS NOT

- Forgiveness is NOT condoning. Forgiveness is not saying what you did was okay.
- Forgiveness is NOT forgetting. We do not erase the past. Those experiences have a lot to teach us. What we erase is the negativity, the judgments.
- Forgiveness is NOT a spiritual bypass. It is not pretending it's okay when it is not.
- Forgiveness is NOT a one time clear-cut decision. It takes time. It cannot be forced.
- Forgiveness is NOT associated with any specific behaviors.
- Forgiveness does not necessarily mean choosing to include the one who hurt you back into your life. It depends.

FORGIVENESS IS

- Forgiveness is letting go of identifying with the past, letting go of being the wounded one, the victim and identifying instead with health, well-being productivity.
- Forgiveness puts the past into proper perspective. We learn from the past and we move on. We develop wisdom from making sense of our wounds.
- Forgiveness is understanding that nothing we do to punish them, or ourselves, will heal us.

- Forgiveness comes from accepting that suffering is part of the human experience and instead of judging it, embracing it for the gift of learning and growth that it brings.
- Forgiveness is part of an ongoing healing process. We need to do the healing work so we can genuinely move into forgiveness. It is a process and it takes as long as it takes.
- Forgiveness frees us from the illusion that harm was done. Who we really are can never be harmed. When we let go of identifying with our suffering, we allow ourselves the freedom to live in who we really are, our soul, our spirit, the loving.
- And finally, forgiveness releases us from our attachment to and eye for an eye mentality and leads us into a greater consciousness, that of Grace.

Forgiveness does *not* mean that the two of you cannot get angry about the state of your marriage or about the affair in the future. It does *not* mean that you cannot discuss the affair anymore. However, forgiveness *does* mean that the betrayed spouse is not going to hold the affair over the cheater's head any longer. It also means that the betrayed spouse is willing to acknowledge his/her contributions to the deterioration in the marriage that led up to the affair in the first place.

Exercises

All of us have been brought up to treat forgiveness in various ways. These could be good ways, or they could be detrimental to the forgiveness process. Here is an exercise to help you sort through this.

My definition of forgiveness is:

What has been my experience with forgiveness?

Do I forgive easily?

In the past, have I been easily forgiven?

Think about a time (or times) when you have been hurt. Have those who have hurt you apologized and corrected their behavior? Or have those people just apologized as a way of escaping punishment without changing their behaviors?

What are some of your misgivings about the forgiveness process?

Letter of Forgiveness

Most of us need to hear a request for forgiveness from the cheating spouse. A good exercise for this is for the cheater to write a forgiveness letter. Remember that the goal here is to facilitate forgiveness, so it's important to write what your spouse needs to hear to make this happen. In turn, the betrayed spouse needs to ask for forgiveness for his/her contributions to the deterioration of the marriage. Use the following format to create a forgiveness letter to each other:

Format:

I was wrong when I (Contribution) _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

Example (betrayed spouse):

I was wrong when I spent too much time working and going out with my friends. I know this must have caused you to feel neglected, lonely and unimportant.

Will you forgive me?

Example (cheating spouse):

I was wrong when I made plans with my affair partner about the future. I know this must have caused you to feel forgotten, betrayed and sad.

Will you forgive me?

Use the following form to complete your forgiveness letters. Complete as many as you feel necessary.

1. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

2. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

3. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

4. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

5. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

6. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

7. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

8. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

9. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

10. I was wrong when I _____

I know this must have caused you to feel _____

Will you forgive me?

After completing your letter, take some time to read your letter to your spouse. It is advisable to have the cheater read his/her letter first. Read the letters in a comfortable position, yet close enough to touch each other. Make eye contact as much as possible.

After each "Will you forgive me?" question, the other person has three possible responses:

1. "Yes, I will forgive you."
2. "No, I cannot forgive you."
3. "Not now; I cannot forgive you now, but I am working on it."

A good thing to do after reading the letters is to exchange them. Having the letter will be a reminder of your spouse's admission of wrong and your need to forgive those yet to be forgiven actions. It will be the responsibility of the spouse to notify the other when they are able to forgive the action. The confessing spouse does not have to ask again.

After this exercise, separate for some time and reflect on what you have just said and heard. Write out your feelings to the following questions:

How do I feel having gone through this exercise?

What other areas of confession would I have liked to have heard from my spouse? Why?

Is there anything I need to clarify for him/her to have a more accurate understanding of how this behavior affected me?

What will have to happen before I can forgive the items where I responded with a “no” or “not yet”?

Present your responses to the above questions to your spouse during a brief, non-interrupted monologue. Your spouse simply listens. No questions or comments allowed.