

Top 10 Myths of Forgiveness

By Monisha Srichand

Forgiveness is often misunderstood and many of us wonder what it really means. While psychological research continues to search for concrete behavioral consequence of what forgiveness is, there is a lot of research done to clarify what forgiveness is NOT.

The following 10 myths is summarized from the bestselling book “*No Regrets*” by Hamilton Beazley, Ph.D., professor of Psychology at Yale University:

1. To forgive, we have to forget the offending behavior.

Forgetting is not part of forgiving. With forgiveness, we let go of the past in order to reclaim the present, but we do not forget that past. The memories remain, but their power to hurt us does not.

2. To forgive is to excuse the offending behavior.

Forgiveness does not in any way excuse or condone the inappropriate actions that created our regret. We forgive for one main reason: to be free of the negative emotions associated with that regret, which is quite different from condoning the offense.

3. When we forgive, we no longer hold the person accountable for the offending behaviour.

The perpetrator should always be held responsible for the offense. We can forgive and still satisfy our need for accountability, such as asking for a divorce, suing for damages, or testifying against a criminal.

4. When we forgive, we are implying that the offender is innocent, less guilty, or somehow off the hook.

Forgiveness does not imply lack of guilt. In fact, the opposite is true: There is no need to forgive the innocent. An act of forgiveness may lessen the perpetrator’s own suffering and regret to some degree, but only if he or she cares. We grant forgiveness for ourselves, not for the benefit of another.

5. To forgive, we have to reconcile with the offender.

To reconcile with someone is to reestablish a relationship with that person. Reconciliation can be part of forgiveness, but only if we choose to make it so. It is not a requirement, which is why we can forgive people who are deceased, people in prison, and those we do not wish to have in our lives.

6. We should only forgive if the other person deserves it.

We forgive others because we deserve it, because we deserve to be free of the regret and the pain it has caused us. Whether the person who hurt us deserves our forgiveness has nothing to do with our decision to grant it.

7. We only forgive in response to a request for forgiveness.

No request from the offending party is necessary for our forgiveness. It is we who ask ourselves to forgive the other person, and it is we who benefit most from the forgiving.

8. If we forgive, we are being disloyal to those the offending party hurt.

This misconception is a culmination of the preceding myths, which hold that forgiveness means having to forget or excuse offending behavior, reconcile with the offender, release the offender from accountability, or judge the offender deserving of forgiveness. The act of forgiving releases us from hatred and grants us freedom from the perpetrator, which benefits us, and so it is not an act of disloyalty to the person the perpetrator injured.

9. We forgive only on the basis of certain conditions such as getting an apology.

Forgiveness is unconditional or it is not forgiveness. If we make out forgiveness conditional on what the other party does, such as apologizing or promising new behavior, we have made the perpetrator the decision maker in our process of forgiving. Ironically, this kind of thinking turns our lives over to the very person who has hurt us.

10. Forgiveness isn't valid unless it is accepted by the other party.

This myth is reinforced by the common phrase, "to offer our forgiveness," as if it has to be accepted to be valid. Forgiveness is not offered, it is granted. It is our gift to ourselves.