



FORGIVENESS AND HEALTH

We have all watched as the family comes out of the courthouse with a guilty verdict for the killer, and seemingly unbelievably, they state that they have forgiven the killer! Some would find this concept bizarre. Those who think about it a bit more, however, may realize that harbouring a grudge, anger and hurt against someone who has harmed you only causes damage to you!

In real life, its not killers that we deal with on a day to day basis, its the people we have everyday dealings with. The most important are our friends and loved ones. Common offences include betrayals of trust, rejection, lies and insults.

The research on this subject supports the concept of forgiveness as being beneficial for your health.

One of the definitions of forgiveness involves letting go of the negative feelings you have and adopting a merciful attitude or good will towards the offender.

Lack of forgiveness has been implicated the following health problems:

1. The negative effects of lack of forgiveness include a strain on the stress- hormone system which involves cortisol and adrenaline. Other hormones become unbalanced. The sympathetic nervous system which upregulates stress responses like blood pressure, muscle tension and the ability to react quickly is heightened. All of these have physical consequences. If held on 'full power' the body starts to get the symptoms mentioned below.
2. Mental illness – anxiety, depression
3. Heart disease – heart attack, hypertension, premature death
4. Immune suppression. Studies have shown effects on levels of immune protective cells and anti cancer cells (Natural Killer cells)
5. Effects on the reproductive system
6. Anything that follows from increased stress responses would also theoretically occur eg irritable bowel, pain, muscle tension, fatigue, infectious illnesses etc

Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings

Some interesting statistics from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has shown that there was a strong correlation between lack of forgiveness and mental illness. The research related to the effects on survivors of abuse was published in the British Journal of Psychiatry in 2001. The researchers studied 134 of the people who were participating in the commission. All were " a victim of a gross human rights violation" and included those who were personally abused or witnessed abuse of a family member. The violations included the killing a family member, torture, severe-ill-treatment, abduction, disappearance of a family member without return and things like police detention, raids on property and property damage. There was a high rate of multiple traumas.

Of the 134 people studied in this South African Truth and reconciliation Commission, 63 % had a mental illness. The most frequent diagnosis was depression (55%), followed by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (42%), then Anxiety disorder (27%). There was a high rate of multiple diagnoses. Analysis showed that there was a higher rate of mental disease amongst those who could not forgive. The researchers concluded that lack of forgiveness carried with it a higher rate of mental illness.

What happens when you are hurt

Once hurt, people can rehearse painful memories and harbour grudges. This can perpetuate negative emotions and the follow on physiological responses to those emotions.

When people hold a grudge, they stay in the victim role and perpetuate the negative emotions. Some people hold onto this for reasons of 'saving face' or to give themselves some sense of control. This is because a lack of control causes stress. However, nursing a grudge is a commitment to stay angry and this keeps all the negative health effects going.

On the other hand, being able to develop feelings of empathy can help move the person towards forgiveness. Empathy is placing yourself in the perpetrators shoes so that you have some sort of understanding of "where they were coming from". This may help you understand why they did the offending behaviour. Empathy has been found to reduce stress responses in the body as well as cardiac risk.

Finally granting forgiveness is a further step from empathy and involves rational and emotional responses as well as positive behaviour. Please note that forgiveness still allows you to hold the offender responsible for the offence and does not involve denying it happened, nor ignoring, minimizing, tolerating, condoning, excusing or forgetting the offence.

Forgiving thoughts reduce all the symptoms and relax the body, reducing stress and health risks.

Now, its not that easy to just decide to forgive. There is usually a process that most people can go through naturally. Some people are more disposed to forgive – its in their personality. Some have more difficulty, or there are circumstances that are making it difficult.

Empathy and forgiveness helps personal relationships run more smoothly.

Its possible to cultivate a more forgiving attitude by developing empathy and understanding that we are all human and not perfect. If you have been hurt and are finding it difficult to move forward to feeling better about it, you may benefit by seeing someone for psychological help.

In the end, its only you that suffers. So, go ahead and forgive, but not necessarily forget for the sake of your health and relationships.

"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." - Louis B. Smedes

"Always forgive your enemies - nothing annoys them so much." - Oscar Wilde

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." - Mahatma Gandhi

"Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future." - Paul Boese

"If you can't forgive and forget, pick one." - Robert Brault

"He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass." - George Herbert

"Without forgiveness life is governed by... an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation." - Roberto Assagioli

"Forgiveness is the sweetest revenge." - Isaac Friedman

"Life is an adventure in forgiveness." - Norman Cousins

"Forgiveness is a virtue of the brave." - Indira Gandhi

"As long as you don't forgive, who and whatever it is will occupy a rent-free space in your mind." - Isabelle Holland

"Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were." - Cherie Carter-Scott

"The best thing to give your enemy is forgiveness; to an opponent tolerance; to a friend your heart; to your child a good example; to a father deference; to your mother conduct that will make her proud of you; to your self respect, and to all men charity." - Frances Balfour

References

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