



## The Power of Forgiveness

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The topic of forgiveness is often overlooked – especially when it comes to our health. After all, how could forgiveness of ourselves or others possibly have an impact upon us physically? Could unforgiveness accelerate biological ageing? Could it accelerate the development of chronic illnesses that we associate with ageing poorly? It turns out that in fact, that whether we choose to forgive transgressors has a huge effect on our immediate and future wellbeing. In fact, forgiveness could save your life.

### First of all, what is forgiveness?

I think it is best to take the definition from the globally respected expert in forgiveness, Dr. Robert Enright, founder of the International Forgiveness Institute:

*“When you forgive someone, you make the choice to give up your desire for revenge and feelings of resentment. You also stop judging the person who caused you the hurt. Instead of revenge, resentment, and judgment, you show generosity, compassion, and kindness. In forgiveness, you don’t forget that the offense occurred, nor do you excuse it. You substitute your negative with positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviour (Enright et al., 1998).*

Let’s now look at some of the health benefits you can expect if you choose to forgive. As usual, all the data I present here are grounded in robust science and much of the information below comes from hospitals and universities that study traditional forgiveness.

### Stress reduction

Forgiveness significantly reduces psychological distress as we no longer churn over thoughts (both consciously and subconsciously) which cause stress to arise. Forgiveness lowers cortisol and boosts immune function. You’ll feel more relaxed and centred, and you won’t become ill as easily once you’ve forgiven transgressions – real or perceived.

### Lower blood pressure and improved heart rate

When we are able to release anxiety or anger which arise as a result of past injustices, our heart rate normalises, and our blood pressure returns to healthy levels. This has the knock-on effect of balancing many other processes in the body.

### Fewer depression symptoms

Forgiveness gives us healing, can foster a sense of universal connectedness and can replace depression with a sense of purpose and compassion.

### **Better anger-management skills and less hostility**

By its very nature, forgiveness allows us to release hostility toward ourselves and others. Spur-of-the-moment hostile behaviours, including road rage or initiating an argument for no reason, decrease as our commitment to forgiveness increases. When we choose to forgive, fewer encumbrances from the past weigh us down, and this improves our self-control if we do get angry.

### **Reduced symptoms of anxiety**

Anxiety often arises when we sense that we've done something wrong. Feelings of guilt provoke anxiety at a deep level. Forgiveness helps us to let go and to love ourselves deeply, easing psychological pain.

### **Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse**

Substance abuse and addictive behaviours mask underlying pain. Forgiveness allows us to release that pain and confront our situation from a more compassionate position.

### **Reduction in chronic physical pain**

Forgiveness has the capacity to help us heal ourselves psychologically and physically. Chronic pain often has a psychological component and it has been found that in many cases pain can be reversed by incorporating forgiveness into our lives.

### **Greater friendships**

Creating a healthy social life is one of the most powerful age-rewind strategies there is. In fact, it is possible to add a healthy 9 years to your life by fostering friendships and by socialising. When we don't hold grudges, we are able to get closer to friends and family. Old relationships have a chance to flourish and forgiveness can make space in our hearts for new relationships to develop.

## **How to nurture forgiveness in your life – my top 3 strategies**

### **Exercise**

When I was researching the science of forgiveness for this article, I was astonished to discover that research at York University in Canada showed that the type of exercise we take has a direct impact upon our ability to forgive. It turns out that aerobic and stretching exercises (both of which have a direct and measurable effect on promoting cardiac health) greatly improve our ability to forgive. Anaerobic exercise, such as lifting heavy weights does not confer this benefit. Remember, though, that I always recommend all the above exercises, regardless of their impact upon forgiveness, as they are all necessary for our overall health. If you are dealing with forgiveness, you could potentially find it easier by increasing your aerobic and stretching activities.

### **Ho'oponopono**

This is the ancient Hawai'ian mantra that has been used for millennia to heal, through forgiveness. The mantra is as follows:

*"I love you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you."*

It is based on the idea of taking 100% responsibility for our lives, so everything we see, hear, taste, touche, or in any way experience would be our responsibility because it is in our lives. Any problem is then *within* ourselves. I strongly suggest reading more about this deceptively simple, yet effective forgiveness approach online.

#### **Four Steps to Forgiveness**

The Four Steps to Forgiveness pioneered by William Fergus Martin, is an easy and powerfully effective way to start forgiving. It can lead to profound changes in your life. You can learn more at [Forgiveness-is-Power.com](http://Forgiveness-is-Power.com)

These Four Steps can be used for any kind of issue big, or small. However, start with relatively small issues until you get the idea. Don't try to forgive someone who could possibly cause you further hurt until you have some experience and understand the whole process. Begin with a small matter you wish to forgive and do the Four Steps in writing until you get some experience.

1. State who you need to forgive and for what.
2. Acknowledge how you currently feel about the situation. Be honest with your feelings, not the nice, polite things you think you should feel. How do you really feel? Then you express your willingness to at least be open to the possibility of letting go of those feelings.
3. State the benefits you will get from forgiving. This will probably be the opposite of what you are currently feeling. Sadness will become happiness, anger will become peace, heaviness becomes a feeling of lightness and so on. If you are not sure about the benefits just choose a few general good feelings which you would like to have for now (happier, more at ease, more confident etc.). It helps if you can imagine how much better you will feel when you have forgiven.
4. Commit yourself to forgiving. This is simply stating who you intend to forgive and then acknowledging the benefits which come from forgiving.