



Begin here...



IDENTIFY THE INJURY

The first step on The Road to Forgiveness is to identify the injury. As an individual seeking freedom from hurt and pain, it is important to reflect on your loss. What specifically happened to you? Did you experience betrayal, injustice, embarrassment, childhood trauma, abandonment, lying, deception? Did the injury involve divorce, adultery, church issues, broken trust, abuse of power, rape?

What emotions are you experiencing as a result of the injury? Are you feeling fear, anger, rejection, cheated, trapped, overwhelmed? Do you feel ashamed, guilty, humiliated, vulnerable, confused, numb, alone?

Properly identifying the injury also involves honestly identifying the offender(s). Who specifically inflicted pain in your life? A generalized "they" will not help you, but naming those who brought the hurt into your life will pave the road for you to ultimately release the offense.

It may be painful to acknowledge your wound, reflect on the emotional repercussions, and name the offender(s). You might be tempted instead to minimize, rationalize, justify, dissociate or build a defense around your wounded area. However, thoroughly identifying the injury requires honest acknowledgement of what happened to you, how it made you feel, and who caused your pain.

CALCULATE THE LOSSES

The next phase of the journey is to come to a full understanding of the depth of your loss.

Were the losses tangible—a home, child, spouse or a job? Did the losses involve your health, a limb, mobility, a parent, career or friends?

Were the losses intangible? Did you lose freedom, independence, reputation, security, privacy, dreams, individuality?

Intangible losses are sometimes even more challenging to process than tangible losses.

Calculating the losses involving a murder, suicide, sexual trauma or the abuse of a child can feel overwhelming and complex. You might want to seek the help of a professional counselor.



OWN YOUR BURDEN

Feeling the intense pain and magnitude of your loss may result in a desire to fight the experience, escape from it emotionally, or even pretend it didn't happen. Addictions, chemical dependency, and frantic activity are common responses that a wounded person may choose in an attempt to numb emotional pain. However, taking ownership of what has been so devastating in your life is an essential stepping stone on the path to forgiveness.

When you own your burden, you are accepting that what has happened to you has impacted your life, perhaps in a profound way. It may change the way you view your world, yourself, and those around you. Perhaps your values have changed or you have lost the ability to trust. You cannot change what has happened to you. The burden is now yours and you are making a choice to accept it.

Be careful to own your burden and not the burdens of others. Perhaps your family, friends, or co-workers have suffered as well; and if you take on the pain and loss of another person, it will likely cloud what has transpired in your life and complicate your journey to forgiveness.

THE VALLEY OF DEPRESSION

Loss and pain carry an emotional price tag. Perhaps the most common emotion associated with your loss is anger. If this anger is turned inward, it can lead to depression.

The Valley of Depression is a lonely place. Feelings of emptiness and overwhelming sadness abound. Often individuals feel abandoned by family, friends, and even God.

To begin your ascent out of depression, you must first address physical needs. Adequate rest, sleep, exercise, and proper nutrition are foundational to climbing



CHOICE AHEAD

Which road do you take?

Choice #1: If you have hurt someone and desire to make amends by asking forgiveness, continue up the path to a place of genuine humility and remorse.

Choice #2: If a person has hurt you and you cannot go to that person or consider it unwise to approach them, you may choose to take the lower road to release the injustice alone.

Choice #3: If a person has hurt you and you choose to go to them to tell them how you were hurt by what they did, you will take the road less traveled. Going to the one who offended you initiates the opportunity for reconciliation. This takes courage, discernment and initiative.

What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is *not* —

Forgiveness is not **amnesia**. "Forgive and forget," is a nice cliché but it doesn't work. There is an African proverb that says, "The axe forgets, the tree remembers." We are not designed to forget.

"Forgiveness does not equal forgetting. It is about healing the memory of the harm, not erasing it." — Ken Hori

Forgiveness is not **synonymous with trust**. "If I choose to forgive must I automatically trust the offender again?" No. Forgiveness and trust are two separate issues. You can forgive someone but trust has to be rebuilt.

Forgiveness is not **releasing the offender from responsibility**. Forgiveness is not "looking the other way when a wrong is done. It does not make light of a wrong. It is no bit of pious pretending that evil is not really evil. Forgiveness is not merely politeness, tact or diplomacy. Nor is it just forgetting." — Augsburg

Forgiveness is —

Forgiveness is **rare, difficult, costly and substitutional**. James Buswell, as cited by David Augsburg, succinctly defines substitutional when he states, "All forgiveness, human and divine, is in the very nature of the case vicarious, substitutional, and this is one of the most valuable views my mind has ever entertained. No one ever really forgives another, except he bears the penalty of the other's sin against him." — Augsburg

To illustrate: Write the word "hurt" on a chalkboard. When someone asks you to forgive them for the hurt that they caused and you choose

to forgive, you can erase "hurt" from the chalkboard. Where did the "hurt" go? Away? No, it's on the eraser. Whenever you choose to forgive, you are saying to the one who offended you: "I am willing to bear the consequences of what has happened to me and erase the debt from your ledger." That is why forgiveness is difficult, rare, and costly.

When you choose to forgive, you give a gift to yourself as well as to the one who offended you. Forgiveness that is granted means you will erase the debt from their ledger and not bring the issue up again.

Forgiveness *means* —

"You may recall the hurt, but you will not relive it! No constant reviewing, no rehashing of the old hurt, no going back to sit on the old gravesites where past grievances lie buried. True, the hornet of memory may fly again, but forgiveness has drawn its sting. The curse is gone. The memory is powerless to arouse or anger. The past is the past. Nothing can alter the facts. What has happened has happened forever. But the meaning can be changed. That is forgiveness." — Augsburg

How to Ask for Forgiveness

Merely saying "I apologize" or "I'm sorry" does not address the emotional hurt and pain that an offended person feels. "I'm sorry" and "I apologize" are one-way conversations.



The forgiveness process includes three critical components: acknowledgement, ownership, and release. These components touch the whole person, encompassing the intellect, emotion and will.

Acknowledgment: "I Know I Hurt You When..."

If you have offended someone, make a list entitled, "I know I hurt you when..." Some items on that list may go back a long way. Be specific. Your ultimate goal is to go to that person to acknowledge the hurt you brought into their life. This will **engage their intellect** by bringing to mind the event that caused the wound.

Ownership: "I Was Wrong."

Ownership means you take full responsibility for what you did. "I was wrong." Not, "I was wrong, but you were wrong too," or, "I was wrong, but let me tell you why I did it." Justifying, minimizing or rationalizing has no place in the forgiveness process.

You may say, "Well I was 70% wrong, but they were 30% wrong!" Take ownership of your part and don't worry about their part. You can not change other people; you can only take responsibility for yourself. "I was wrong." Period.

Why is ownership so important? If the offender will not judge his or her actions as wrong, it may not be possible for change to occur. It will certainly impact the ability to trust the offender in the future. To say, "I know I shouldn't have done... will you forgive me?" falls short of full ownership. The only way you can demonstrate ownership for your actions is to say, "I was wrong."

out of depression. If the depression lingers for weeks, you may want to consult a medical professional to assist in the recovery.

Having a safe place to unload emotionally, free from judgment or criticism, will further empower you to climb out of depression. Broken dreams, shattered trust and multiple losses often create perplexing emotions and twisted thinking that can only be untangled in a place that is safe for sharing.

Cognitive distortions often accompany depression. Feelings may be perceived as facts. You may see things as very black and white, all-or-nothing, or may "awfulize" your situation

You may also find yourself in a rut with "should" thinking. "I should have...", "If only I would have...", "Why didn't I?" Some battles can be fought over and over again, but it's not worth the emotional energy. Like the adage says, "A bulldog can whip a skunk, but it's not worth the fight!" The emotional consequence of beating yourself with "should" statements can create deeper depression. Remember, hurts can heal, regrets never heal.

Three "I's" that can assist you in climbing out of depression are time, talking, and tears. Talk openly and honestly with a trusted friend or counselor and don't resist releasing your pain through tears.



THE BITTERNESS TREE

"Living with bitterness is like driving down the road of life constantly looking in the rear view mirror."

—David A. Whiting

A physical wound left unattended can become infected. The swelling, redness, and tenderness impacts the entire body as it tries to compensate for the injury and protect the wound from further pain.

In the same way, emotional wounds must be properly diagnosed and receive appropriate care and attention in order to avoid an emotional infection. An emotional infection can create something that is deeper than anger; something that poisons the spirit and can literally transform the personality—an emotional gangrene that takes on a life of its own. The emotional infection that occurs has been called by a number of different names: institutionalized anger, harbored hurt, corrosive anger, a wounded spirit, tenacious anger, carcinoma of the spirit, acid of the soul or calcified resentment. Perhaps the most common word is bitterness.

Bitterness is a root which produces negative fruit. One of those fruits is **wrath**—a fierce indignation against a perceived injustice—which progresses to the explosive outburst of **anger**.

Anger progresses to **clamor**—yelling, crying and screaming—which can lead to **abusive speech**. These negative fruits can culminate in **malice**—a physical attempt to do harm. In the most extreme form, malice turned inward can lead to suicide; malice turned outward can lead to murder.

One of the defense mechanisms people use with pain is to separate their feelings from the event. When an offender acknowledges his or her actions and takes ownership, it **activates emotion** in the individual who was offended. Cognitive recognition and emotion must be packaged together before the wrong can be released. If you can't feel it, you can't heal it.

If you are the recipient of this confession, what is shared with you may bring a flood of overwhelming emotion, making it difficult to forgive at that moment. It is appropriate to say, "I need a little time to process what I have heard, but I will get back to you." Keep your promise to do so.

Release: "Will You Forgive Me?"

How you ask the offended party for forgiveness is important. Do not say, "Forgive me" or "You need to forgive me." This isn't a time to issue commands. You are asking them to erase the debt from your ledger: "Will you forgive me?"

The offended individual now has the opportunity to respond with, "I forgive you," which gives him or her a choice that **involves the will**.



RELEASING THE INJUSTICE ALONE

How do you forgive someone when they have not asked to be forgiven? Sometimes you have to release the injustice alone. There may be times when it would be unsafe or unwise to go to the offender because their response might re-victimize you. Also, if the offender is dead or unremorseful, it may further complicate, but not thwart, the forgiveness process.

The freedom of forgiveness is not achieved by merely processing your losses cognitively. You may be feeling intense pain, and justice demands answers for your pain. There will never be a cognitive response sufficient to answer the "why" question that is rooted in emotional pain.

Release the right to exact and execute your own brand of justice. "Forgiveness is taking your hands off another person's throat."

—William Paul Young

The emotional release of anger and desire for vindication involves a choice, an act of the will. Your will is now at a crossroad. You can choose to release the injustice or hold on to it. "Forgiveness is a choice, a crisis of the will." —Neil Anderson

Some hurts and losses are just too large to handle. The pain is overwhelming and the injustice runs deep. Defer the right for vindication to God. The price of carrying resentment and anger is unbearably heavy and takes the joy out of life. Give yourself the gift of freedom.

To merely treat the fruit may be ineffective. Buried beneath the surface lies the gnarled and twisted root of bitterness, ravenously feeding on an emotional infection deep within the human heart. Bitterness takes on a life of its own and destroys the person it inhabits.

"It slowly sets, like a permanent plaster cast, perhaps protecting the wearer from further pain but ultimately holding him rigid in frozen animation. His feelings and responses have turned to concrete, and, like concrete, they are all mixed up and firmly set. Bitterness is a paralysis."

—David Augsburg

The New Freedom of Forgiveness

Characteristics of a Bitter Person

- A bitter person:
- Finds it impossible to speak peaceably with others in their family.
- Speaks with barbed and cutting words, hurting others deeply.
- Uses language characterized by hostility and suspicion.
- Criticizes what others say or do.
- Disrespects others and is unthankful.
- Rehearses the past over and over again.
- Twists the motives and intentions of others when they try to come alongside to help.
- Resists change or help.
- Strives to keep past injuries fresh as though they happened yesterday.
- Exhibits indifference and numbness toward the hurts they inflict on others.

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Carefully consider the physical, relational, emotional and spiritual consequences of holding on to bitterness. Perhaps it would be helpful to compose a list of the advantages and disadvantages of holding on to bitterness. When the disadvantages outweigh the advantages and the destructive poison of bitterness is fully understood, then you are ready to continue your journey. Forgiveness is the only antidote to bitterness.



THE DUNGEON OF DESPAIR

The Dungeon of Despair is a cold and lonely prison, a dead end street, a place of self-pity. The negative energy of self-pity will emotionally drain you, giving the false impression that you are being strengthened and empowered.

"Surrender your right to get even. Leave that with God. Lay down your demands that the offender change or pay for the past, that he prove himself first and that he guarantee the future." —Augsburger

In the book of Genesis, a man named Joseph was wrongfully abused by his brothers. Relationships were severed and Joseph's life was totally altered. He released the injustice to God. Years later, he named his firstborn son *Manasseh*, which means in Hebrew, "to take the sting out of the wound." In this way, Joseph expressed that God had taken the sting out of his wound so it could heal. —Genesis 37:39-45

You may want to take symbolic, physical steps to release and forgive. Tangible actions could include: write out the offense on paper and then burn the paper to symbolize the act of forgiving and releasing, write the offense on a helium balloon and symbolically let it go, or paint the offense on a rock and throw it in a river.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Sometimes a person hurts you and they are unaware that they have done so. In this case, you can initiate the opportunity to have the hurt addressed by going to that individual and saying, "I was hurt when..."

You have no control over how the offender will respond. Hopefully, if they are sensitive, the relationship can be restored. If they react defensively, you may feel "re-offended." Be prepared to accept the outcome; you did what you could to create opportunity for the relationship to be restored. Recognize that you can always return to the solo path of "Releasing the Injustice Alone."



THE BRIDGE OF RECONCILIATION

People often confuse forgiveness with trust. Forgiveness can be granted; trust has to be rebuilt. Sometimes the Bridge of Reconciliation can be reconstructed and at other times, too much damage has occurred.

"If, however, the interpersonal bridge (reconciliation) is to have any structural integrity; if it can be suspended across deep and abysmal injuries; if it is to be sound enough to bear the weight of persons traveling to the other side once more, then forgiveness must be more than a social lubricant, a survival technique, a relational strategy, a memory fatigue, an individual escape, a dismissal of hurt or anger or a ritual of denial."

—Augsburger

The offender must admit his or her wrong; recognize the hurt he or she caused you, own their behavior and declare their commitment to change. Forgiveness is a solo; reconciliation is a duet. If both parties are deeply committed to restoring the relationship, then there is hope.

"Having resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

—Malachi McCourt

Anger has power—the power to imprison. So much has been taken away that you feel you have the right to be angry. This creates a sense of justification and control in which you experience power in not forgiving. I am not your victim, you are my victim.

"Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

—Frederick Buechner

Life exists outside the dungeon. You will laugh and sing again, but you must first choose to move through the resentment and injustice to create something better. Releasing the right to be angry is not easy. Some never do. They are content to remain in the Dungeon of Despair as an emotional slave to someone else's injustice toward them.

Now is the time to make the decision to walk out of the Dungeon of Despair and move on with your life. Talk to the jailor who holds the key to the door and can open it. The jailor is you.



MOURN THE LOSS

Mourning is an encounter with the truth. Mourning is not whining. Whining is when you are stuck in self-pity. Mourning is pausing to feel the loss so that you can accept it. Mourning requires the "revisiting of the past, re-working of the injury and rebuilding of the loss through re-framing and reinterpreting its meanings."

—Augsburger

Take time to reflect honestly on what has occurred in your life. Come to terms with the reality of what others have done to you. Realize what you don't have and perhaps never will have. Mourning is where emotion and reality converge.

A number of the Psalms in the Old Testament were devoted to mourning—songs of deep sorrow. Songs that define, clarify, and quantify the loss. Perhaps writing your own song of mourning would be helpful. Mourning the loss creates a freedom within to move forward.

However, when there has been a profound betrayal of trust, the relationship may never be fully restored.

Rebuilding takes honesty, transparency, accountability, openness, and sometimes restitution. Both parties need to be actively involved.

Reconciliation takes work, but is possible. Husbands and wives can rebuild after adultery. Adult children can reconcile with their parents. Family members can reconnect.

However, it is important to note: some people burn bridges; others dynamite them. When a child has been molested or abused by an adult, the damage can be so severe and the abuse of trust so profound, that to try to rebuild the bridge of reconciliation and restore the relationship is practically impossible and often unwise.



MOVING FORWARD

The Road to Forgiveness may have been a lonely journey, and you may have lost a sense of community; but now you have an opportunity to connect with others. As you honestly share your story of pain and your journey to forgiveness, you may find that others have similar stories.

One of the benefits of pain is that it opens your eyes to others and increases your sensitivity to the losses they have experienced. The ultimate purpose of any emotional healing is to be able to share with others and be a source of comfort and encouragement. The entire journey on the Road to Forgiveness is about hurt and healing. We may have been hurt in relationships, but in relationships we will experience healing. As we participate in this community of support and build healthy relationships, we are able to continue to grow, receive strength, and move forward.

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Mourning allows *The Serenity Prayer* to be woven into the fabric of your life.

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
The things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
Which should be changed,
And the wisdom to distinguish
The one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Amen.

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

DECIDE YOUR IDENTITY

The nature of trauma is that it changes you forever. It does not need to damage you forever, but it will change you forever. Embedded in loss and tragedy are the seeds of change—new relationships, new values and a new perspective on many things in life.

Perhaps the hurt you have experienced has caused you to become more compassionate. You may more readily identify with other hurting people and innately know what to say and do.

Personal trauma may have caused you to develop a whole new value system—a system that values people and relationships more than status or possessions. Following a loss, old friendships may seem shallow and purposeless; new friendships may seem deeper and more meaningful.

It is important to take time to contemplate who you have become and where you want to go. Do you desire to remain under the power and control of the one who hurt you? Do you want this event to be the defining moment of your life? Do you want those who have hurt you to continue robbing you of joy and purpose?

Write down how your loss has changed you. Consider how this painful event can deepen or expand your knowledge and understanding, enabling you to create something new for your future.

"The past is the past. Nothing can alter the facts. What has happened has happened forever. But the meaning can be changed. That is forgiveness. Forgiveness restores the present, heals for the future, and releases us from the past."

—Augsburger