

# Forgiving and Moving On

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Forgiveness is a process not an event. Rather than an endgame, what's important and beneficial about forgiveness is that it motivates us to work through the powerful feeling and thought patterns that block it. Carl Jung felt that we don't really solve a problem, rather we go to the mountain top, figuratively speaking, and learn to "see it differently". Forgiveness involves both willingness to work through the feelings that keep us reverberating in unresolved, painful emotions that make forgiveness seem impossible, as well as a willingness to view, as Marcel Proust said, "the same landscape through different eyes".

The kind of emotional and psychological pain that inevitably are part of living with addiction are not easily forgotten. Learning to tolerate the intense emotions that make us want to run, shut down or pick up is part of the work of recovery. Twelve step programs have understood, since their beginnings, that forgiveness is an issue that needs to be addressed at some point in recovery for both the addict and those affected by addiction. Forgiving *others* who have hurt us, whether we're an addict, co-dependent or a coa in recovery, can seem insurmountable. Emotions like anger, resentment and unresolved hurt come to the surface and cloud our willingness or ability to see past them. But it is in addressing these feelings openly and honestly, as a part of our fearless, moral inventory, that we can move through them toward healing.

People in recovery sometimes struggle the hardest with *self* forgiveness. Self recrimination and

shame can make us retreat into rigid positions that make intimacy and connection feel fraught with discomfort. Becoming willing to forgive the self implies a recognition that hanging onto anger toward ourselves not only hurts us, but everyone around us. For *addicts*, *self*-forgiveness can help to lighten the emotional burdens that can fuel relapse. Both unresolved anger and sadness toward others and feelings of guilt and shame over their own actions while using, can contribute to a "dry drunk" syndrome. At the least, "white knucking it" takes the comfort and joy out of life and relationships and at the most can contribute to being forever welded to addictive and compulsive patterns.

Following are some of the misconceptions surrounding forgiveness that seem to give some people pause when contemplating it.

## Myths About Forgiveness

- If I forgive, my relationship with the person I'm forgiving will definitely improve
- If I forgive, I'll no longer feel angry at the person for what happened
- If I forgive, I forgo my right to hurt feelings
- If I forgive, it means I want to continue to have a relationship with the person I'm forgiving
- If I forgive it, means I'm condoning the behavior of the person I'm forgiving
- If I haven't forgotten, I haven't really forgiven
- I only need to forgive once
- I forgive for the sake of the other person
- Forgiving myself is selfish or wrong
- It isn't important to forgive myself (Dayton 2003)

In recovery we learn to “talk out” rather than “act out” our powerful emotions. When we get triggered into intense emotional states, it can help to stop and tune in rather than explode or implode; to ask ourselves, “what’s going on inside of me, why am I feeling so highly charged”? When we can’t allow ourselves to actually tune into the pain that gets triggered and try to understand why we’re reacting intensely, we may try to get rid of it through blame and acting out in negative ways. This locks us into a stress cycle that solves nothing, exacerbates problems and leaves us feeling depleted and alone. Breaking through engrained patterns of thinking, feeling and behavior can allow us to truly mourn the inevitable list of losses that follow in the wake of addiction and surface during recovery. If we can’t process the feelings of anger and sadness that surface when we honestly confront life damage, we’re at risk for trying to replace what was lost rather than accept it, mourn and move on; trying to meet old needs but in the wrong place, at the wrong time and with the wrong person. Lost relationships, years of life, sense of safety and security and future dreams can all come back to haunt both the addict and the co-dependents when the sickness of addiction is finally addressed. Forgiveness provides a positive goal that can help us to move toward a life free of the kinds of emotional and psychological burdens that create more pain. It involves a rigorous facing and working through of psychological and emotional pain as well as a spiritual solution of surrender that is part of living with our powerlessness over the disease of addiction.

### **The Stages of Forgiveness: Walking the Walk**

People seem to go through about five predictable stages as they confront the issues that block their letting go and moving on. These stages can be repeated, alternated or leapfrogged. They are.

**Waking Up:** *Realizing that we’re carrying around some issue that’s standing in our own way of serenity.*

**Anger/Resentment:** *Simmering feelings or resentment, sudden, angry outbursts and bouts of rage, often due to unresolved grief.*

**Sadness/Hurt:** *Feelings ranging from sadness to despair that are often blocked by fear and are painful to let in and feel.*

**Integration/Acceptance/Letting Go:** *Having felt the disowned or unwanted feelings: we learn from them and have new insights; we grow.*

**Reinvestment:** *Reinvesting freed up energy in life and relationships consciously and deliberately. (Dayton 2003)*

### **The Story of Addiction is Written on the Body**

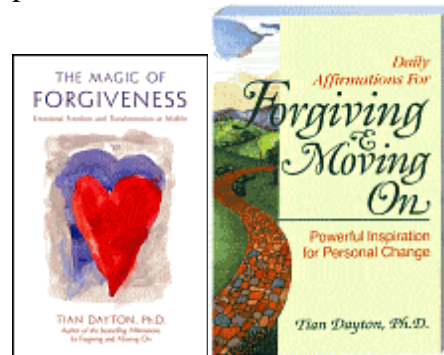
Both being addicted and living with the trauma of addiction deregulates our limbic system. The limbic system “sets the mind’s emotional tone, filters external events through internal states (creates emotional coloring), tags events as internally important, stores highly charged emotional memories, modulates motivation, controls appetite and sleep cycles, promotes bonding and directly processes the sense of smell and modulates libido,” (Amen 1998). Our neural networks are not easily altered, “early emotional experiences knit long-lasting patterns into the very fabric of the brain’s neural networks.” (Lewis 2000) Our emotional life is physical, it imprints itself on our bodies. When we have problems in our deep limbic system

they can manifest in “moodiness, irritability, clinical depression, increased negative thinking, negative perceptions of events, decreased motivation, floods of negative emotion, appetite and sleep problems, decreased or increased sexual responsiveness or social isolation,” (Amen 1998). Our neural system carries with it our emotional sense memories from childhood. When the memories are positive they are likely to propel us toward optimism and self acceptance in the present, when they’re painful, they can color our current experience in darker hues. In recovery we are faced with altering negative feeling patterns that developed through addiction as well as reeducating our deeper patterns, perhaps from as far back as childhood, that may have caused us to pick up or act out in the first place. (Dayton 2003)

We need to be around healthy regulating relationships and activities in order to re-regulate our neural systems. Psychotherapy, treatment and twelve step work are some ways of repatterning our limbic systems, along with other healthy relationships and activities of all kinds. Because “Describing good relatedness to someone, no matter how precisely or how often, does not *inscribe* it into the neural networks that inspire love or other feelings.” The limbic system is associated with our emotions and the neocortex is associated with critical thinking. Both are operative in processing emotions. While the neocortex can collect facts quickly, the limbic brain does not.” (Lewis 2000). We are designed to learn through all of our senses. Physical mechanisms, or sensory impressions, are what produce our experience of the world and we need new sets of physical impressions to change or alter those impressions.

Making the unconscious conscious is

an age old goal of many forms of therapy. The idea is that therapy creates what Fritz Perls referred to as a “safe emergency” in which emotions can resurface to be reexamined and reworked so that they get restored in our unconscious with new insight and meaning, so that they no longer control us. In treatment, therapy and twelve step work we learn to tolerate the intensity of our inner world and decode it rather than jump straight into action in an attempt to flee from feeling or fight to get rid of intense emotion. We face and work through the anger, hurt and resentment that keep us from moving forward in recovery. As we do this and come to new insights and understanding surrounding our intense emotional reactions, forgiveness happens organically, we see the same situation “through different eyes”. Rather than an act of will, it is a natural outgrowth of deep, emotional work, an awakening into another point of view, a letting go of the past in order to live more fully in the present.



Daniel Amen, author of *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*. (1998) Three Rivers Press

Tian Dayton *The Magic of Forgiveness* (2003) Health Communication  
 Thomas Lewis, M.D., in *A General Theory of Love*, (2000) Vintage

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