**Forgiveness: An Inside Job**

*By: Roger Landry and Teresa Beshwate*

We are surrounded by examples of forgiveness, including the remarkable story of Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for 26 years for fighting apartheid, who forgave those who took away his freedom, and so moved the country, that he was elected President of South Africa not long after his release. And then as President, he resisted all suggestions to punish those who had served injustice to so many. He said that if he did not forgive, he would still feel imprisoned.

Forgiveness is more than being a good person. Forgiveness is about choosing to live free of hate, anger, and negativity. And, it is the only way to find peace. Dr. Paula Bloom tells us our minds are like magnifying glasses … whatever we focus on will expand. Think anger and hate and that is what fills your life. Think compassion, forgiveness and acceptance of loss, and there lies peace.

*But forgiveness is hard, right?*

We first learn forgiveness as children. Remember being positioned face to face with another child and instructed to “say you’re sorry?” The other child is expected to accept the apology, of course. Based on this childhood experience, we can spend our adult lives thinking of forgiveness as a verbal exchange between two people, the acceptance of an apology or the condoning of behavior.

*But it is not necessarily any of those things.*

**Forgiveness is defined as follows:***to stop feeling angry or resentful toward someone for an offense, flaw, or a mistake.*

So technically, forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person. Instead, it is about us and how we feel.

Based on this definition, we can choose to forgive someone and never tell them and never speak to them again. Or we can choose to forgive them and bring them back into our lives. We can also *pretend* to forgive someone and bring them back into our lives but still feel angry and resentful - which is not forgiveness at all.

The actions we take don’t define forgiveness. Forgiveness is exclusively about our feelings. It’s an inside job. Actions are secondary and optional.

**When to forgive?**

We get to decide to forgive when we want to stop feeling angry or resentful. It’s that simple.

The other person doesn’t experience our emotion anyway. We are not punishing them in any way. As the saying goes, it’s like drinking poison and hoping that the other person will suffer. It never works and we stay shackled in negativity.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is freedom.

**How to forgive**

The only thing required to forgive someone is to change how we feel: to stop feeling angry and resentful. That might sound impossible, but it can be surprisingly simple.

What causes anger? What causes resentment? The brain likely wants to come up with a host of examples: what he said, what she did, what didn’t happen that should have, etc. But it isn’t truly the actions of the other person that cause our anger and resentment. Our thoughts always cause our feelings, so it is our thoughts *about* those actions.

This is good news, because while we can never control the actions of others, we have complete control over our thoughts, and therein lies our power.

What are your thoughts that create feelings of anger and resentment? Write them all down. Be sure to focus on what *you are thinking* about whatever event that happened, not the actions of the other person.

Now ask your brain to go to work and consider other thoughts. It will protest, but that’s okay, ask it to go to work anyway.

**Try on new thoughts like:**

* Hurt people hurt people.
* It had nothing to do with me.
* It means nothing about me.
* He/she is doing their best given what they know.
* He/she is a messy, imperfect human, just like the rest of us.

These are some examples, but it’s important to come up with your own. Ask your brain to create a list of 20 new thoughts, or more.

**Also ask your brain to answer some questions:**

* How can I be an example of what is possible?
* What if it was always supposed to happen this way?
* What good can come of this?

Try on each new thought and see how it makes you feel. Keep the thoughts that are true for you, and that generate feelings that are useful. Then choose to think those thoughts on purpose.

Anger and resentment are heavy burdens to carry. Releasing ourselves from the shackles is always within our power if we are willing to challenge our brains to think new thoughts and try each one on for size. We then become responsible for our feelings and step into the freedom that is forgiveness, and ultimately, we can be an example of what is possible.