



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

NINE STEPS TO FORGIVENESS

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

—Lewis B. Smedes

OVERVIEW

A nine-step process to help you forgive someone who has hurt or offended you

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When you are holding a grudge or feel disappointed by a colleague or student
- When you are ready to start mending a relationship that could use forgiveness

TIME REQUIRED

- Each person will forgive at their own pace. We suggest that you move through the steps below based on what works for you.

LEVEL

- Adult

MATERIALS

- Paper (optional)
- Pencil/Pen (optional)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

You will:

- Process a challenging experience by identifying key components of the experience
- Utilize stress management techniques when feeling triggered
- Practice shifting your perspective on a situation

MATERIALS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to think of a person who has said or done something to offend or harm you. Does this surface any challenging emotions? Consider whether you feel ready to release these emotions and forgive this person. If so, take a moment to prepare yourself mentally and emotionally to practice a new approach to forgiveness.
- Note that the process of forgiveness can take a long time. The steps outlined below are not meant to take effect overnight. It can sometimes take years to fully forgive—and that's OK. Be gentle with yourself and take the time you need. Even though forgiving someone can seem overwhelming, in the end, it is worth the emotional freedom.

INSTRUCTIONS

STEP 1

Take a moment to reflect on the situation that resulted in your feeling hurt. Identify exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then tell a few trusted people about your experience.

STEP 2

Make a commitment to yourself to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and no one else. You may want to write a small note to yourself as a reminder of your commitment.

STEP 3

Remember that forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning their actions. In forgiveness, you seek the peace and understanding that come from blaming people less after they offend you and taking those offenses less personally.

STEP 4

Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not from what hurt you two minutes—or 10 years—ago.

STEP 4

At the moment you feel upset, practice stress management to soothe your body's fight or flight response. This could mean taking deep breaths, doing a mindful breathing exercise, taking a walk outside—whatever is most effective for you.

STEP 6

Give up expecting things from your life or from other people that they do not choose to give you. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship, and prosperity, and work hard to get them. However, these are “unenforceable rules”: You will suffer when you demand that these things occur, since you do not have the power to make them happen.

STEP 7

Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you.

STEP 8

Remember that a life well-lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving power over you to the person who caused you pain, look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Put more energy into appreciating what you have rather than attending to what you do not have.

STEP 9

Amend the way you look at your past so you remind yourself of your heroic choice to forgive.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did you feel after going through this practice?
- Did you have any new insights that may have helped alter your perspective on the situation?
- Are there any steps that you may need to revisit at a different moment?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), 259 majority white adults between the ages of 25-50 who completed a six-week forgiveness training (90 minutes/session) reported lower stress, anger, and hurt than people who didn't undergo the training. They also felt more capable of forgiving and greater optimism immediately after the training and four months later.

Dr. Luskin led the training, which involved teaching participants the core elements of forgiveness outlined in this 9-step practice, including taking less personal offense, blaming the offender less, and offering more understanding of the offender and of oneself.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We all suffer slights, hurts, and betrayals, and it's natural to be upset with the people who hurt us, or sometimes even cut off contact with them. But holding onto a grudge too deeply or for too long can wreak havoc on our mental and physical health—it can elevate stress, increase our blood pressure and heart rate, and even compromise our immune system. Research suggests that [practicing forgiveness](#) can strengthen relationships and reduce toxic feelings of stress and anger and boost happiness and optimism.

At the organizational level, forgiveness improves employee productivity and retention and also increases morale and trust among workers. Forgiveness entails letting go of resentment or vengeance toward an offender and making peace with what happened so you can move on with your life; it doesn't necessarily mean reconciling with that person. The process of forgiveness takes time and should only be initiated when you feel ready and have had time to grieve the wrong that was done to you. For more on the benefits of forgiveness, see the Greater Good Science Center's [forgiveness definition page](#).

SOURCE

Fred Luskin, Ph.D., Stanford University