



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

EIGHT ESSENTIALS WHEN FORGIVING

"It's one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive."

—*Maya Angelou*

OVERVIEW

Make a list of people who have hurt you—and who you would like to forgive. Then, move through these eight steps to forgiveness at your own pace.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When you are ready to mend a relationship through forgiveness
- When you notice that a past hurt influences how you engage with your students or colleagues
- When you want to let go of resentment or anger that you feel toward someone at home or at school

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
- Pencil/Pen

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

You will:

- Reflect on harms you have experienced and how they have influenced your sense of trust

- Consider making a conscious decision to forgive a person who has caused you pain
- Practice taking the perspective of the person who caused you harm—in an effort to understand what might have led them to such action
- Practice becoming aware of your emotions and your capacity for compassion
- Consider forgiveness as a gift or an act of mercy
- Reflect on how this experience may clarify a sense of meaning or purpose in your life.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Forgiveness
- Compassion
- Kindness

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-Judgment
- Open Awareness
- Focused Attention

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Find a quiet space for this exercise. Take a few deep breaths. Prepare yourself to think about those who have caused you pain.
- 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 okay. Be gentle with yourself and take the time you need. Even though forgiving someone can seem overwhelming, in the end, it may be worth the emotional freedom.

INSTRUCTIONS

Make a list of people who have hurt you deeply enough to warrant the effort to forgive. You can do this by asking yourself on a 1-to-10 scale, How much pain do I have regarding the way this person treated me?, with 1 involving

the least pain (but still significant enough to justify the time to forgive) and 10 involving the most pain. Then, order the people on this list from least painful to most painful. Start with the person lowest on this hierarchy (least painful).

1. Consider one offense by the first person on your list. Ask yourself: How has this person's offense negatively impacted my life? Reflect on the psychological and physical harm it may have caused. Consider how your views of humanity and trust of others may have changed as a result of this offense. Recognize that what happened was not okay, and allow yourself to feel any negative emotions that come up.
2. When you're ready, make a decision to forgive. Deciding to forgive involves coming to terms with what you will be doing as you forgive—extending an act of mercy toward the person who has hurt you. When we offer this mercy, we deliberately try to reduce resentment (persistent ill will) toward this person and, instead, offer them kindness, respect, generosity, or even love.
3. It is important to emphasize that forgiveness does not involve excusing the person's actions, forgetting what happened, or tossing justice aside. Justice and forgiveness can be practiced together. Another important caveat: To forgive is not the same as to reconcile. Reconciliation is a negotiation strategy in which two or more people come together again in mutual trust. You may not choose to reconcile with the person you are forgiving.
4. Start with cognitive exercises. Ask yourself these questions about the person who has hurt you: What was life like for this person while growing up? What wounds did they suffer from others that could have made them more likely to hurt you? What kinds of extra pressures or stresses were in this person's life at the time they offended you? These questions are not meant to excuse or condone, but rather to better understand the other person's areas of pain, those areas that make them vulnerable and human. Understanding why people commit destructive acts can also help us find more effective ways of preventing further destructive acts from occurring in the future.
5. Be aware of any little movement of your heart through which you begin to feel even slight compassion for the person who offended you. This person may have been confused, mistaken, and misguided. They may deeply regret their actions. As you think about this person, notice if you start to feel softer emotions toward them.
6. Try to consciously bear the pain that they caused you so that you do not end up throwing that pain back onto the one who offended you, or even toward unsuspecting others, such as loved ones who were not the ones who wounded you in the first place. When we are emotionally wounded, we tend to displace our pain onto others. Please be aware of this so that you are not perpetuating a legacy of anger and injuries.
7. Think of a gift of some kind that you can offer to the person you are trying to forgive. Forgiveness is an act of mercy—you are extending mercy toward someone who may not have been merciful toward you. This could be through a smile, a returned phone call, or a good word about them to others. Always consider your own safety first when extending kindness and goodwill towards this person. If interacting with this person could put you in danger, find another way to express your feelings, such as by writing in a journal or engaging in a practice such as compassion meditation.
8. Finally, try to find meaning and purpose in what you have experienced. For example, as people suffer from the injustices of others, they often realize that they themselves become more sensitive to others' pain. This, in turn, can give them a sense of purpose toward helping those who are hurting. It may also motivate them to work toward preventing future injustices of a similar kind.

Once you complete the forgiveness process with one person on your list, select the next person in line and move up that list until you are forgiving the person who hurt you the most.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did you feel after going through this process?
- Did you have any new insights that altered your perspective?
- Are there any steps that you may need to revisit at another time?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Researchers compared several studies using Dr. Enright’s “process model of forgiveness,” which is similar to the steps outlined above. All the studies took place in a clinical setting including individual and group therapy. Therapies that used these methods were shown to be effective in increasing forgiveness and in decreasing negative psychological states such as anxiety and anger, compared to control groups. These were often long-term therapies, ranging from 6 to 60 weekly sessions, aimed at helping individuals cope with serious offenses.

Other studies indicate 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.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We have all suffered hurts and betrayals—many at the hands of our colleagues, which can impact how we feel about the culture of our school and the work we do with students and others. Choosing to forgive is a way to release the distress that arises again and again from the memory of these incidents, and can help shape a more connected school culture. But it’s important to remember that forgiveness is often a long and difficult process.

This exercise outlines several steps that are essential to the process of forgiveness, breaking it down into manageable components. These steps were created by Robert Enright, Ph.D., one of the world’s leading forgiveness researchers. Although the exact process of forgiveness may look different for different people, most anyone can still draw upon Dr. Enright’s basic principles. In certain cases, it may help to consult a trained clinician, especially if you are working through a traumatic event.

SOURCE

[Robert Enright, Ph.D.](#), University of Wisconsin, Madison