



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

## LETTING GO OF ANGER THROUGH COMPASSION

*"We may not know how to forgive, and we may not want to forgive; but the very fact we say we are willing to forgive begins the healing practice."*

—Louise Hay

### OVERVIEW

Practice thinking about a hurtful event in a different way and offering the offender some compassion to begin letting go of the anger or hurt you might hold.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When you find yourself ruminating on an experience of hurt.
- 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

- 5 minutes. You can repeat this exercise as needed.

#### LEVEL

- Adult

#### MATERIALS

- N/A

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

You will:

- Practice changing your perspective on a situation

- Practice being attuned to your emotions, thoughts, and your physical responses towards a person who has hurt you
- Practice giving a gift of compassion to someone who has caused you pain

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

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

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Forgiveness
- Compassion

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-Judgment
- Open Awareness
- Focused Attention

## 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, whether at your school or in your personal life. 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

- Find a quiet place to sit. Relax for two minutes, breathing in and out naturally. During each exhale, focus on the word "one." Keep your arms, legs, and body still.

- Identify a time in the past when another person at your school or in your personal life hurt or offended you.
- For the next two minutes, think of the offender as a human being who behaved badly and has the potential to change. Even if the relationship cannot be restored, try to genuinely wish that this person experiences something positive or healing.
- Even though it may be hard, focus your thoughts and feelings on giving a gift of mercy or compassion. Be consciously aware of the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses you have as you cultivate compassion, kindness, and mercy for this person.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were you able to alter your perspective on the situation?
- What emotions, thoughts, and physical reactions did you experience as you went through this practice?
- How do you feel after having gone through this practice?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), participants instructed to think about a past offense in a compassionate way—to engage in what the researchers call “compassionate reappraisal”—reported greater empathy, forgiveness, positive emotions, and feelings of control, compared with participants instructed to ruminate on or suppress negative emotions about the offense. Compared with the rumination group, the compassionate reappraisal group also showed less eye muscle tension (which is associated with intense emotion) and lower heart rate.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Scientists who study forgiveness in organizations point out that [conflict is inevitable in the workplace](#), including schools. Working closely with our colleagues on a daily basis gives us many opportunities to hurt or offend another person—whether we mean to or not. And yet rather than deal with the hurts directly, we sometimes choose to avoid the person, become defensive, or, as what often happens in the school staff break room, start backstabbing each other—all of which contribute to a negative classroom and/or school climate.

When we are hurt or betrayed by someone, it’s understandable to feel angry and view the person in a negative light. However, persistently dwelling on these painful feelings can keep us stuck in a grudge, which is highly stressful and wreaks havoc on our physical and mental health.

One way to loosen the grip of anger and hostility is to change the way we think about the person who hurt us. [Research](#) suggests that when people view offenders as fallible human beings who behaved badly but have the potential to change, they experience emotional and physiological benefits, such as increased positive emotions and a more stress-resilient cardiovascular system.

## SOURCE

Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, Ph.D., Hope College