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# Forgiveness: Healing Wounds in Families

by Emma Allen

During my adolescent years, I observed my mother go through excruciating pain as she spent nearly four years trying to forgive an emotionally abusive family member. Our family had lived through the toxic repercussions of my mother's abuse, with her sometimes lashing out under the weight of difficult emotions and, at other times, withdrawing into depressive symptoms when her abusive family member would act out inappropriately. With the boundary work she underwent and, especially, the journey toward forgiveness she embarked on, we too experienced healing as my mother embraced her authentic self, learned to calibrate emotionally, and ultimately, fully forgave.

Some of the strongest offenses and deepest hurts occur in family relationships, resulting in feelings of helplessness, betrayal, hurt, anger, uncertainty, and shame that can almost overpower our lives. Researchers have found "the capacity to both forgive and ask for forgiveness for the 'everyday relational harms' is an important asset in overcoming the threat of everyday living that pulls [families] apart."<sup>1</sup>

**With faith, time, effort, and a desire to overcome pain, the process of forgiveness can deliver us and our families from difficult emotional bondage.**

However, forgiveness should not be seen as a way to minimize the pain we suffer from serious offenses.<sup>2</sup> With faith, time, effort, and a desire to overcome pain, the process of forgiveness can deliver us and our families from difficult emotional bondage and proffer growth, mental well-being, and love and peace at home. The journey, though complex and arduous, ultimately rewards those who embark on the forgiveness path with harmony in their relationships and a sense of peace that no longer eludes them.

## Forgiveness Is a Process

To be free from her pain, my mother was willing to try anything in order to get to the desired result. She described her experience as a long and painful process that involved examining a variety of puzzle pieces as she worked to make sense of the situation. However, as she opened her metaphorical personal forgiveness box, she soon became overwhelmed as she realized that instead of bright, colorful

patterns that would help her quickly sort these pieces, they all appeared gray. There was no easy solution or clear picture, and the pieces wouldn't fit together for her without substantial work. Through trial and error, my mom persisted, however, in an effort to fully forgive.

As I struggled to learn the forgiveness process and found the need to work through my own wounded relationships, I found my mother's example helped me with my own puzzle. We have both resonated with these five main puzzle pieces that researchers have outlined:

**First, uncover the offense.** According to forgiveness researchers, uncovering refers to "the awareness of the problem and emotional pain following an offense, including anger and insight."<sup>3</sup> For my mom, this involved realizing an unhealthy relationship in her life was caused by certain inappropriate behaviors of another family member. Exploring this puzzle piece evoked emotions such as hurt, sadness, loss, confusion, and anger as she faced, defined, and acknowledged the offense.

**Second, choose how you will respond to the offense.** For my mom, responding involved "processes such as reframing, empathy, and acceptance of pain."<sup>4</sup> My mom spent endless hours in tears, processing her pain and trying to evaluate the type and quality of relationship she wanted with her family member going forward. Although my mom had no control over the actions of this person, she could control her attitude and choose to build the life she wanted for herself. Instead of holding onto the pain, frustration, and sorrow associated with this family member, she decided to set boundaries for future interactions and let go of past offenses in order to develop a healthier relationship.

**Third, discover empathy as a piece of your forgiveness puzzle.** Researchers have found that "empathy seems to be a critical condition for the individual's capacity to forgive after experiencing a transgression."<sup>4</sup> My mom sought to understand her abuser's background, upbringing, and current emotional state. However, to avoid oversympathizing and to take measured steps forward, she decided how and where she would have contact with this person to avoid putting herself in situations that might stir up negative emotions and to allow healthier interactions to begin rebuilding civil, healthier conversations.

#### Fourth, seek out an alternate resolution.<sup>4</sup>

My mom realized in order to fully forgive her relative, she needed to steer away from old behaviors in order to create a healthier relationship. Instead of accepting the abuse, she learned the value of setting healthy boundaries. She understood that in order to minimize further emotional damage, she needed to distance herself and voice her opinions to her offender. By sticking with the boundaries she created, my mom was able to protect herself from further emotional damage.



Photo by Lina Trochez on Unsplash

#### Lastly, seek to deepen understanding.

“Deepening includes finding meaning and universality.”<sup>4</sup> My mom strived to deepen understanding of the forgiveness process and found meaning in her suffering. She furthered her relationship with God through prayer and found peace in knowing her mental health had improved. Realizing that she could not force puzzle pieces together in order to create the picture-perfect family created a sense of acceptance. Instead, the final and best result included finding peace in her relationships, not achieving perfect understanding. This deepening allowed her to have the strength to forgive and move past the pain.

### Adopting a Culture of Forgiveness

While many faith traditions teach the value of forgiveness in families, I have appreciated the example of members of the Greek Orthodox religion where a culture of forgiveness within families is explicitly encouraged. This involves families setting aside time each week to discuss the meaning of forgiveness and using this time to forgive each other for any minor or major frustrations. This constant pattern of forgiveness allows families to not only practice

forgiveness but to live with less contention. Families can adopt their own practices, leading to a culture of forgiveness in order to maximize family support and unity.

Through my mom’s example, our family now adopts a culture of forgiveness. By making a conscious effort to forgive each other for various offenses, our family has grown closer. But because offenses vary in severity, the process of forgiveness may look different and may vary in length for each family member. Forgiveness requires patience with oneself and others. As families develop a culture of forgiveness they resolve stress, pain, and anger in healthy and meaningful ways. My mom’s experience taught me to put forth the work necessary to learn and grow from my own personal offenses. The frustration, time, and effort required to put a puzzle together is necessary in order to find beauty in the finished bigger picture of forgiving others. The once confusing gray puzzle transforms into a life of growth and harmony.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Marks, L. D., & Dollahite, D. C. (2016). *Religion and families: An introduction*. Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Rasband, J. (2012). Faith to forgive grievous harms: Accepting the atonement as restitution. *BYU Speeches*. <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/james-r-rasband/faith-to-forgive-grievous-harms-atonement-restitution/>

<sup>3</sup> Toussaint, L. L., Worthington, E. L. J., & Williams, D. R. (2015). *Forgiveness and health*. Springer Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup> Hargrave, T. D., & Zasowski, N. E. (2016). *Families and forgiveness: Healing wounds in the intergenerational family*. Routledge.