

## Self-Forgiveness:

Everyone has made; is making; and will continue to make - *mistakes*. Me, you, the neighbours, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, King David, the Buddha, everybody.

It's important to acknowledge mistakes, feel appropriate remorse, and learn from them so they don't happen again. But so many of us will keep beating ourselves up for these behaviours way past what could be considered appropriate. That's the unfair self-criticism that will undermine us and lead to problems with our self-image and the sadness and anxieties this will cause.

Inside the mind are many sub-personalities. For example, one part of me might set the alarm clock for 6 am to get up and exercise . . . and then when it goes off, another part of me could grumble: "Leave me alone, I just want to sleep!" More broadly, there is a kind of inner critic and inner protector inside each of us. For so many, that inner critic is continually yammering away, looking for something, *anything*, to find fault with. It magnifies small failings into big ones, punishes us over and over for things long past, ignores the larger context, and doesn't credit us for our efforts to make amends or recognise our achievements.

Therefore, you really need your inner protector to stick up for you: to put your weaknesses and misdeeds into perspective; to highlight your many good qualities surrounding your lapses; to encourage you to keep getting back on the high road even if you've gone down the low one, and – frankly – to tell that inner critic to Shut Up!

With the support of your inner protector, you can see your faults clearly with fearing that will drag you into a pit of feeling awful; it can help put right the consequences of your actions (as best can be) and move on. The only healthy purpose of guilt, shame, or remorse is learning – not punishment! So that you are less likely to make a similar mistake again.

Anything over and above the point of learning will just lead to needless suffering. Plus excessive guilt, etc., actually gets in the way of you contributing to others and helping make this world a better place by undermining your energy, mood, confidence and sense of self-worth.

Seeing faults clearly, taking responsibility for them with *appropriate* remorse and making amends; and then coming to peace about them: this is what is meant by "forgiving yourself".

### **OK. Now what?**

Start by picking something relatively small that you're still being hard on yourself about, and then begin the instructions below. Get used to looking at the positive qualities that you possess and to genuinely acknowledge these qualities.

Your therapist will help you compile a list.

#### **First:**

Start by getting in touch, as best you can, with the feeling of being cared about by some other being: a friend or mate; a spiritual entity; a pet; or perhaps a person from your childhood. Open to the sense that this being really cares for you; and you can accept this care as something which is *fully deserved* by you.

Staying with the feeling of being cared about; list some of your many good qualities. You could ask this protector what it knows about you. These are facts, not flattery, and you don't need a halo to have good qualities like patience, determination, fairness, or kindness.

#### **Next:**

If you yelled at a child; lied at work; were dishonest; let a friend down; cheated on a partner; or were secretly glad about someone's downfall – whatever it was – acknowledge the facts: what happened; what was in your mind at the time; the relevant context and history; and the results for yourself and others. Notice any facts that are hard to face – like the look in a child's eyes when you yelled at them – and be especially open to them; these are the events that are keeping you stuck. Acknowledging the truth can be painful, but that's where the healing is to be done.

**Caution! When you start this exercise, make sure you pick some fairly “low-level” behaviours at first. Then, when you feel more comfortable with the idea, you might like to work up to tackling more significant issues.**

Sort what happened into three piles: moral faults, unskillfulness, and everything else. Moral faults deserve proportionate guilt, remorse, or shame, but unskillfulness calls for correction, no more. (This point is very important.) You could ask others what they think about this sorting (and about other points below) – include those you may have wronged – but you alone get to decide what's right. For example, if you gossiped about someone and exaggerated a mistake they made, you might decide that the lie in your exaggeration is a moral fault deserving a wince of remorse, but that casual gossip (which most of us do, at one time or another) is simply unskillful and should be corrected (i.e., never done again) without excess self-punishment.

In an honest way, take responsibility for your moral fault(s) and unskillfulness. Say in your mind or out loud (or write): I am responsible for \_\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_ , and \_\_\_\_\_ . Then let yourself feel it.

Then add to yourself: But I am NOT responsible for \_\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_ , and \_\_\_\_\_ . For example, you are not responsible for the misinterpretations or over-reactions of others. Let the relief of what you are NOT responsible for sink in.

Acknowledge what you have already done to learn from this experience, and to repair things and make amends. Let this sink in. Appreciate yourself.

Next, decide what if anything remains to be done – inside your own heart or out there in the world – and then do it. Let it sink in that you're doing it, and appreciate yourself for this, too.

Now check in with your inner protector: is there anything else you should face or do? Listen to that "still quiet voice of conscience," so different from the pounding scorn of the critic. If you truly know that something remains, then take care of it. But otherwise, know in your heart that what needed learning has been learned, and that what needed doing has been done.

Now actively forgive yourself. Say in your mind, out loud, in writing, or perhaps to others statements like: I forgive myself for \_\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_ , and \_\_\_\_\_ . I have taken responsibility and done what I could to make things better. You could also ask the inner protector to forgive you, or others out in the world, including maybe the person you wronged.

You may need to go through one or more the steps above again and again to truly forgive yourself, and that's alright. Allow the experience of being forgiven to take some time to sink in. Help it sink in by opening up to it in your body and heart, and by reflecting on how it will help others for you to stop beating yourself up.

*Adapted from the work of Rick Hanson Ph.D.*