

THE WONDER OF FORGIVENESS

As attorneys, we constantly are confronted by disputes in our work. It is the rare professional who is never caught off guard, surprised by an outcome or thrown into anger by an unexpected event. Anger that spirals into grievance is an unfortunate side effect of law practice. But, grievances can cumulate. Mounting grievances can impair your mood, your relationships and your health. But there is a startlingly simple antidote to grievance - forgiveness.

Grievances cause suffering. Forgiveness is about relieving the suffering grievances cause. It is best for you to unburden yourself of grievances sooner rather than later. Relief of your suffering should be reason enough. But there is more. The attention that you pay to your grievances makes them stronger over time. Grievance making can become habit, making it more likely that future interference also will give rise to grievance. Finally, grievance gives an event or a person power over you.

Forgiveness does not condone unkindness, nor excuse inappropriate behavior. It is not about forgetting what occurred. Nor, does it deny or minimize your hurt. Forgiveness allows you to control your emotions and to create awareness so that you gain insight and exercise good judgment. You stop wasting your precious energy engaged in anger or distress. Forgiveness gets you out of your past, which cannot be changed. It helps you revise your narrative (the story you tell yourself about yourself) and offers you the opportunity to witness the present moment from a new perspective. It offers you a chance for peace. Forgiveness essentially is a practice of unwinding your grievances, one at a time.

Dr. Fred Luskin is the co-founder and director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project. In his 2002 book, *"Forgive for Good-A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness,"* Luskin confirms that forgiveness is for your benefit, not that of the offender. It is a way of taking back your power and taking responsibility for your emotions. Luskin describes three steps to forming a grievance: taking something too personally, playing the blame game and creating a grievance story. The triggering event to a grievance arises from an unanticipated event, something over which you had no control. You create an unenforceable rule so that you can write a mental ticket to punish the perceived wrongdoer. Your rule is your expectation of how something should turn out or how someone else should act or think. But, since the rule is unenforceable, the only person you end up hurting with your rule is you.

Find a quiet place where you can rest for a few moments. Take a notebook and writing instrument with you. Create your "grievance list" and assess the impact of that inventory on your life. Take a moment to sit quietly with your list. Ask yourself the following: How much of my life energy am I devoting to these grievances? How much of each day is being lost to their maintenance? What mood do these grievances generate in me? What is happening to my relationships, as I remain with these grievances? What am I missing with each passing moment because of the distraction of these grievances? What opportunities are passing me by, as a result of holding on to these distractions? If I stopped losing these precious present moments, what could I be doing to serve others and myself?



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THE WONDER OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness comes about by reversing the steps of the grievance process. You learn to balance the impersonal aspects of the hurt with the personal, allowing you to loosen the hurt's grip on you. You take responsibility for how you feel when you are hurt, discharging the blame that has made you a victim. You change your grievance story into a forgiveness story in which you become a hero, because you have forgiven.

There are three preconditions necessary to forgive: Know what your feelings are about what happened; be clear about the action that wronged you; and share your experience with at least one or two trusted people. There may have been a variety of feelings that arose from the event. Those feelings may have varied over time and in intensity. But you have to acknowledge how you felt to overcome any tendency to deny or minimize the event's impact on you. It is equally important to know exactly what occurred that was unacceptable. You must be able to articulate the act that caused you pain, so that you don't deny or minimize the consequences of that act. Finally, by sharing your experience with trusted friends, you are able to clarify your experience, your feelings and the event itself. It helps you cope and provides you with resource for guidance and support. Then, you are ready to forgive.

Undertaking forgiveness is principally a matter of motivation. Your motivation arises from your desire to regain the power that you have given over to the past so that it no longer impairs your ability to be in the present. You are responsible for your emotional experiences. Your past is not responsible for your present feelings. You need to reclaim your responsibility by shifting your focus. You begin by spending more time and energy inquiring into what is positive and beneficial in your life.

Here's another practice. Find a quiet space in which you will not be disturbed for five minutes or so. Take a few slow breaths to focus your attention and quiet your mind. Think back on what has transpired during your day. Consider the following: What is it for which you have reason to be grateful? What beauty already has contributed to your day? What forgiveness already has arisen today from the world, your colleagues, yourself? When have you experienced love in the course of the day? After you have quietly contemplated these questions, continue to sit, first bringing attention to your breath, then allowing your attention to focus on your heart. Recall an experience that fills you with gratitude, love, or tranquility. Sit with that recollection as you begin to experience peace. Bring yourself back into the world, attempting to bring with you that sense of peace. Do this practice twice a day.

Next, challenge your unenforceable rules. The good news is that challenging unenforceable rules is pretty straightforward. There are only six simple steps. First, recognize that you are upset and acknowledge that the upset is taking place in the present moment. Second, remind yourself that your upset stems from an unenforceable rule. Third, be willing to challenge this unenforceable rule. Fourth, identify the unenforceable rule. Fifth, having identified your unenforceable rule, change the way you think about what you need or want by making it something that you may hope for or wish, converting it from a demand to a desire. Finally, recognize that by challenging your unenforceable rule, you lighten your load, create space in your mind, think more clearly and feel much better.

As you begin to create healing space by focusing on the positive, learn how to avoid disruption in difficult moments and release your unenforceable rules you are engaging in the process of forgiveness. You are creating the ability to take hurtful actions less personally. You are assuming greater responsibility for how you feel. You witness your emerging power and self-confidence. With all this, you begin a new story - from victim to hero.

THE WONDER OF FORGIVENESS

A story is how you put selected events into perspective and assign them meaning. By substituting *out* your grievance stories featuring you as the victim, and incorporating *in* your forgiveness stories featuring you as a hero, you begin to shift your life narrative. And with that shift, you begin to alter your perspective of how you view the world, which transforms how you interact with others. You gain self-confidence, clarity and a more tranquil perspective.

Positive intention is central to the forgiveness process. Positive intention allows you to reconnect with your life goals that the grievance forced aside. Reconnecting with your positive intention allows you to move forward. According to Luskin, "In any grievance story, someone does not get what he or she wants. Unacknowledged is that behind each painful situation is a positive intention. Once found and reclaimed, the positive intention alters the grievance story. (T)he grievance story becomes a vehicle for learning how to change to attain that goal."

Remember, the transgression that gave rise to each grievance could have been worse. You did survive. You overcame the transgression. Can you see how, for that reason alone, you are hero? Find the goal that puts each grievance into a larger context. Focus on the positive intention behind that goal. You will find instant relief. As you learn to tell each new story, you remind all those who have heard of your grievance that you have overcome an obstacle. You no longer are a victim. You have become a hero.

My best to you on your forgiveness journey!

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