

Forgiveness... a Spiritual Exercise for a Healthier Life

During a Bible study I attended recently, a man spoke of how his younger brother was shot while walking home from school. "How am I supposed to forgive this man who shot my brother?" asked the man. My heart sank as I heard the pain in his voice. All I felt I could do was to approach the man afterwards and tell him I was sorry this had happened and that I would pray for him. He looked into my eyes and told me how the shooting of his brother had turned his life upside down and caused him to turn to unhealthy behaviors. I left the meeting with a heavy and burdened heart. When I returned home I dropped to my knees and said a prayer for him. When I see him next, I intend to ask him if he'd like to talk with me about this issue. My hopes are that he will be able to forgive this man some day.

Forgiveness is a spiritual exercise that we must learn to practice if we are to be whole and healthy. Perhaps no other exercise can be as beneficial to our health as forgiving someone who has hurt us by their actions or by what they have said to us.

What the Research Says: When we harbor resentment and bitterness toward other people our spiritual, emotional and physical health can be impacted upon in a negative way. Anger that comes from holding on to these negative emotions can lead to health problems. In the book *Anger Kills*, the authors, Redmond and Virginia Williams refer to numerous studies that indicate that on-going anger can lead to heart disease. Don Colbert, M.D., in his book, *Deadly Emotions*, says that when chronic anger is present, the body has a steady drip of the hormone cortisol. This excessive presence of cortisol can cause the immune system to become confused and to attack itself, causing autoimmune diseases. This increased level of cortisol can also contribute to diabetes, weight gain, bone loss, impaired memory and other health problems. In *The Healing Connection*, Harold Koenig, M.D., writes "The research indicates those who can't get past these hurt and angry feelings of spiritual discontent may soon be in big trouble in terms of their emotional and physical health."

What the Bible Says:

"Because God loves us, he inspired many authors of the Bible to write about the importance of forgiveness. "Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life."
Proverbs 4:23

When our heart is troubled and weighed down with all that comes from holding resentment, it affects much of how we live life and our health. When we turn to God and ask Him to forgive us from our sins, "He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."
1 John 1:9

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."
Ephesians 4:31-32

Finally, Jesus was asked by Peter, one of his disciples, how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. "Seven times?" he asked. Jesus responded, "No! Seventy times seven!"
Matthew 18:21-22

"Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important for it promises a reward in both this life and the next."

1 Timothy 4:8

What You Can Do: If you know of someone who is still holding on to resentment and anger from a past hurt, love them. Pray for them and ask if you can pray with them. Ask them if they'd like to talk with you about their circumstances. If you are carrying unforgiveness in your heart, know that it is a process to get rid of any resentment that may be there. It is an act of your will to forgive. You must make a conscious choice to pardon someone who has offended you. That's where it begins. When you are ready, consider getting down on your knees and telling God that you have made the choice to

forgive. Cry out to Him and ask Him to help mend your heart. Get to know God better by spending time with Him. Experience His love and receive His forgiveness for your sins. If you are unable to do this on your own, ask a close friend, a pastor or another professional to help support you as you walk through this healing process.

Recognize that you are really hurting yourself when you choose not to forgive. And you are not able to be all that God intends you to be when you continue to harbor resentment and bitterness. Your emotional, spiritual and physical health will continue to be affected. This will, in turn, impact on how you're able to use the special gifts that God has given you to make a difference in this world. Your life will not be as full and abundant as God wants it to be.

We all will experience major hurts in our lives. This short article can only begin to address this sensitive and often painful issue. My hope is that you'll take time to reflect on whether you could be healthier by forgiving someone who has hurt you or by receiving the forgiveness that God has for you. It's only when we rely on God's unending love and the strength that he gives us that our hearts can begin to heal in a genuine way through forgiveness.

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