

## Forgiveness

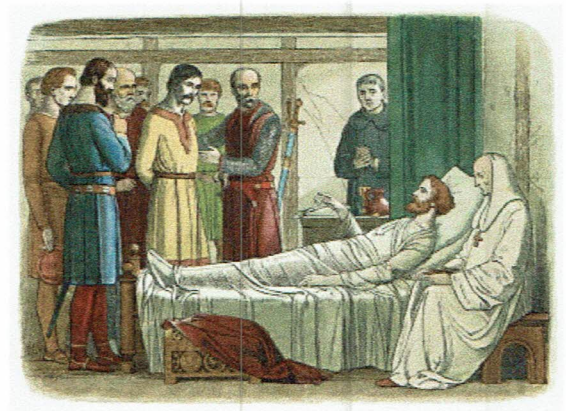
### *Choosing to Overcome Your Desire for Revenge*

Will the hurt ever end, can the pain ever stop? Perhaps authentic forgiveness can help you move beyond [hate](#) and the desire for [revenge](#).



### Definitions

1. The decision not to seek punishment for those who have harmed you.
2. A decision to release yourself from [anger](#), resentment, [hate](#), or the urge for [revenge](#) despite the injury you suffered.
3. To let go of hope of a different past.
4. A change of heart; ceasing to [hate](#).
5. Responding to unjust hurt with [compassion](#), benevolence, and [empathy](#).
6. Moving beyond bitterness.
7. Cancelling a debt.
8. Choosing not to act on vindictive passions.
9. Discharging—removing the obligation for—a debt owed to you.
10. Ending estrangement and letting go of resentment and the urge for [revenge](#).
11. Surrendering feelings of animosity and hatred when others harm us
12. Peace and understanding that come from blaming less that which has hurt you, taking the life experience less personally, and changing your [grievance](#) story



### Related Terms

Amnesty—a general pardon for past offenses—is a variant of forgiveness that may focus more on the needs of the offender than of the aggrieved.

### The Vindictive Passions

Vindictive passion—intense feelings of resentment, [anger](#), [hatred](#), and the desire for [revenge](#) against those who wrong us—are an integral part of [human nature](#). They originate from the need for self-defense, for preserving our self-respect, and for maintaining moral order—our clear understanding of acceptable and unacceptable ways to treat humans. These passions are real, natural, genuine, legitimate, useful, and valid emotions. The goal of [vengeance](#) is to quench these vindictive passions.

While a moderate and proportional response to your injury can be appropriate, submitting totally to these passions is often very dangerous, especially when they are used as an excuse to justify destructive, sadistic, cruel, excessive, or [violent](#) behavior.

We control our actions. We are [responsible](#) for the choices we make. We can choose not to submit to these passions. We can exercise self control, allow the passions to dissipate, and choose to forgive. Vindictive

passions may have every right to being the first word, but they don't have to be the last word.

## The Paradox of Forgiveness

I know they are wrong. If I forgive them, how will they ever learn and change? I will never forgive them. I can't possibly let them get away with it. If I forgive them they will have won. I can never condone what they did; it is unforgivable. Despite these common objections, the truth is that forgiveness is an act of [courage](#) and not an act of weakness. Forgiveness is correlated with better physical health, reduced [anxiety](#), reduced [anger](#), and increased [self-esteem](#). Forgiving may elicit a sincere [apology](#) which can provide additional comfort. As we reach out to the ones who hurt us, we are the ones who heal. Forgiveness restores the [congruence](#) between what you desire and what is possible and constructive.

## Forgiving is not Condoning

To condone an offense is to overlook or disregard a harmful action without protesting or expressing disapproval. Abuse can never be condoned, it needs to be prevented and stopped. But forgiveness is not about overlooking, endorsing, or excusing an offense. It is not about accepting the unacceptable. Forgiveness is about releasing **yourself** from destructive emotions and a hurtful past. It is not about the offender, it is about yourself. You can forgive the abuser without condoning the abuse. The past does matter and it may make sense never to forget an outrage. Remembering may not be easy, but forgetting may be impossible.

Forgiveness is **not**:

- Letting wrongdoers off the hook,
- Failing to hold people accountable for their actions,
- Forgetting, denying, ignoring, or overlooking the wrongs that have occurred,
- Repressing genuine feelings of hurt, anger, or hate.
- Condoning, excusing, or justifying bad behavior, unkindness, or abuse or becoming complicit in continuing it,
- Denying, minimizing, or excusing your hurt or your feelings,
- Condemning the offender, demonstrating they deserve to know they are wrong, or that you are morally superior.
- Contingent on seeking justice or compensation. It is not a bi-lateral transaction; it is a unilateral act of generosity.
- Placation or simply calming down. While equanimity is valuable, forgiveness requires more than a superficial tranquility.
- Insincere, thoughtless, casual, often easy, or a sign of weakness.
- Equivalent to trust. Forgiveness can be given, but [trust](#) must be earned.
- Contingent on religious beliefs.

## Repentance

Repentance is:

- a remorseful acceptance of [responsibility](#) for your wrongful and harmful actions, along with
- a repudiation (disowning, renunciation) of your character traits that led to the wrongdoing, along with
- the resolve to eliminate the renounced character traits, and
- the resolve to make reparations—compensation to the victim—for the harm you have caused the victim and to make them whole again.

Repentant people feel [guilty](#) and may seek out their own punishment. They become recommitted to [community](#) values. Sincere repentance cannot be coerced, it has to be given voluntarily.

It is often reasonable to make forgiveness contingent on some change or transformation in the wrongdoer. Sincere repentance of the wrongdoer makes forgiveness easier, but it is not an essential prerequisite to forgiveness. The choice is yours.

## Power Reversal and Transformation

Victims often have a goal to regain their [power](#); to reverse roles, feel less like a victim, and to exercise

power over the wrongdoer. This is often the goal of [revenge](#). Being a victim is an insult, the wrongdoer sends the message that he is powerful and you are not. Transforming yourself from the powerless victim to the one with power may require you to see a transformation in the wrongdoer. This transformation may be expressed as their repentance, or [apology](#). In any case, since it is your choice if and when to forgive, you have the power.

## Forgiveness and Punishment

Forgiveness is entirely consistent with the continued demand for punishing the wrongdoer. The purpose of forgiveness is to release the victim (yourself) from the vindictive passions. The purpose of punishment is to prevent future harm by preventing the recurrence of injuries. Visiting the wrongdoer in jail to express your forgiveness, while insisting he serve out his full sentence, is consistent with both of these goals. Forgiveness does not forbid punishment, what it forbids is punishment out of hatred. Christ himself, known as a champion of forgiveness, is said to have driven the money changers from the temple.



## Who can forgive

Only the actual victim of a wrong has the *standing* to forgive the wrongdoer. Person "A" cannot forgive someone who wronged person "B". You can forgive yourself, end your [shame](#) and [respect](#) yourself.

## One step at a time

Authentic forgiveness is a process that requires particular understanding and analysis to be effective. It may require a long period of time for you to be prepared to sincerely forgive. Authentic forgiveness is often difficult to accomplish.

The process must begin with an acknowledgement and careful analysis of your hurt, [anger](#), or [hatred](#). What happened; what are the facts of the event? What do you perceive as the injustice? How do you apportion [responsibly](#) for the injustice? What was your role? What role did others play? Why did they act as they did? Can you understand their [point of view](#)?

The next step is for you to make a decision and to choose to forgive. A key step is your decision to put aside any claim to [revenge](#), regardless of how justified or subtle it may be. Until you are able to totally let go of your thoughts, feelings, or intentions for revenge, you are not yet ready to forgive. You may need more time, more information, more [dialogue](#), or you may need to consider the offender's perspective from a more compassionate point of view. To be ready to forgive you must decide to bear (dissipate, dissolve, endure, overlook, tolerate, absorb, let go of) your own pain rather than pass it on.

The next step is to tell them you forgive them. This is done fully and unconditionally, without any requirement for an apology, acknowledgement, remorse, repentance, or reparations.

If you still [hate](#), then you have not yet forgiven. When you are beginning to wish the person well, you have accomplished genuine forgiveness. Are you able to feel goodwill and express kindness toward the person?

## Reconciliation is a Step Further

Forgiveness is a change within yourself. Reconciliation requires a change within someone else. Forgiving is a unilateral step toward reconciliation, but reconciliation must be bilateral and [reciprocal](#). Reconciliation requires that both sides agree on the facts, the hurt, the motivation, and that each can understand the other's point of view. It requires each to understand a consistent or compatible account of what happened, why it happened, and the consequences of what happened. Reconciliation requires [fact finding](#), discovering the truth, [dialogue](#), [empathy](#), fully telling your story, agreeing on the truth, acknowledging the pain,

acknowledging [responsibility](#), establishing [trust](#), equalizing or reversal of [power](#) and [stature](#), [remorse](#), [apology](#), and forgiving for a meaningful transformation to take place. Reconciliation may also require reparations—payments intended to compensate a victim for a [loss](#). The goals of reconciliation are to prevent repetition of the harmful behavior and ensure healing and healthy co-existence. Genuine reconciliation leads to helping each other.

## Motives

Although many people reject the idea of forgiveness and relentlessly pursue [revenge](#), people also have a variety of motives, reasons, and expectations for forgiving. These are arranged here from the least constructive to the most sincere, authentic, and autonomous.

Motive	Expectation, Rationale, Belief, or Defense
<a href="#">Revenge</a>	After I get my revenge, the score is settled and I may be able to forgive you. I certainly won't forgive you until I get a full <a href="#">apology</a> from you.
<a href="#">Fear</a>	You will hurt me (exercise your <a href="#">dominance</a> over me) again if I don't forgive you (or at least profess my forgiveness) for abusing me the last time.
Obligation	I have been taught to "forgive and forget". My boss, parents, pastor, god, or friends expect me to "bury the hatchet and get over it." I am obliged to "turn the other cheek" whether I want to or not. This is superficial and insincere <a href="#">reciprocity</a> .
Appearances	I can look good by taking the high road and pretending to overlook your offense. I'll keep the grudge to myself. This is good for my <a href="#">image</a> . We can establish a quid pro quo.
Justice	You will pay your debt to society through the justice system. I have my closure and can move on. I accept the rule of law to resolve this issue. Just punishment leads to a just world.
Harmony	Let's all get along. If I don't talk about the issue it will go away. Just forgive and forget and we can move on and be fine. Let's all play nice together and nothing bad will happen. We have to get along with each other. We have to find a way to continue to work together. I'll give in and forgive to preserve our <a href="#">relationship</a> .
Pity	"Forgive them father for they know not what they do." We tend to <a href="#">pity</a> and forgive the weak, the young, and the frail rather than hold them responsible for their transgressions.
Release	I am tired of begin <a href="#">angry</a> , <a href="#">hateful</a> , and <a href="#">vengeful</a> . I don't want you controlling my life any more. I am choosing to release myself from the need to control, change, or punish you. I am letting go of my bitterness. I have had a change of heart and no longer hate.
<a href="#">Empathy</a>	I may not understand why you caused such harm, but perhaps it made sense from your point of view. I wish the best for you, even if I don't condone what you did. This motivates authentic forgiveness.

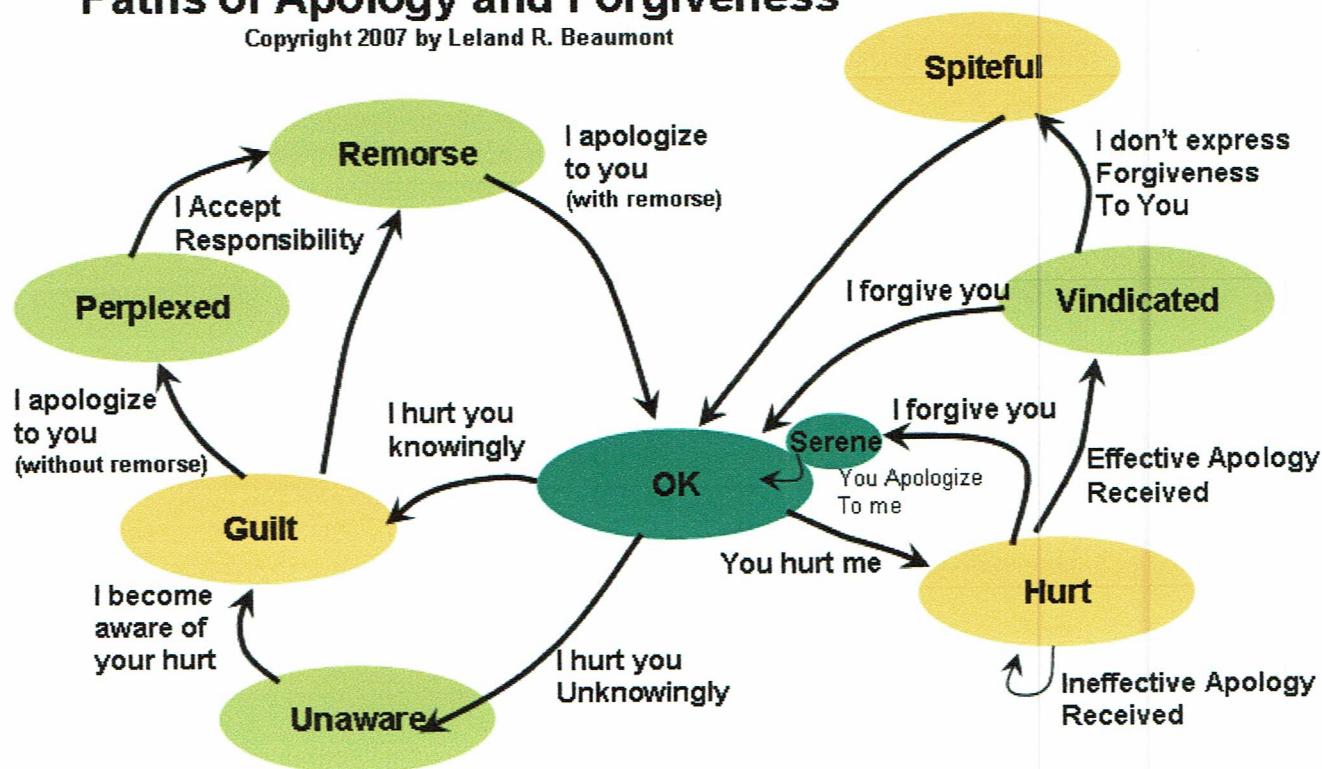
## The Paths of Forgiveness

Understanding when to forgive, the effect it can have on ourselves and the offender, and its relationships to [apology](#) helps us to manage our relationships and feelings. The following figure illustrates choices we have and paths we can take to either prolong or resolve our hurt. Use this like you would any other map: 1) decide where you are now, 2) decide where you want to go, 3) choose the best path to get there, and 4) go down the chosen path. If you can arrange a constructive meeting with your adversary, use this map to discuss where each of you are now and to choose a path leading to resolution of your [conflict](#).

You may wish to print out this one-page version of the [Paths of Apology and Forgiveness map](#).

# Paths of Apology and Forgiveness

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This diagram is an example of a type of chart known by systems analysts as a *state transition diagram*. Each colored elliptical bubble represents a *state of being* that represents the way you are now. The labels on the arrows represent actions or events and the arrows show paths into or out of each state. You are at one place on this chart for one particular *relationship* or incident at any particular time. Other people are likely to be in other places on the chart. This is similar to an ordinary road map where you plot where you are now, while other people are at other places on the same map. Begin the analysis at the green "OK" bubble, or wherever else you believe you are now.

The following is written in first person; "I" and "me" refer to the aggrieved, and "you" refers to the offender.

**OK:** This is the beginning or neutral state. It corresponds to being free of hurt, *anger*, *hate*, or *guilt*; including a full reconciliation of hurt or guilt. The green color represents safety, tranquility, equanimity, and growth potential.

**You hurt me:** You did something (or neglected to take action) that hurt me physically, materially, or psychologically. It could be a slight, insult, *betrayal*, injury, assault, theft, or anything else that harms me or *humiliates* me. This is an example of the "insult" path on the "Paths of Anger" chart.

**Hurt:** I feel *humiliated*, *angry*, resentful, bothered, or just plain bad. I am annoyed at you, my offender. This is an instance of the "Angry" or "Resentful" states on the the "Paths of Anger" chart and it can lead to all the destructive states described there. The yellow color indicates my pain and resentment, and the need for caution in choosing the next path.

**I forgive you (before an apology):** Even though you have not offered me an apology, I decide to let go of my hurt. I forgive you and gain a serene inner peace and satisfaction for myself.

**Serene:** My unilateral forgiveness puts the hurt in the past, allows me to get on with my life, and provides me with a serene and tranquil inner peace. I am OK now, but you may still need to *apologize* at some time for a full resolution. I may feel *proud* of myself. This is shown touching the OK bubble, because I am feeling OK. The green color acknowledges my peace.

**You apologize to me (in response to my unilateral forgiveness):** In response to your expression of forgiveness, you [apologize](#) to me. The relationship is now OK and fully reconciled.

**Effective Apology Received:** The offender offers me an effective [apology](#). I feel vindicated because you have acknowledged your responsibility in causing me harm.

**Ineffective Apology Received:** An insincere attempt to patch things up, a failure to acknowledge your [responsibility](#), lack of remorse, attempts to explain away your actions, a failure to acknowledge your understanding of the injury you caused, or any of several other omissions causes the apology to fail. I remain hurt by the original offense, and now I hurt even more because you tried to make yourself feel better, without addressing my needs.

**Vindicated:** You admitted your error, your [responsibility](#), and my hurt. Perhaps you made reparations and showed genuine remorse. In any case, I feel vindicated because you have taken responsibility for my pain. The greenish color acknowledges the hurt may be over, while the yellowish color recognizes this may be hurtful to you and my forgiveness is still required for a complete resolution.

**I forgive you (after an apology):** You have apologized, the hurt is over, and I feel compelled to forgive you. The relationship is reconciled and we are both OK again.

**I don't express forgiveness to you (after an apology):** Even though you have made a sincere and effective apology, I decide not to forgive you, or at least not to express forgiveness to you. I let you suffer, perhaps only for a few minutes, or hours, or maybe for days, weeks, and years. I am enjoying my new power over you, and remaining spiteful.

**Spiteful:** You have humbled yourself and apologized to me, yet I decide to withhold forgiveness. Don't go too far with this, [hubris](#) goes before the fall. The yellow color indicates the need for caution in choosing the next path.

**I hurt you unknowingly:** You have taken offense, you are hurt, and I am clueless and unaware of your hurt, or what I have done to offend you.

**Unaware:** I am clueless and unaware of your hurt, or what I have done to offend you. The greenish color acknowledges you may feel OK, while the yellowish color recognizes that awareness will lead to [guilt](#).

**I become aware of your hurt:** After reflection, reappraisal, or dialogue with others, I recognize I have hurt you. I now feel guilty.

**Guilty:** I now understand that I have transgressed your sense of justice and morality and hurt you. The yellow color represents the dangers I can face and cautions about the choices I can make.

**I accept responsibility:** When I accept [responsibility](#) for what I did to hurt you, I become [remorseful](#).

**Remorse:** I feel genuinely bad about the hurt I have caused and I take [responsibility](#) for the hurtful choices I made. The greenish color acknowledges remorse can be only one step away from a resolution while the yellowish color recognizes that a full restitution is still required.

**I apologize to you (with remorse):** I can authentically express to you my responsibly and remorse and make a successful [apology](#).

**I Apologize to you (without remorse):** I realize you feel hurt, but I have no idea why. I [apologize](#) anyway to try to patch things up. I become perplexed because I don't feel responsible for your hurt, yet you are clearly distressed.

**Perplexed:** I am confused because I don't feel responsible for your hurt, yet you are clearly distressed. If I later understand my role and take responsibility, I will feel remorse and can fully resolve the dilemma and

reconcile the relationship. The greenish color acknowledges you may no longer feel guilty, while the yellowish color recognizes that you feel conflicted.

## Quotations

The paradox of forgiveness has inspired many thoughtful quotations. Here are some of the more thought provoking ones:

- "Resentment is like taking poison and hoping the other person dies." ~ St. Augustine
- "To err is human; to forgive, divine." ~ [Alexander Pope](#)
- "There is no [revenge](#) so complete as forgiveness." ~ [Josh Billings](#) (1818 - 1885)
- "Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge." ~ Fred Luskin.
- "Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much." ~ [Oscar Wilde](#) (1854 - 1900)
- "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." ~ [Mahatma Gandhi](#) (1869 - 1948)
- "The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive but do not forget." ~ [Thomas Szasz](#)
- "Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future." ~ Paul Boese
- "You cannot change the facts of the past but you can change the meaning of the past." ~
- "Forgiveness is not an emotion, it's a decision." ~ [Randall Worley](#)
- "Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is again made clean." ~ [Dag Hammarskjöld](#)
- "It really doesn't matter if the person who hurt you deserves to be forgiven. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself. You have things to do and you want to move on." ~ RealLivePreacher.com,
- "The hatred you're carrying is a live coal in your heart - far more damaging to yourself than to them." ~ Lawana Blackwell
- "The quality of mercy is not strain'd, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes." ~ [William Shakespeare](#) (1564 - 1616), "The Merchant of Venice", Act 4 scene 1
- "It is not the wrongdoer's repentance that creates forgiveness, but the victim's forgiveness that creates repentance." ~

## References

*On Apology*, by Aaron Lazare

*Bone to Pick: Of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Reparation, and Revenge*, by Ellis Cose

*Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-By-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, by Robert D. Enright

*When to Forgive*, by Mona Gustafson Affinito

*Forgive for Good*, by Frederic Luskin

*Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, by Jeffrie G. Murphy

*Revenge: A Story of Hope*, by Laura Blumenfeld

*The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, by the Dalai Lama, Howard C. Cutler

*The Wisdom of Forgiveness: Intimate Journeys and Conversations*, by Dalai Lama, Chan Victor

*A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid*, by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

*Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness*, by Marc Ian Barasch

The [International Forgiveness Institute](#) is dedicated to helping people gain knowledge about forgiveness and to use that knowledge for personal, group, and societal renewal.

[The Forgiveness Web](#), an Internet resource for forgiveness

[Forgiving.org](#), A campaign for forgiveness research.

[Learningtoforgive.com](#), Learn to forgive for good to reduce anger and hurt. See especially the [Nine Steps to Forgiveness](#).

[What is Forgiveness](#), Adapted, with permission, from Dr. Fred Luskin's Book: *Forgive for Good*

[Of Repentance](#), an essay by Michel de Montaigne.

[The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), was set up to help deal with what happened under apartheid

[The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) was an independent body seeking truth and healing transformation for Greensboro, N.C., a city left divided and weakened by the [events of Nov. 3, 1979](#).

[The Parents Circle](#), Bereaved families supporting peace, reconciliation, and tolerance.

[SNAP](#), The Survivor Network of those Abused by Priests.

The New Zealand [Family Group Conferences](#) is a justice system designed to prevent recurrence of youth crime.

The New Zealand [Treaty of Waitangi](#), keeping promises made in 1840 and resorting a damaged community.

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