

## Injustice and Forgiveness—

### What is Your Most Cherished Grudge?

**Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you give back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is what you are wolfing down is you. The skeleton at the feast is you – Frederick Buechner<sup>1</sup>**

Our most impressive grudges travel with us wherever we go. Grudges that are real gems elevate stress, increase our heart rate and blood pressure, and compromise our immune systems.

Grudges start when we didn't get something we wanted (promotion, pay raise or recognition), or we got something we didn't want (nasty teammate, moronic boss or a layoff). Grudges can be professional or personal, but interestingly, regardless of what or who harmed us, all grudges fester for the same three reasons:

- 1) We take an offense too personally
- 2) We blame the offender for how we feel
- 3) We create a grievance story

### What's the alternative to being perennially hacked off?

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years behind bars, imprisoned during apartheid in South Africa. His first act after his release from prison was a head scratcher. He forgave his jailer. It would certainly have made sense to throttle the jailer, but to forgive! Why? Mandela said forgiveness was not for the jailer, but for him. If he didn't forgive the jailer, Mandela worried that he would be too full of hate to steer South Africa away from civil war. Despite Mandela's example, research suggests few people consider forgiveness to cope with life's blows.<sup>2, 3</sup>

### Grudge Reduction Tools

If you do not wish to be prone to anger, do not feed the habit; give it nothing which may tend to its increase – *Epictetus*<sup>4</sup>



Forgiveness is for you and no one else. You can forgive and rejoin a relationship or forgive and never speak to the person again. Or you can forgive all who have done you harm. The conditions under which you decide to forgive are yours to make.

The goal of forgiveness is to free ourselves from our own prison. To do so, research reveals we need to consider the following: learn to take things less personally, let go of unenforceable rules, rely on trusted relationships and create a hero or growth story. Forgiveness entails letting go of resentment or vengeance toward an offender and making

peace with what happened so we can move on with life. However, this doesn't necessarily mean reconciling with that person.

### **Taking Things Less Personally**

We start letting go of our grudges by understanding that most offenses are committed without the intention of hurting anyone personally. Daily, millions of the seven billion people on Earth are getting hurt or angry. Getting hurt is a normal part of life. For example, most layoff decisions are not personal attacks on the person who loses their job, though this doesn't deny that the laid-off person's pain is real. Letting go of blame doesn't deny how we feel about losing a job. At the same time, when we play the blame game, we offer the worst possible response.

### **Let Go of Unenforceable Rules**

When you have too many unenforceable rules or try too hard to enforce the ones you have, you increase the amount of time you spend being hacked off. You are mad because a driver cut you off. No doubt dangerous driving is wrong, but do you have the power to stop the person from weaving in and out of traffic? It is far easier to change our thinking than to get unenforceable rules obeyed, with the result that we live more peaceful lives.

### **Connect with People you Know, Like, and Trust**

Researchers have found that people who share their life experiences with others tend to deal better with grief. People who deal with difficult experiences without support struggle more. One or two trusted people can help us get unstuck from a time when we were treated unjustly. What doesn't help is sharing your pain with people who can hurt you or violate

your confidence. You also do not have to share your pain with the person who hurt you. Lastly, there is no rush to forgive. When you are ready to forgive, it will be easier and deeper.

### **Hero or Growth Stories**

Jerome Bruner said, "To tell a story is, inescapably, to take a moral stance."<sup>5</sup> That moral stance can be the story of the aggrieved or the story of the hero. Perhaps we think our circumstances shape the stories of our life. Yet research shows the opposite is the case. It's how we respond to our circumstances that shapes the stories of our life. Consider the common skeptical phrase "I won't believe it until I see it." The flip is "I won't see it until I believe it." Living by conviction rather than by circumstance is like the latter.

When we create a victim story out of our experiences, we separate ourselves from our positive goals through excessive focus on what went wrong. The victim story keeps us stuck in the past and alienates us from our friends and family.



When we create a hero story of overcoming injustices done to us, we blame less and are less prone to take things personally. Overcoming injustice means we are in control of the story rather than the grievance. Creating a growth story allows us to build on our strengths rather than focus on our victimhood through a grievance story.<sup>6</sup>

People who learn to grow from injustice have less stress, less depression, better health and better relationships with others. This is because exercising

forgiveness helps them to repair their relationships—especially if the offender has also apologized and tried to make amends. Research reveals forgiveness helps co-workers re-build positive relationships following conflict. Forgiveness reduces the desire for revenge, which is a major cause of negative behaviors in the workplace.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “The weak can never forgive. *Forgiveness* is the attribute of the strong”<sup>7</sup>



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