

Sally's Story Forgiving One Self

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Forgiveness is a choice one makes in order to move from both the physical and emotional consequences of a painful event, to a more peaceful and healthier life. People have different understandings of the meaning of forgiveness. Some view forgiveness as condoning another's actions; others believe that forgiveness means to forget or to excuse the infraction. Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing the hurt or excusing poor behavior. Definitions of forgiveness do not include forgetting how painful an experience was but instead focusing on the process of moving from the past into a future with hope and peace (Luskin, 2002).

Ultimately, forgiveness can be used as a very powerful tool that allows people to heal and relationships to mend (Worthington, 1998). To further clarify, forgiveness does not necessarily involve reconciliation. The choice to reestablish a relationship to the state to which it existed prior to the offense is up to the individual (McCullough, Pargament, Thoresen, 2000).

For many years people have studied and practiced forgiveness from both a philosophical and religious perspective. Many people still associate the concept of forgiveness with religion or spirituality. In addition to the theological perspective of forgiveness, the discipline of psychology over the last few decades has been empirically researching forgiveness as a therapeutic option within a clinical environment. Prior to 1985, only five studies examining forgiveness could be identified and in 1998 the number of studies had risen to fifty-five (Worthington, 1998). By the year 2005, the number of scientific studies escalated to over nine hundred and fifty. The interest in forgiveness

research continues to grow rapidly as more studies suggest an overall wellness benefit obtained to those choosing forgiveness as a way to heal emotional wounds. As a result of these positive findings there has been a marked interest in forgiveness as a concept relevant to individual, couple, family, and group psychotherapy.

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Several years ago Sally stopped talking to her brother. During her childhood Sally had looked up to her older brother and felt close to him. In his early twenties John drifted into the wrong crowd. He increased his partying and despite a brilliant academic career he never developed any kind of professional life. One day after John embarrassed her in front of her business colleagues by coming to her office intoxicated, Sally vowed she would not be mortified by him again. She refused all of his phone calls and letters and made a life without him. Sally recalled "I loved my brother but when I tried to get my life together he kept partying until he was as drug and alcohol involved as my parents. It seemed like the better I was doing the worse he became."

Several years later, John went into a rehabilitation program and cleaned up his act. In time he became a senior member in his local twelve step program. He didn't achieve the level of success that his early talents promised but he had friends and was living a productive life. Sally still was not able to let go of her shameful feelings about John and she kept her distance. She had a vague feeling of unease in that she knew he was doing the best he could but she continued to reject contact with him.

Three years later, at her uncle's funeral, Sally saw her brother. John was gentle and handsome and he spoke with the quiet intelligence that she remembered in her youth. She left the funeral with deep misgivings about how harshly she had treated John. Sally

found herself missing the brother that she looked up to. She remembered “When I saw him he was so gentle and soft spoken. He was nothing like the loud obnoxious lout that I had experienced for so long. It reminded me of when we were young.”

Sally decided to call John to see if they could get together and talk. John politely agreed and they met at a restaurant for lunch. The conversation was stiff and awkward even though Sally tried her best to put John at ease. She could see how much John had grown. She felt proud of him. What she also saw was that while her brother was kind he was distant. It became clear that all the years of separation had left them as strangers. She wanted to bridge the gap but did not know how. He had made a life for himself without her; evidenced not by anger but by formality and distance.

Sally feared she waited too long and regretted the unforgiving stance that she took towards him for so many years. Sally said “I felt so selfish. I had ruined our connection and I had no one but myself to blame. I wished I could make it up to him but he wouldn’t even let me close enough to discuss it. I then started to wonder if my success in life was really a giant scam that had fooled the world. How could a person who turned away her own brother really be worth anything? ”

Sally’s words show self-attack and pernicious guilt. It is a common tale that causes unnecessary pain and demolishes self-esteem.

Guilt: Constructive and Destructive

Guilt is a complex emotion that is seen differently by different people. Some people see guilt as a mechanism of social control that can be utilized to maintain order in society. Others have come to regard all shades of guilt as a neurotic manifestation that is always destructive. In their vision, a healthy life would be one without guilt. In our

clinical work we have seen many types of guilt and have concluded that some forms are constructive while others are highly destructive.

Healthy guilt is our conscience's way of telling us that we have behaved in a way that has violated our sense of right and wrong. We then feel remorse which drives us to make amends or fix what is wrong. We may apologize or try to repair the damage we have caused. In healthy guilt we bring ourselves back in line with our own value system and we work to make ourselves whole. Even though we feel bad about how we have behaved, we do not feel bad about ourselves as a person. Healthy guilt serves a positive function in that it helps us safeguard our value system and it does not include self-attacks.

Pernicious guilt on the other hand includes feeling bad about a particular action. However, instead of trying to make amends we turn on ourselves and the guilt becomes destructive. It is no longer our actions in question but our basic selves. This self-attack contributes to low self-esteem, self destructive behavior, and depression. In such a state it is difficult to make amends because making amends requires a level of self love that we lack. So in our self-loathing we continue the vicious cycle of bad behavior, self-attack, low self-esteem, more bad behavior, etc. The self-attack and the resulting pernicious guilt is a painful and destructive dynamic. The path out of the self-attack that characterizes destructive guilt is that of learning to forgive one's self.

Forgiving One's Self

Self-forgiveness is the ability to make peace with something we did that we do not like and cannot change. It means that we take responsibility for our hurtful actions, accept that we behaved badly, and make a sincere attempt to prevent ourselves from repeating these actions. If we can make amends we do so but we choose to forgive

ourselves rather than continue to define ourselves as a person who did something wrong. When we forgive ourselves we grieve the loss we felt as a consequence of behaving badly. After grieving we let go of our regrets and emotional pain and move on with our lives. When we attack ourselves we stop the grief process that leads to self-forgiveness and letting go. The self-attack can be looked at as a defense against the sadness, fear, and feelings of loss that are part of healthy grieving.

Self-forgiveness can be taught. Once we learn this skill we stop the self-attacks inherent in pernicious guilt. Once freed from the pernicious guilt we can rebuild our self-esteem by living more in alignment with our core values.

Self-Forgiveness Assessment

We have created a seven step Self-Forgiveness Assessment which helps people gauge how entrenched they are in a grievance against themselves and teaches them the steps to reverse their grievance story and forgive themselves.

The first step is to unearth and begin to alter the grievance story that we have created. The grievance story is the nasty tale we repeatedly tell about how we betrayed our values through bad behavior. In this story we remain in a powerless position to redeem ourselves and our bad behavior is the major point of the story. In effect we are victimized in the story by the actions of our “bad selves”. The crucial understanding is that it is the repetition of the grievance story that keeps us stuck; not the original behavior. Usually when we are entrenched in a grievance story against ourselves we view our betrayal as highly personal. That is to say that we see our bad behavior as an act of sabotage directed in part against ourselves. We don’t consider that sometimes we behave badly because we lacked the skill to do better or simply because we are all flawed

human beings. Rather we think our betrayal was personally motivated and designed specifically to hurt ourselves or others. As a consequence we focus our attention on how we let others, and more pointedly, ourselves down.

In Sally's case her grievance story depicted the long term damage she inflicted on her brother and their relationship through her long avoidance of him. She treated her rejection of her brother as personally motivated to be hurtful to him and indicative of her flawed character. The result of the self-attack was that Sally felt herself to be a mean spirited, cruel person. Her self-esteem suffered as a result. Part of the problem was that Sally was unable to understand the impersonal nature of what happened. The impersonal perspective is that although we may have behaved in a hurtful way our behavior was not intended to be cruel. We can see that, because of a wide range of factors, we did not see a better option. Perhaps we took actions based on our need to protect ourselves, not as an attempt to cause harm. Perhaps we lacked the skills at the time to act more appropriately.

Sally grew up in an alcoholic family where she learned she had to protect herself from her brother to protect her own sobriety. It is likely that the pain of her dysfunctional parents was too close to home for her to deal with her brother when he was actively using. While these considerations do not eliminate Sally's responsibility for her actions, they suggest that her treatment of her brother was not only to reject him. Sally's grievance with herself led her to attribute her brother's distance from her as primarily caused by her rejection of him. She never considered that John may have decided that for the sake of his own sobriety, he needed a more distant relationship with his sister. Sally's assumption that her rejection of John was the sole reason for his distance was the result of the unforgiving or destructive grievance story to which Sally adhered.

The second step of The Forgiveness Assessment Process is to evaluate the degree to which we have adequately grieved for the loss we have suffered. If we have not done appropriate grieving we will not be in a position to successfully forgive ourselves. There are three simple criteria to determine if we have done the requisite grief work. Question one: Are we aware of the range of feelings we have experienced regarding the offense? Question two: Can we locate the specific action that we committed that caused harm, articulate the harm, and say what was wrong about what we did. Very often when people tell a grievance story they are highly general in their description of the event. For instance, to say I feel badly that I had acted so horribly will not suffice in our goal to move the grief process. Rather we must get very specific about our behavior that caused harm to truly learn from the experience, and express our feelings clearly. Question three: Have we told a handful of trusted others about our grievance story and are we open to the feedback we receive? If the answer is yes to these three questions we are ready to work towards forgiving ourselves.

Sally was quite aware of her feelings as she felt sick with guilt about the way she treated John. She easily launched a self-attack which made her sound like a selfish, cruel person. Sally was aware of the specific action that she took that was hurtful towards her brother. She knew that she rejected him for such a long time that he had turned away from her emotionally. Sally was not so aware of what drove her to this behavior and reclaiming this was part of her therapeutic work. Sally had told her story to some close friends and she could indeed hear their feedback. Therefore, Sally was ready to learn how to forgive herself.

The third step is to evaluate how capable we are of calming our minds and bodies when gripped with upset from the grievance story. Most of us are woefully unprepared to calm ourselves down when we are triggered. The result is that we cause harm to our body and we do not think rationally. If we do not learn the breathing and guided imagery exercises that have proven to be effective in reducing stress then it is very difficult to see our way to self-forgiveness. The practice of stress reduction lessens the hold the grievance story has on us. When calm we can enlarge our view of the situation and see choices that were unavailable to us when stuck in the grievance story.

Sally did not practice stress management, guided imagery, or meditative practices. She obsessed about her grievance story and her body reacted with tension. Sally's thought processes were rigid and lacked creativity. After learning a few simple guided imagery exercises like Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique and Heart Focus, she found that when she practiced she was able to sit with her disappointment more easily. Through practice her judgment towards herself became less severe. She saw that although she was not happy with her behavior she knew she was okay as a human being. She started to feel compassion for herself and the suffering she had been through.

The fourth step is to locate the "unenforceable rules" that cloud our thinking about the offense. An unenforceable rule is any expectation or demand that we make of ourselves, others, or life that we have no power to make happen. Often an unenforceable rule is a desire for something good that morphs into an expectation or demand. The problem with unenforceable rules is that we think they are necessary for success and then we are outraged when we do not measure up. The reason that they cause so much suffering is we can't ensure our demands for perfection or infallibility. The good news is we can

resolve the suffering caused by the unenforceable rules by taking our demands and substituting them with a wish or hope. In that way we hope our changed behavior causes certain results but they do not have to. Then we work as hard as we can to get what we want but without the stress that it is catastrophic if things do not turn out as we hoped.

Sally's unenforceable rule was that she should have been a loving and accepting sister no matter how John behaved. Sally's rule required that she ignore all of her concerns about her own safety or sobriety. This rule allowed her brother unlimited excess and her no room to maneuver. When she disputed this unenforceable rule she found her experience changed and she re-stated the rule in a way that was more realistic. Sally wished she could have been more accepting of John. She also hoped to end her estrangement from him with an improved, closer relationship. These were healthy desires; ones she could act upon. She understood her brother had his own life and that perhaps he could not turn things around as quickly as she wished.

The fifth step is to locate what we call "The Positive Intention" that changes the grievance story. The positive intention is the positive goal that we had just before we committed the offense. Even though we behaved in a way that we now disapprove of, if we examine ourselves closely we will find that good motivation underlay our behavior. Once we locate our positive intention we re-claim it and then pursue that original goal as best we are able. We thus change the grievance story to a positive intention story. The positive intention story allows the grievance to serve as a temporary detour to obtaining our goals and sets the state for self-forgiveness.

Sally was stuck in her grievance story which led to self-attack. In therapy she was able to locate her positive intention which was a happy life which contained a good

relationship with her brother under certain conditions. Sally's rejection of her brother carried with it a positive desire for a productive, successful, and healthy life. She realized that these goals could be in conflict and knew the personal goal was more important than the relationship goal. She understood that her decision to reject her brother while painful had helped her have a sober and successful life. Sally regretted that in the past she didn't possess the skill needed to create a good relationship with her brother and maintain her focus. Sally knew now that she was capable of managing her life without eliminating people whose lifestyles she disapproved.

The sixth step is to find the positive in our lives even when the negatives seem stronger. There is a built in tendency in human beings to emphasize the negative aspects of their lives, called the negativity bias. This leads us to pay far less attention to our positive experiences and qualities. Our overemphasis on the negative makes sense as a mechanism of survival but it severely impedes our ability to get over our wounds and to relax when times are good. In order to forgive we have to be able to access positive emotions such as love, gratitude, and appreciation of goodness and beauty. One caveat: forgiveness does not suggest that life is without suffering or difficulty. Forgiveness emerges from paying attention to the good in life by helping us deal with our pain without being overwhelmed by it.

Research has found that people who focus on a loving image for about five minutes increase their immune function by ten to fifteen percent. On the other hand people who focus on a negative image for the same time period decrease their immune function. Accessing the positive proves to be beneficial for mind and body. People report that they think better and improve their problem solving abilities following exercises in positive

imagery. However, when negative events occur we do not naturally tune into our feelings of gratitude or appreciation. Yet it is in situations of adversity that we most need gratitude for what we have in our lives to balance that which we have been offended by. An attitude of gratitude differs from a feeling of gratitude in that it can be available to use even when bad things happen.

Sally focused on her disappointment when she thought about her grievance against herself. She saw that she inflicted suffering on her brother and therefore was at fault for possibly losing the relationship. Clearly, this was painful and she needed to feel that pain as a natural part of the grieving process. However, it wasn't until she learned how to access the love, gratitude, and beauty in her life that she could deal with her pain without having the same tightening of her body and self-attacking thoughts that so damaged her sense of self. When she could appreciate her career success, her loving relationship with her boyfriend, and the loving friendships she had cultivated, she could put her relationship with her brother into perspective. When Sally focused on how grateful she was that despite her dysfunctional childhood, she had created a healthy life for herself, she no longer fell prey to her family pattern of rumination and attack. As Sally became mindful of the good in her life she felt a shift in her view of herself. She became more able to tolerate her pain for her failures and flaws and was able to feel bad for the harm she caused without hating herself.

Step seven in the assessment process is differentiating content from process. Content is the drama line or the actual material that makes up our grievance story. It is the dramatic unfolding of the offense and the grievance we harbor towards ourselves. We think of process as the way that we order, highlight, focus, and emotionally manage

the content. When we suffer from pernicious guilt we have held the content in ways that lead to guilt and shame. Most of us think that the content is the force that determines the quality of our lives. Those who have learned how to forgive know that no matter what the content is, it is the process that shapes how positive or negative we feel about ourselves. While the content may not be altered the process always can. When we cultivate a healthy process we create the capacity to live well even when we make painful mistakes.

Sally developed a forgiveness practice that worked. She stopped articulating her one dimensional grievance story as the full truth. She disputed her unenforceable rules for her own perfection. Sally focused on her positive intention to live a successful and loving life. She had a regular mindfulness practice and managed her stress through guided imagery exercises. She made it a practice to contemplate the positives in her life as much or more than the negatives. She cultivated gratitude for all that she appreciated and valued in her life. Sally's forgiveness practice created a new process that de-emphasized the painful content. She thus stopped her self-attack and resolved her pernicious guilt.

Conclusion

Through a case example we have modeled our seven step forgiveness process and its clinical application. Self-forgiveness becomes the means to resolve pernicious guilt and the damage it wreaks. The resolution of pernicious guilt is self-forgiveness. Our seven step assessment shows how to diagnose and treat pernicious guilt through self-forgiveness.

People who feel guilt after they behave in ways that violate their own value systems have the opportunity to make amends. When we apologize or constructively try to rectify the harm we have caused we are taking responsibility for our actions. Although we feel bad for the harm we have caused we do not attack ourselves but put our energies into improving the situation. When we do this we profit from the guilt because it serves to show us how our behavior is inconsistent with whom we want to be. We may suffer emotionally for a time as we process our human frailty and grieve our loss of innocence or lapse of integrity.

Pernicious guilt is quite different from the healthy form of guilt. In pernicious guilt we do not put our energies into making amends. Instead we take our disappointment with our poor behavior and broadside ourselves with a self-attack. The self-attack often decimates our self-esteem and undermines our confidence. Pernicious not healthy guilt is what often leads to pathological emotional conditions.

About the Authors

The authors are all members of [The Forgive for Good Center for Forgiveness Education](#). The Center is a national educational and training organization specializing in the forgiveness methodology that originated from Fred Luskin's Stanford Forgiveness Project at Stanford University. Fred Luskin is the Center's director; Jed Rosen is the Center's clinical director, Ken Silvestri is the Center's educational director, and Joanne Coyle is a graduate of the Center.

The Center's forgiveness training is a research based solution model that integrates mind/body practice, guided imagery exercises, mindfulness, and cognitive behavioral principles. The overarching philosophy guiding our teaching can be found in Fred

Luskin's two books: *Forgive for Good* and *Forgive for Love* (Harper Collins). It is our mission to provide forgiveness training to the professional and lay audience through workshops, presentations, and published writings. The *Forgive for Good* Methodology has expanded into a system of forgiveness therapy and is being taught as such in the mental health community.

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