

# HANDOUTS

## *The Psychology of Forgiveness*

Presented By

Frederic Luskin, Ph.D

### AGENDA

#### Thursday

8:15 a.m. Registration (*continental breakfast*)

9:00 **What Is Forgiveness and What Is Not?**

- Research on Forgiveness
- Effects of Unmanaged Anger and Hurt on Psychosocial and Physical Health
- Effect of Positive Emotions on Psychosocial and Physical Health

10:20 **Break** (coffee and tea)

10:35 **Grievances**

- Three Core Components in Creating an Interpersonal Grievance
- Reversing the Grievance Process

12:00 p.m. **Lunch** (*on your own*)

1:15 **Techniques of Cognitive Disputation**

- Guided Practice in Gratitude

2:35 **Break** (*coffee, tea, soda, snack*)

2:50 **Techniques of Mindfulness Training**

- Present-Centered Acceptance
- Guided Practice in Present Moment Stress Management

4:15 **Adjournment**

Sponsored by

**J&K Seminars, LLC**

1861 Wickersham Lane

Lancaster, PA 17603-2327

(800) 801-5415

jk@jkseminars.com

[www.jkseminars.com](http://www.jkseminars.com)

#### Friday

7:45 a.m. Registration (*continental breakfast*)

8:30 **Choices in Emotional Well Being**

- Bitterness and Holding onto Grievances from the Past
- Goal Seeking (Positive Intentions) and Forgiveness

9:50 **Break** (*coffee and tea*)

10:05 **The HEAL Visualization Method**

- New Approaches for Relaxation Training
- Building a Secure Attachment

11:30 **Lunch** (*on your own*)

12:45 p.m. **Narrative and Story**

- Assessment of Self-Healing

2:05 **Break** (*coffee, tea, soda, snack*)

2:20 **Forgiveness Assessment**

- Integrating into Therapy

3:45 **Adjournment (Pick up certificates)**

**Frederic Luskin, Ph.D.**

1069 E. Meadow Circle

Palo Alto CA 94306-4231

650-208-7658

learningtoforgive@comcast.net

## Frederic Luskin, Ph.D. Stanford University Forgiveness Projects:

- The largest controlled forgiveness intervention study to date.
- Harris, A.H, Luskin, F.M., Benisovich, S.V., Standard, S., Bruning, J., Evans, S. and Thoresen, C. (2006) Effects of a group forgiveness intervention on forgiveness, perceived stress and trait anger: A randomized trial *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 62(6) 715-733.

## Types of Forgiveness

- \* Forgiving offender(s)
- \* Forgiving yourself
- \* Asking for forgiveness
- \* Accepting request for forgiveness
- \* Existential forgiveness

## Stanford Forgiveness Projects Dissertation Study

- Randomized controlled study of cognitive behavioral forgiveness intervention with 55 Stanford University students
- Reduced hurt and state and trait anger ( $p < .05$ ).
- Increased hope, self efficacy, compassion and forgiveness ( $p < .05$ ).
- Served as pilot data for the larger study to come.

Luskin, F. M., Ginzburg, K & Thoresen, C. E. (2005) The effect of forgiveness training on psychosocial factors in college age adults. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*. Special Issue: altruism, intergroup apology and forgiveness. 29(2) 163-184.

## Common Myths about Forgiveness

- Forgiveness is the same as forgetting
- Forgiveness is same as condoning
- Forgiveness is the same as reconciliation
- Forgiveness is not a choice
- Forgiveness means you can't seek justice
- Forgiveness requires offender to admit wrong

## Background

- In the last few years, there has been growing interest in forgiveness research (Luskin and Thoresen, 1998; Pargament, McCullough, & Thoresen, 2000).
- Intervention studies are finding people may be trained to let go of the hurt and anger associated with a past negative interpersonal experience (Luskin and Thoresen, 1998; McCullough et al, 1998).
- Although the health consequences of forgiveness training are not yet established, the detrimental effects of perceived stress as well as chronic anger/hostility on physical and mental health are demonstrated in the research literature.

## Methods:

- Participants were 259 adults who volunteered to take part in the Stanford Forgiveness Project, an empirical study of a cognitive behavioral forgiveness intervention.
- Participants were recruited through newspaper advertisements and radio, television, and printed news stories on the Stanford Forgiveness Project.
- To be included, participants must have experienced a hurtful interpersonal experience from which they still felt negative emotional consequences.

## Stanford Forgiveness Project Participants:

- Age: 25 - 49
- Gender: 62% female (161 women, 98 men)
- Education: 77% college graduates
- Ethnicity:
  - ◆ 69 % White, 13.9% Asian, 7.7% African-American, 5.4% Hispanic, and 8.1% other (in all, 31 % ethnic minorities)

## The Hurtful Experience:

- **Offenders included: family members, friends, significant others, and co-workers**
- **Offenses ranged widely, usually a perceived betrayal of trust, failure to meet expectations, or rejection by the offender.**
- **Participant completed questionnaires at baseline, 6 weeks, and 4 month follow-up.**

### Three Components in Creating an Interpersonal Grievance:

- Taking exaggerated personal offense
- Assigning blame for how one feels
- Creating a ‘Grievance Story’ (mental representation or narrative) of the problem

### Forgiveness emerges when one:

- Realizes the personal and impersonal nature of offense
- Understands limitations of one’s unenforceable rules
- Successfully manages one’s feelings
- Enhances understanding through changing one’s story from victim to hero

### Three Components of Forgiveness

- Taking offense less personally
- Taking responsibility for one’s emotional experience
- Offering more understanding/creating different story

### Stanford Forgiveness Project Session 1

- Negative visualization
  - Physiology of both positive and negative affective states.
  - Positive visualization
- Example: “For the next 5 minutes, visualize in as much detail as you can an event where you felt anger, hurt or frustration. Choose one that rates about a 5 on a scale of 1-10.”

## Stanford Forgiveness Project Session 2

- Details of heart rate variability and HPA axis activity
- How we create a grievance
- Three steps of forgiveness

Example: “The grievance process emerges by taking an event personally, our unenforceable rules being violated, and creating a grievance story about what happened.”

## Stanford Forgiveness Project Session 4

- Identifying cognitive distortions (Unenforceable rules)
- Teach simple cognitive restructuring
- Practice disputation

Example: “As you examine your thinking about a hurtful event from the past, how does the distortion ‘should’ play a role?”

## Stanford Forgiveness Process Session 3

- Positive emotion refocusing technique
- Examining rules in the grievance process
- Importance of gratitude and positive emotion

Example: “As you remember a time when a personal rule was broken, immediately shift your awareness to the area around your heart as you breathe slowly and deeply into and out of your belly”.

## Stanford Forgiveness Project Session 5

- Guided practice in changing the grievance story
- Combining cognitive restructuring with positive emotion psychophysiological change
- Guided Practice: “When old memories resurface, or as new hurtful events occur, what ways can you intervene?”

## Stanford Forgiveness Project Week 6

- Summation/Review
- Lingering Questions
- Review of Practice
- Guard against relapse

Example: “How has your approach to the event that brought you into the study changed?”

## Stanford Forgiveness Project Data Analysis Strategy

- Results for completers (n= 202).
- Results are substantially same when including those who only completed 2 assessments (n=38) or dropped out of the study (n= 39).
- No association found between treatment condition and drop-out status.

## Stanford Forgiveness Project Data Analysis Strategy

- Assessed main (time X condition) effect in a repeated measures GLM
- Calculated the treatment vs. control effect size at follow-up
- Use a best-subsets and increment to R-squared approach, we identified important co-variates in the prediction of rate of change scores.

## Co-variates used in Predicting Rate of Change in the Dependent Measures

- Age
- Gender
- Condition by gender interaction term
- Four Subscales of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Manipulation, Self-Absorption, Leadership, Arrogance)
- Frequency of religious service attendance
- Initial rating of intensity of hurt
- Optimism

## Results- Perceived Stress Scale

- Treatment significantly predicted change in PS,  $F(2, 183) = 10.04, p = 0.000$
- Follow-up raw score **ES = 0.54.**
- Higher baseline optimism predicted a significant decrease in PS ( $t = 2.37, p = 0.019$ ).
- Men marginally greater decrease in PS ( $t = 1.84, p = 0.067$ ) compared to women.

## Results-Trait Anger

- Treatment significantly predicted change in TA,  $F(2, 181) = 8.12, p = 0.000$
- Follow-up raw score **ES = 0.55**
- Significant Manipulation Subscale by Treatment interaction effect -- those higher in Manipulation decreased less in trait anger than those lower in Manipulation ( $t = -3.23, p = 0.001$ ).

## Results-State Anger

- Treatment significantly predicted change in SA,  $F(2, 177) = 5.39, p = 0.000$
- Follow-up raw score **ES = 0.40**
- Higher Optimism predicted a decrease in SA over time  $t = -3.41, p = 0.000$

## Self-Report Physical Health

- MOS1: "In general, would you say your health is: (1-5; Excellent to poor)
- MOS2: During the past 4 weeks, to what extent has your physical health interfered with your normal activities with family, friends, or neighbors (1-5; )
- SCL-90 Somatic (e.g., nausea/upset stomach)
- SCL-90 Other (e.g., feelings of guilt, poor sleep)

## Results- MOS 36 Questions 1 and 2

- No treatment effect for MOS 1
- Control and Tx. groups began with people rating their health as very good( mean=2.1)
- Significant univariate correlation between reduction in MOS 1 with religious service attendance over time ( $r = -0.134$ ,  $p < .05$ ).
- No treatment effect for MOS 2

## Results- SCL-90-Other Subscale

- Treatment significantly predicted change in **SCL-90 Other Subscale**,  $F(2, 177) = 10.47$ ,  $p = 0.000$
- Follow-up raw score **ES = 0.14**

## Results – SCL-90-Somatic Subscale

- Treatment by time interaction effect for the SCL-90 **Somatic Subscale**,  $F(2, 160) = 7.80$ ,  $p = .001$ , due to reductions in Treatment and increase in Control over time. ( 8.3, 4.9, 6.2)
- Baseline **Manipulation Subscale**,  $t = 2.04$ ,  $p = .04$ , and **male gender**,  $t = 1.71$ ,  $p = .087$ , predicted **higher** SCL-90 Somatic scores.

## Results-Forgiveness Likelihood Scale

- Treatment significantly predicted change  $F(2, 183) = 14.77$ ,  $p = 0.000$
- Follow-up raw score **ES = 0.61**
- Example: “ A friend borrows your most valued possession, and then loses it. The friend refuses to replace it. What is likelihood that you would forgive this person? ( likert scale: 1-5, Extremely likely to not at all likely)

## Results-Forgiveness Self-Efficacy

- Treatment significantly predicted change  
 $F(2, 183) = 10.04, p = 0.000$
- Follow-up raw score  $ES = 0.72$
- Co-variables not predictive of change
- Example “ I can think about my interpersonal hurt without blaming the offender for what happened”

## Results-Interpersonal Hurt Scale

- Rate on a scale of 1-10 how hurt you feel right now
- Both Control and Treatment groups Pretest means were 8.8
- Post test: Tx.= 3.8 Control=5.6
- Follow-up: Tx.= 3.2 Control=5.0
- $p = .000$

## Results-Rye Forgiveness Scale

- 1-5 Likert Scale (Scores range 15-75)
- Pretest Mean -Treatment and Control=46.9
- Control Means: Post Test =51.1 Follow-up =54.2
- Increase of 16%
- Treatment Means: Post Test= 57.1 Follow-up =62.9
- Increase of 34%
- $p=.03$

## Forgiveness Intervention and Physical Health

- Dissertation study showed positive influence of forgiveness intervention on HPA axis activity in pre menopausal women.
- Intervention study showed blood pressure reduction in angry hypertensives in a group cardiology practice in Orlando, Florida.

Tibbits, D., Pirovelli, D., Laskin, F.M., Ellis, G., (2006) Hypertension reduction through forgiveness training. *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Spring Summer (60) 27-34.

## Northern Ireland Forgiveness Project Number 1

- 5 Catholic and Protestant Women with grievous personal losses ( 4 women lost sons to murder) received a week of forgiveness training at Stanford University.
- Completed pre test-post test and 6 month follow-up evaluations
- At Follow-up significant ( $p < .05$ ) reduction in:  
Hurt Depression and Stress
- At Follow-up significant ( $p < .05$ ) increase in:  
Forgiveness and Optimism

## Developing Emotional Competence in Financial Service Advisors

- Eight projects completed in three east coast market groups of Ameriprise.
- 88 advisors , 8 vice presidents and 6 administrative assistants participated.
- Work began with one day on site workshop followed by 5 conference call follow-ups.
- Each participant got an individual development plan (IDP) after the workshop.
- IDP from baseline assessment data

## Northern Ireland Forgiveness Project Number 2

- 17 Catholic and Protestant men and women who lost an immediate family member to murder received a week of forgiveness training at Stanford University
- At Post-test significant ( $p < .05$ ) reduction in:  
Hurt Depression and Physical Symptoms of Stress
- At Post-test significant ( $p < .05$ ) increase in:  
Physical Vitality
- At Post-test positive trend ( $p < .075$ ) reduction in:  
Trait Anger and Perceived Stress.

## Emotional Competence/Forgiveness Results

- Decreased stress by 23%
- Increased ability to experience positive states by 20%
- Increased physical vitality 9%
- Decreased trait anger 13% ( Spielberg State Trait Anger Inventory).
- Increased quality of life 10% (MOS 36).
- All significant 2 tailed t-tests ( $p < .05$ )

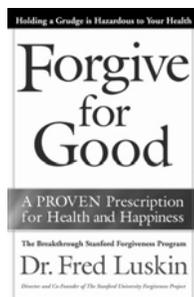
## Developing emotional competence in Ameriprise

- Advisor gross sales increased on average of 24% per advisor from pre to post.
- Control provided for gross sales only.
- Control was remainder of market group advisors for each project time and location.
- Control advisors showed an increase of 10% on average from pre to post.

Luskin, F.M., Aberman R., & DeLorenzo, A. (2005) The effect of emotional competence/forgiveness training on productivity and well being in financial service advisors. [Issues in Emotional Intelligence, www.eiconsortium.org](http://www.eiconsortium.org)

## Dr. Luskin's Books:

- Luskin, F. M. (2003) Forgive for good. A proven prescription for health and happiness. SF: Harper One.
- Luskin, F.M. (2008) Forgive for love: The missing ingredient for a healthy and lasting relationship. SF: Harper One.
- Luskin, F.M. Pelletier, K.R. (2005). Stress Free for Good. 10 Scientifically proven life skills for health and happiness. SF: Harper One.



## **Forgiveness Assessment Process: Psychotherapy Networker**

**May 2009**

Frederic Luskin, Ph.D. Ken Silvestri, Ed.D and Jed Rosen, M.S.W. :

When beginning forgiveness work with couples or conflicted individuals the therapist must make an initial assessment with their clients in terms of how they typically manage hurt. We employ a 7 stage assessment of their forgiveness readiness and try to understand where it is best to intervene. First we look to find the grievance stories our clients are telling. A grievance story is the tale of woe that the client uses to defend his position. This is the reality they have constructed that details how they were hurt. Typically the grievance story portrays the offender as very powerful. In a way the offender becomes the star of the story. The client is cast as the victim. He/she has given up much of their power. The grievance story is often repeated over and over and seems resistant to change. In some cases the grievance story emerges readily because the client is almost obsessed with it. In other cases the grievance story is not so obvious. The grievance story may be hidden or sometimes not fully conscious.

In such instances an excellent way to harvest the grievance story is through the use of the genogram. The genogram often teaches us other patterns in the client's life that may show grievance stories that are similar in theme that appear in many other contexts. A genogram can serve as an "ice breaker" as it is a three generational psychological family tree that depicts a family's legacy, history, relationship and communication patterns. Families/Couples come in for therapy because of disagreements and consequent resentments (sometimes called a "bitter bank") leading to grievance formation and spiraling discord. Forgiveness is making peace in the present, yet often failing to understand the history of how family dynamics occur can lead to repeating dysfunctional embedded patterns inhibits success in therapy.

As we listen to their story we examine how the client interprets the harm done to them. Most grievance stories hold fast to a highly personal interpretation of the offense committed. In the personal interpretation, the client is not only upset at being hurt; they have the added outrage that it was done to them and to them alone. They feel as if they were picked out of the universe to be hurt. They have little real consideration that the world is full of people who are hurting, many much worse than they are and thousands of people hurting in the exact same way. This overly personalized interpretation lacks empathy for others. The impersonal interpretation of the offense differs in that it recognizes that all of us are hurt and that it is an unavoidable aspect of life. The therapist does not want the client to deny the personal aspect of hurt they have experienced. Instead the therapist helps the client balance the personal and impersonal aspect of the experience. In a grievance story this usually means helping the client experience the offense less personally in effect giving them a wider lens.

Second the forgiveness therapist, after harvesting the grievance story determines where the client is in their grief process. The therapist needs to know how the client is managing their grief. Are they in touch with what they are feeling? Can they articulate their feelings and do they know specifically what they are upset about? In order to forgive, one must be clear about their feelings and the action that they feel has wronged them. Attempts at forgiveness without this basic step leads to a false forgiveness which tends to backfire. In making such a grief assessment the therapist determines how ready the client is for forgiveness at this time and what work must be done to help the client become clear enough to successfully forgive. In some cases of severe trauma it will take a great deal of preparatory work before the client can safely and effectively attempt forgiveness. Forgiveness is the end point of the grief process. With all clients forgiveness requires that one grieve.

Third, the forgiveness therapist evaluates how the clients typically manage stress. Do they have ways of calming themselves or are they at the mercy of their own reactivity. Clients vary in how quickly or intensely they emotionally escalate. This understanding will help the therapist know how to introduce the breathing and guided imagery exercises that are such an important part of the stress reduction component of forgiveness therapy. A central understanding of forgiveness therapy is that little can be done cognitively for a client when they are a fight/flight mode. Calming the mind and the body is primary to helping a client get a new perspective on their situation.

Fourth, the forgiveness therapist evaluates the unenforceable rules that the client is employing in their grievance story. The unenforceable rules are any expectation or demand that the client makes on themselves, others, or life that they do not have the power to make happen. Unenforceable rules that are unearthed in the grievance story can often be found in many other contexts in the client's life. The benefit of this realization is that if you help a client with the unenforceable rules in their grievance story, you will probably be helping them in many other facets of their lives that may not seem related to the grievance story. Our major intervention with respect to unenforceable rules will be to help our clients convert their demands towards their partner into hopes or wishes. This transformation brings the client more in line with interpersonal relating and the intricacies of intimacy.

Fifth, the forgiveness therapist unpacks the grievance story to find the client's positive intention. The positive intention is the positive goal that the client had that put them in the hurtful situation in the first place. The positive intention often represents the most loving, positive part of the client that has been forgotten in the grievance story. In a nutshell we help them find the positive piece that may not have manifested in one relationship or piece of relationship and re connect them with their good goal. The positive intention is broader than any specific person or experience. When the client goes back into the hurt and retrieves the positive goal, they can choose to move forward and have a new and powerful story.

The sixth aspect is evaluating the degree of negativity that commands their attention and the amount positive emotion/gratitude they express. That is do they give more attention to what is wrong in their relationship or what is right. Unfortunately, no matter what a client harps on that is painful and negative the result is increased suffering and impaired relationship. The opposite of unforgiveness or complaining about one's partner is acceptance and gratitude.

Seventh, the forgiveness therapist determines to what degree the client is driven by "Content or Process". By content we mean the actual details of the grievance story as the client experiences them. The process is how the client actually deals with the hurt. Clients caught in a grievance story will most of the time be driven by content. They will utilize content to rationalize their failed process. For instance, a client can easily justify his out of control screaming at someone as being justified by the nature of the provocation. The client may not be proud of their behavior but they justify it by relentlessly citing the provocation. If the client is deeply immersed in the content, the forgiveness therapist must intervene to articulate the unskillful means of their process. For example, the therapist can show that calming down and positive refocusing rather than immediately reacting to the distress can make one feel better no matter what happened to them. We also show the client that changing the content is impossible (we can not change the past). Current process is what shapes our lives not content and this realization opens clients to the novel process of forgiveness.

Within the seventh step, content vs. process, many of the resistances to forgiveness emerge. After being hurt once clients are naturally hesitant to be hurt again. The forgiveness therapist helps the client deal with their pain and vulnerability by dialoging about the effectiveness of bitterness or despair as a protection against hurt.

### **Working with Don and Sara:**

Don and Sara had been married for twenty five years and had two children. They had been to individual and couple therapy for years but Don found himself unable to get past some disturbing feelings he had about Sara. Ten years ago Sara told Don that she had an affair during the first year of their marriage. She had discontinued the relationship back at that time but felt so plagued by guilt over the years that she felt compelled to reveal this to Don.

Don was stunned by this news and felt increasingly hurt and angry. Even though ten years had passed since finding out, all Don could see was the betrayal and dishonesty on the part of Sara. Because of this he often was verbally abusive with her. Their relationship was characterized by shifts from warm friendship and cooperative parenting to screaming sessions that resulted in polarized standoffs. In one session Don turned abruptly on Sara. "I can never stop thinking that in those first two years when I was busting my ass each day running my business you were regularly screwing that bastard and then lying to me about it. How could you have looked me straight in the eye and still come to me for help with any of your problems?" Don came back to this refrain even years after he learned of the affair and decades after the affair

actually occurred. Sara, who at first experienced guilt for her affair, now saw Don as punitive towards her and so she stopped trusting him. Sara protested to Don, “How can you expect me to want to have sex with you again when you have such hatred towards me. What would make me want to let you touch me?” Sara’s guilt over the affair had morphed into bitterness and anger at Don for how unforgiving he remained after so much time. She found herself either withdrawing from him or yelling at him.

Don got in touch with one of us after a talk given near his home on the Psychology of Forgiveness. He realized he had never been able to forgive Sara and he wanted to save his marriage. Don had recently quit marital therapy because he found the conversations about the past so unsettling that he would leave the session feeling worse about his marriage. Don often despaired that talking with Sara often made him feel worse. “Every time the therapist asked me or Sara to bring up what was bothering us my blood would boil. We got so angry at each other that all we would do is accuse each other of the same things. What was worse, I would leave the session so angry and hopeless that I would have to force myself not to dial up the attorney to draw up divorce papers. This can’t be helping.”

Don and Sara were skeptical but they agreed to jointly enter forgiveness therapy. Don’s grievance story was that his wife humiliated him by this affair and he blamed her for shattering his trust in and commitment to her. Sara’s grievance story was that Don had found an excuse to punish her and that he had intentionally destroyed her self confidence as a wife and mother by his unrelenting criticism.

It was clear that both Don and Sara took the offense committed against themselves very personally. Unfortunately, when immersed in the grievance story, Don had no ability to see anything about Sara’s affair beyond his personal hurt. He was unable to see that her bringing this to him after so many years was her attempt to repair the relationship and to right a wrong she had committed. He had no ability to see what the burden of this guilt had been like for her. Finally, Don had not been able to factor into his story the reality that Sara was only eighteen years old at the time of the affair.

Sara came to see Don’s hurt and anger almost entirely as an excuse for him to punish her. Sara, when she re-lived her grievance story, lost sight of any of the positive qualities that Don continually expressed in the marriage. Sara was unable to see Don’s continued romantic interest in her as his way of healing the wound. Instead she interpreted Don’s sexual interest as a primitive authoritarian male power play that he used to collect his due. Sara had refused any intimacy in the last year of their marriage. It was clear that while Don had trouble forgiving Sara, Sara had trouble forgiving Don’s not forgiving her.

Don and Sara, in uncovering their grievance stories, showed that each of them were clearly aware of their wound. Don knew that he was angered and hurt at the betrayal he felt by Sara. Sara was aware of her feelings of hurt that Don had let her down in never understanding her

mistake and by then attacking her verbally. While Don and Sara were well aware of their feelings about the offense committed against them, and of the specific act that wronged them, they had not come to be able to accept and grieve the loss. They were in such a fevered state of protest that they could not move forward in grief or forgiveness. At one point Don told me that he feared forgiving Sara because he expected to feel so vulnerable and he feared she could hurt him again. "If I soften up and she hurt me again I don't think I could take it. Maybe it is better to just get divorced. At least when I am angry I can't get taken by surprise." When Don felt afraid to tend to give up and threaten divorce.

In order for Don and Sara to be able to progress to forgiveness they would have to reach acceptance of their loss as couples can't grieve what they are still objecting to. It seems that part of the protest inherent in the grievance story serves to give one the false impression that if one protests the offensive it will somehow erase it or take the pain away. In fact the protest only serves to keep one mired in the grievance. Because of this Don and Sara both were highly reactive and their emotions escalated quickly into anger at simple provocations. Their arguments often spiraled out of control into vituperative name calling. Their bodies tensed up and their thinking constricted in the classic fight/flight experience. This relentless escalation was why Don decided to quit the previous therapy. In a parenting difference, Don recalls Sara once describing him as good for nothing. He was so outraged that he chased her into the kitchen, got into her face and called her a string of vulgar and obscene names. They didn't speak after that for three days.

After hearing their story the therapist taught them several stress reduction exercises designed to calm their bodies and restore rational thinking. We used guided imagery which not only calmed them down but helped them re-focus their negative internal images into positive ones. When they could learn to access gratitude, compassion and love as easily as they could access blame, shame and anger, they increased their skills in relating to each other. Don and Sara learned through these stress reduction exercises that they had unexplored options within themselves to change their patterns and reactions. Through stress management they helped examine the hurt without being dominated by their personal stake in it. They learned how to calm their minds and bodies when discussing their negative feelings.

The next step was to help them uncover and dispute their unenforceable rules. Don's unenforceable rule was that Sara had to be faithful to him and for a limited time Don had every right to be hurt and angry at the betrayal. However a big part of Don's outrage which caused him to be unable to forgive Sara for over two decades was that he viewed Sara's fidelity as his entitlement. He was completely unprepared that fidelity and trust is not an entitlement for any of us. It was this sense of entitlement that gave Don the impression that he could punish Sara forever and that she should simply accept that. Don's second unenforceable rule was that Sara was supposed to make him feel strong and masculine. Her betrayal caused him to doubt his own masculinity and he blamed her for that. The moment Don's demand places his masculinity in Sarah's hands he is in a very vulnerable position.

Sara's unenforceable rule was that Don, as the strong protector that she had chosen when they first met, would always love and protect her no matter what mistakes she made. She was completely unprepared for Don's hurt and outrage when he learned of the affair. Sara actually thought Don would simply appreciate her honesty and that they would move on from there with the slate clean. In some ways Sara's unenforceable rule was that Don would continue to love and protect her no matter how she behaved.

Once Don and Sara were able to dispute their unenforceable rules, they were able to set more reasonable goals for the marriage. That included putting forth their own terms (including insisting on fidelity from one another to stay married). They learned the only practical control they had was over their own actions, not their partner's. As Don and Sara quieted their rigid rules for each other they were able to gain access to some of the more positive feelings they held for each other. Don knew that Sara helped him become a big success in life and that she knew him back when he was a 'street kid' with few prospects. He knew she had stuck with him over the years and believed in him even though he was so hurt by her. By acknowledging his gratitude to Sara, without denying his hurt, Don became more able to forgive. He also became more able to access the positive qualities in himself. Sara, as she softened came to see the good Don had done for her in her life. Don had a difficult time not insisting on his right to Sara's fidelity and to her love. With work he was able to express this wish for her to love him and to stay true. When Don put forth his wish and refrained from insisting, his voice cracked, he became vulnerable. "All I ever really wanted was for you to love me." Don bowed his head. He looked sad. Sara softened at Don's vulnerability. As I looked at her I saw a tear stream down her cheek.

Despite his harshness after her affair, Don was fiercely protective of Sara. She also greatly admired his work ethic. She even realized part of what brought them together in the first place was the strong work ethics they both shared. "I really do not want to give up the life style we have built" said Sara. "I know you have helped us get to where we are in the community, Don." Don replied, "Sara you will never hear me complain about your mothering or the way you organize our lives. I know that we work well together running a household." Sara, as she softened felt gratitude for all that Don provided her. In widening their perspectives, Don and Sara could actually have some compassion for the mistakes each of them made even though they were hurtful. They were able to reinforce a basic human bond based on understanding they married a flawed human being. Many of us suffer very harsh expectations of what we should accomplish in life. We suffer greatly because of this harshness. We are all pretty screwed up in many ways. If we can keep this in mind it is far easier to forgive others when we are hurt. This was true for Don and Sara.

The pivotal point in Sara and Don's healing was in their ability to find their positive intention. Don was able to see that although he had regret for his behavior in this troubled part of his marriage, he knew that the reason he was so hurt had to do with the depth of his love and admiration of Sara. He could not imagine himself ever being with another woman. He really

wanted to have a life with Sara. That commitment to her was his positive intention. If he wanted that commitment to nourish Sara and their relationship he had to forgive her and move on. As Don got in touch with his positive intention he told Sara of an old friend of theirs from their childhood whom they haven't seen in decades that Don recently ran into. "I saw Steve last week and he reminded me of all the old times when you (Sara) hung out with all my friends and how you fit in so well with us. It made me remember how proud I was of you and of how beautiful I thought you were." Sara was touched.

Sara was able to uncover her positive intention as well. Sara felt loved by Don's previous capacity to be so steadfast in his support. Sara's positive intention was that she wanted to be in a marriage that was so strong that anything could be forgiven. This was the marriage that she never witnessed in her home growing up and she had hoped she could achieve this with Don. Sara's youth and her immaturity at the time of the affair was a strong test of her marriage. Her positive intention allowed Sara to realize that she had to make the first step to create the reality she wanted and so she had to forgive Don for his behavior. Sara, after affirming her positive intention recalled a memory she had to Don, "I started remembering how you ran down to fix my broken car with only five minutes notice when I was faced with missing that important job interview. You somehow got it running and I made the meeting on time. You could fix anything." It had been a long time since Don felt that appreciated by Sara.

The positive intention not only helps us forgive our offender, it can help us forgive ourselves as well. When we find the positive loving kernel underneath our unskillful means we lighten up on ourselves as well. Self recriminations can be transformed into motivation to heal ourselves and our partners. Our unmet expectations also have to be grieved and let go of. When we can give ourselves a break we open up to kinder realities and become more creative in our ability to solve our problems.

Don and Sara's positive intention was to recommit. In a long term relationship there are bound to be ups and downs. No matter what the original intentions of the partners, life introduces changes that no one can foresee. It is imperative for a long term relationship to succeed that the partners consciously recommit to each other many times. This act of recommitting creates good will and helps each partner feel more secure and increases their confidence that they will weather the storms that come with married life.

As is true in many long term grievances Don and Sara were dominated by the content of their injury rather than the process of how they related to their injury. Don would repeat over and over how angry and hurt he became every time he thought of how hard he had worked in the early years of their marriage to make his business a success, only to later find out that Sara was having sex with another man. What Don was unable see so long as he remained stuck in repetitive content was that learning how to deal with all of life's hurts through forgiveness (the process) was what would lead him to peace and happiness.

Sara had built a grievance story that showed that she too was lost in a repetitive and unproductive content. Her reality of their present marriage was her outrage that she lost a supportive, loving husband and now lived with a man who only brought her shame and guilt. Sara needed to learn that the process (the way she dealt with her injury) is what caused her continued misery. What Don and Sara both learned was that people who love each other can make mistakes and that no couple gets a life without hurt and disappointment. Don and Sara learned that forgiveness is making peace with the parts of their relationship they did not like. Their outrage rather than their grieving and forgiving kept them stuck. The simple truth is when like Don we practice harshness towards our partner than we become good at being harsh. When we practice forgiveness we become good at forgiveness. Forgiveness therapy changed their practices (process) to include stress management when upset, better stories about their relationship, an understanding of their good fortune to have each other and a commitment to offer kindness rather than unkindness. And their marriage was saved. “We want a future together. We have a lot riding on it,” Don commented in one of our later sessions. Sara said “I think I got my husband back. I will really try to keep growing and to build our future together.”

Rather than accept each other’s flaws and forgive their lives for its ups and downs, Sara and Don and most of us expect our partners to compensate for our losses and unmet expectations. We dump on our partners a set of unenforceable rules that they complete us and we then blame them for failing a task that they never agreed to. Forgiveness does not condone unkindness it simply frees us from being stuck in hurt. It stops us from giving up our power by endlessly blaming ourselves or others for what did not work. With forgiveness we can love imperfect people and allow them to love imperfect us.

# Forgive for Good

Frederic Luskin, Ph.D.

[www.learningtoforgive.com](http://www.learningtoforgive.com)

1069 East Meadow Circle, Palo Alto, CA 94303  
650-208-7658 [learningtoforgive@comcast.net](mailto:learningtoforgive@comcast.net)

## What is Forgiveness?

*Forgiveness is the moment to moment experience of peace and understanding that occurs when an injured party's suffering is reduced as they transform their grievance against an offending party. This transformation takes place through learning to take less personal offense, attribute less blame to the offender and, by greater understanding, see the personal and interpersonal harm that occurs as the natural consequence of unresolved anger and hurt.*

Frederic Luskin 1998

### Forgiveness is Not the Same As:

1. Forgetting 2. Pardon 3. Reconciliation

1. Condoning 5. Justice

### Three Components in Creating an Interpersonal Grievance:

1. Take something too personally.
2. Blame the offender for how you feel.
3. Create a grievance story that reflects helplessness.

### Core Components of Forgiveness:

1. View the offense less personally.
2. Take responsibility for your own emotional experience.

3. Change the story to reflect the heroic choice to grow and prosper.

***Practice in Disputing Unenforceable Rules***

Over the course of your day it is common to react with hurt and anger to difficult people and memories. When you experience these feelings it is hard to forgive. However, if you remember that when you experience hurt or anger, underneath you are thinking with an *Unenforceable Rule*, then there is always something you can do to help yourself.

Please choose two recent events or memories that caused you to feel emotionally upset or distressed. Write down the event and label the negative feelings you experienced. Then, determine the underlying *Unenforceable Rule*. Finally, write what would be a more enforceable rule; one that would lead you to have a more positive and healing experience.

**Event-**

---

---

**Negative Emotions-**

---

---

**Unenforceable Rule-**

---

---

**Enforceable Rule-**

---

---

---



# The Moment to Moment Experience of Forgiveness

## *Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique*

**When you are feeling the effects in your mind and/or your body of an unresolved interpersonal grievance or ongoing relationship problem then:**

1. Bring your attention fully to your stomach as you slowly draw in and out one or two slow deep breaths. Keep breathing slowly and deeply.
2. Then bring to your mind's eye an image of an experience with another person when you experienced love or a picture of a scene in nature that fills you with awe and wonder.
3. Hold the positive or loving feelings that emerge in the area around your heart.
4. Ask this positive emotion voice of yours if it can suggest to you a way to remain peaceful when you think about this interpersonal hurt.

# FINDING YOUR POSITIVE INTENTION

1. Close your eyes and bring your attention to your breath as it enters and leaves your belly
2. Take 3-5 slow and deep breaths
3. Bring your attention to the area around your heart while continuing to breathe into and out of your belly slowly and deeply
4. Reflect upon love or beauty or appreciation and fill your heart with a positive feeling
5. Ask yourself:

**What is the strongest positive and loving language I can use to describe my goal for being in this hurtful situation in the first place?**

OR:

**What is the strongest positive and loving language I can use to describe my goal for healing from this hurtful situation?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

# THE H.E.A.L. METHOD

1. Practice P.E.R.T.
2. Keep your attention focused in the good feelings in the area around your heart
3. Maintain your slow deep belly breathing
4. Remind yourself of the healing power of Hope, Educate, Affirm and Long Term Practice

I **HOPE**- (Be personal, specific and positive) \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

---

I **EDUCATE**- (Remain open to the larger picture)

I accept and understand \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

I **AFFIRM**- (My positive intention) \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

My **LONG TERM COMMITMENT IS:** \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

## **Nine steps to Forgiveness**

### **Frederic Luskin, Ph.D.**

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a couple of trusted people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else. No one else even has to know about your decision.
3. Understand your goal. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person that upset you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace. Forgiveness can be defined as the "peace and understanding that come from blaming that which has hurt you less, taking the life experience less personally, and changing your grievance story."
4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset you are suffering now, not what offended you or hurt you two minutes - or ten years -ago.
5. At the moment you feel upset practice the Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique (P.E.R.T.) to soothe your body's flight or fight response.
6. Give up expecting things from other people, or your life, that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the "unenforceable rules" you have for your health or how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship and prosperity and work hard to get them. However, you will suffer when you demand these things occur when you do not have the power to make them happen.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. I call this step finding your positive intention. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt seek out new ways to get what you want.

8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge.  
Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty and kindness around you.
9. Amend your grievance story to remind you of the heroic choice to forgive.