

Just One Thing: Forgive Yourself by Rick Hanson

Everyone makes mistakes. But it takes skill to hush your inner critic!

Everyone messes up. Me, you, the neighbors, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, King David, the Buddha, everybody.

It's important to acknowledge mistakes, feel appropriate remorse, and learn from them so they don't happen again. But most people keep beating themselves up way past the point of usefulness. In fact, they're unfairly self-critical.

Inside the mind are many sub-personalities. For example, one part of me might set the alarm clock for 6 am to get up and exercise... and then when it goes off, another part of me could grumble: "Who set the darn clock?"

More broadly, there is a kind of inner critic and inner protector inside each of us. For most people, that inner critic is continually yammering away, looking for something, anything, to find fault with. It magnifies small failings into big ones, punishes you over and over for things long past, ignores the larger context, and doesn't credit you for your efforts to make amends.

Therefore, you really need your inner protector to stick up for you: to put your weaknesses and misdeeds in perspective, to highlight your many good qualities surrounding your lapses, to encourage you to keep getting back on the high road even if you've gone down the low one, and—frankly—to tell that inner critic to Shut Up.

With the support of your inner protector, you can see your faults clearly without fearing that they will drag you into a pit of feeling awful. You can clean up whatever mess you've made as best you can and move on. The only wholesome purpose of guilt, shame, or remorse is learning—not punishment!—so that you don't mess up in that way again. Anything past the point of learning is just needless suffering. Plus excessive guilt actually gets in the way of you contributing to others and helping make this world a better place—by undermining your energy, mood, confidence, and sense of worth.

Seeing faults clearly, taking responsibility for them with remorse and making amends, and then coming to peace about them: this is what I mean by forgiving yourself.

How?

Start by picking something relatively small that you're still being hard on yourself about,

and then try one or more of the methods below. I've spelled them out in detail since that's often useful, but you could do the gist of these methods in a few minutes or less. Then if you like, work up to more significant issues.

Here we go:

- * Start by getting in touch, as best you can, with the feeling of being cared about by some being: a friend or mate, spiritual being, pet, or person from your childhood. Make this feeling part of your inner protector.

- * Staying with feeling cared about, list some of your many good qualities. You could ask the inner protector what it knows about you. These are facts, not flattery, and you don't need a halo to have good qualities like patience, determination, fairness, or kindness.

- * If you yelled at a child, lied at work, partied too hard, let a friend down, cheated on a partner, or were secretly glad about someone's downfall—whatever it was—acknowledge the facts: what happened, what was in your mind at the time, the relevant context and history, and the results for yourself and others.

- * Notice any facts that are hard to face—like the look in a child's eyes when you yelled at her—and be especially open to them; they're the ones that are keeping you stuck. It is always the truth that sets us free.

- * Sort what happened into three piles: moral faults, unskillfulness, and everything else. Moral faults deserve proportionate guilt, remorse, or shame, but unskillfulness calls for correction, no more. (This point is very important.)

You could ask others what they think about this sorting (and about other points below)—include those you may have wronged—but you alone get to decide what's right. For example, if you gossiped about someone and embellished a mistake he made, you might decide that the lie in your exaggeration is a moral fault deserving a wince of remorse, but that casual gossip (which most of us do, at one time or another) is simply unskillful and should be corrected (i.e., never done again) without self-flagellation.

- * In an honest way, take responsibility for your moral fault(s) and unskillfulness. Say in your mind or out loud (or write): I am responsible for _____ , _____ , and _____ . Let yourself feel it.

- * Then add to yourself: But I am NOT responsible for _____ , _____ , and _____ . For example, you are not responsible for the misinterpretations or over-reactions of others. Let the relief of what you are NOT responsible for sink in.

- * Acknowledge what you have already done to learn from this experience, and to repair things and make amends. Let this sink in. Appreciate yourself.

- * Next, decide what if anything remains to be done—inside your own heart or out there in the world—and then do it. Let it sink in that you're doing it, and appreciate yourself for this, too.

- * Now check in with your inner protector: is there anything else you should face or do? Listen to that "still quiet voice of conscience," so different from the pounding scorn of the critic. If you truly know that something remains, then take care of it. But otherwise, know in your heart that what needed learning has been learned, and that what needed doing

has been done.

* And now actively forgive yourself. Say in your mind, out loud, in writing, or perhaps to others statements like: I forgive myself for _____ , _____ , and _____ . I have taken responsibility and done what I could to make things better. You could also ask the inner protector to forgive you, or others out in the world, including maybe the person you wronged.

* You may need to go through one or more the steps above again and again to truly forgive yourself, and that's alright. Allow the experience of being forgiven to take some time to sink in. Help it sink in by opening up to it in your body and heart, and by reflecting on how it will help others for you to stop beating yourself up.

May you be at peace.