

The Healthy Way to Forgive Yourself by Juliana Breines

Self-forgiveness is critical to well-being—but it has a dark side. Here are four steps to healthy self-forgiveness, based on recent research.

The ability to forgive oneself for mistakes, large and small, is critical to psychological well-being. Difficulties with self-forgiveness are linked with suicide attempts, eating disorders, and alcohol abuse, among other problems.

But self-forgiveness has a dark side. Research suggests that while it can relieve unpleasant feelings like guilt and shame, it can also reduce empathy for others and motivation to make amends. In other words, self-forgiveness may at times serve as a crutch, producing a comforting sense of moral righteousness rather than a motivating sense of moral responsibility.

Is there a healthy way to forgive yourself? Here is what recent research has to say.

1. Don't get rid of guilt. Feeling bad when you do something wrong is natural, and maybe even useful. Without it, where would we find the motivation to do better next time? But not all bad feelings are equally beneficial. Shame, which involves negative feelings about the self as a whole (i.e., feeling worthless), is associated with defensive strategies like denial, avoidance, and even physical violence. Feeling like you're just a bad person at your core can undermine efforts to change, as change may not even seem possible from this perspective. Guilt, by contrast, involves feeling bad about one's behavior and its consequences.

Research suggests that criminal offenders who recognize that doing bad things does not make them bad people are less likely to continue engaging in criminal activity. And remorse, rather than self-condemnation, has been shown to encourage prosocial behavior. Healthy self-forgiveness therefore seems to involve releasing destructive feelings of shame and self-condemnation but maintaining appropriate levels of guilt and remorse—to the extent that these emotions help fuel positive change.

2. Own up. In theory, self-forgiveness is only relevant in the context of transgressions that an individual has acknowledged and taken responsibility for. Without the recognition of wrongdoing, what would there be to forgive? In practice, however, self-forgiveness can be code for avoiding culpability. The self-forgiveness formula most conducive to constructive change seems to involve an acknowledgement of both positive and negative aspects of the self.

Research suggests, for example, that people who have more balanced, realistic views of

themselves are less likely to use counter-productive coping strategies like self-handicapping than those who either inflate or deflate their self-images. Along similar lines, self-forgiveness interventions have been shown to be most helpful when combined with responsibility-taking exercises. Alone, self-forgiveness seems to do little to motivate change.

3. Pay your dues. Just as you probably wouldn't forgive someone else until they have made it up to you in some way (although there are of course exceptions), forgiving yourself may be most beneficial when you feel like you deserve it.

So how do you know when you've adequately paid your dues? In some cases, it's obvious what needs to be done (e.g., if you damage someone's property, you would probably want to replace it, at minimum), but in other cases the criteria for making amends may be less clear. Receiving forgiveness from others can help facilitate self-forgiveness, but it's ultimately up to you to decide when you've done enough to right a wrong.

Rather than simply going through the motions of atonement, it may be useful to consider what kinds of reparative behaviors will actually make a difference for others, or for your own personal growth. Even self-punishment may be useful when motivated by a desire for self-improvement rather than anger at the self, though researchers recommend that such punishment be mild and time-limited, and never physically or psychologically harmful. For example, a teenager who engages in shoplifting and feels remorse might decide to refrain from shopping for three months and instead focus on her schoolwork.

4. Foster empathy for the victim. Research has found that self-forgiveness is negatively associated with empathy for victims. As self-forgiveness increases, empathy decreases. This disconnect is understandable: it's difficult to have compassion for oneself while also having compassion for those one has hurt. But self-forgiveness is not supposed to be easy, and without incorporating empathy it seems more like a form of avoidance.

Importantly, self-forgiveness need not be all-or-nothing. It's a slow process that may never (and some may argue should never) result in a full release of negative feelings or an exclusively rosy view of oneself. Rather than being a form of self-indulgence, self-forgiveness might be better seen as an act of humility, an honest acknowledgment of our capacity for causing harm as well as our potential for doing good.