How Do We Forgive Someone Who Isn’t Sorry—or Alive?

In many cases of interpersonal injury, the offending party never apologizes, never asks for forgiveness, and often is not physically or emotionally available to make any kind of repairs. But the injured party still needs closure, still needs to move forward with life and let go of their pain. What can be done to start the process of healing to move toward acceptance and let go of the past?

One of the problems with the work of “forgiveness” is that it means so many different things to so many people. For some people, forgiveness is an intrapersonal event—something you do on your own. You ask nothing of the offender.

For others, forgiveness is a transaction. It requires the hard work of the offender who must show remorse and make meaningful repairs to earn the forgiveness.

When these two ideas are blended together, many people are offended that it’s their job as the hurt party to forgive someone who’s not sorry or someone who’s deceased and unable to make repairs. Hurt parties often resent being told they should and must forgive. Often they stubbornly refuse to forgive and remain simmering in their own hostile juices. This isn’t healthy.
My work describes two separate healing processes. The first is called Acceptance. It’s a healing gift to the self which asks nothing of the offender. It’s meant to help the hurt party rise above a violation and make peace with the past. What I call Genuine Forgiveness is a transaction, an intimate dance. It requires the helping hand of the offender. The offender must make bold, heartfelt, humble acts of repair and, in response, the hurt party must work to release his or her resentment and need for revenge. Acceptance involves 10 concrete steps, such as learning to release your bitter preoccupation with the offender. Because this process does not require forgiveness, hurt parties are more willing to do the work to heal themselves.

Why Do People Resist Forgiving?
Almost everything written today about forgiveness espouses the same thing, which is that forgiveness is good for us and good people forgive. Many people feel pressured to forgive. They may have been taught by their religion that they must forgive to be granted eternal life, to be a decent human being. But in real life, many people choke on the concept of forgiveness and refuse to forgive. They resent the pressure put on them, especially when the person who has hurt them is not sorry or willing to acknowledge the harm they’ve caused.

An example might help illustrate my point. Recently, when I was teaching at a spiritual wellness center, I asked the young woman sitting next to me how she was spending her time. She told me she had come to the center to shake off the stress of raising three young children. She asked me what I was doing. I told her I was teaching a course on forgiveness. She shot back, “Oh yes, I saw your course in the catalogue. Let me tell you, my husband has hurt me in ways for which he’s never apologized and, frankly, I’m not ready to forgive him. So when I read about your course, I couldn’t turn the page in the catalogue fast enough! I wanted no part of it.”

“That’s exactly how many people feel,” I explained. I invited her to sit in on the course and she did, for 8 hours. When pushed to forgive an unrepentant offender, people often respond in one of three ways:

1) They say, “Forgiveness may be divine, but it’s not for me. It takes a person with a really big heart to forgive—bigger than mine.” They’re left not forgiving, often hating and hurting and unresolved. This is not healthy.

2) They’ve been taught they should and must forgive, they try to forgive, but inside they feel cheated and disingenuous.

3) They say they forgive, but actually, research shows that even those people who describe themselves as the forgiving type, actually forgive less in real life than they admit.

A Model of Acceptance
Acceptance is a healing process for the self. It helps the hurt party take 10 concrete steps to rise above the violation. Briefly, they include:

1. You honor the full sweep of your emotions.
2. You give up your need for revenge but continue to seek a just resolution.
3. You stop obsessing about the injury and reengage with life.
4. You protect yourself from further abuse.
5. You frame the offender’s behavior in terms of the offender’s own personal struggles.
6. You look honestly at your own contribution to the injury.
7. You challenge your false assumptions about what happened.
8. You look at the offender apart from his offense, weighing the good against the bad.
9. You carefully decide what kind of relationship you want with him or her.
10. You forgive yourself for your own failings.

In Step 3, hurt parties learn how to stop obsessing about the injury and re-engage with life. So often, we’re told, “you need to let go of the injury.” The truth is, most people are quite willing to let its poison go, but they don’t know how to do that. In How Can I Forgive You?, I describe 10 different strategies from different therapy models for letting go of an obsessive preoccupation with an interpersonal wound. For example, one behavioral intervention is called “thought stopping.” When you find yourself ruminating over an injury, you actively interrupt your preoccupation by calling out loud, “Stop!” Then, as if you were a friend, you gently try to redirect yourself to think about something else, something that’s more interesting, relaxing, inspiring. Unless you’re problem solving about the injury, your obsessions simply stir the pot and make you sick.

In Step 5 of Acceptance, you reframe the offender’s behavior in terms of the offender’s own personal struggles, to the extent that this is true. What happens when somebody mistreats us—perhaps an alcoholic father who sexually molests a daughter, or a partner who has an affair—is that we tend to take the offender’s treatment of us personally, and we’re left feeling diminished and ashamed. This is one of the great dangers of any interpersonal injury, that we begin to feel about ourselves the way the offender has treated us. In this step, we try to separate out the way the offender treated us from who we are and what we deserve. When we begin to see the injury in terms of what it says about the offender, rather than what it says about us, the shame lifts. This step teaches us to see the offender objectively by asking questions such as: Why did this person treat me so terribly? What is it about them that led them to treat me this way? What do I know about their biochemistry? What do I know about their early childhood history? What do I know about their current life stressors? How could they have misunderstood me so that they reacted so badly?

Step 6 is the opposite. In it, you’re asked to look honestly at your own contribution to the injury. Some times, you’re innocent. For example, if you’re an eight-year-old girl who has been molested by your mother’s boyfriend, you’re innocent. But some times, you can’t bear to see how you may have contributed to your injury. For example, one woman complained that her son...
treated her terribly. This was her “official story,” but it wasn’t the full picture. The truth was, whenever he called, she never failed to bring up the two most sensitive subjects in his life—his job search and his dating situation. So what would happen? He wouldn’t call again for a couple of weeks, and she felt hurt and used. But she needed to confront her own contribution to the injury if she was ever going to step out of the role of victim and change their interaction. She needed to change her behavior and thinking if she was ever going to understand his.

The steps of Acceptance help hurt parties come to terms with an injury, rise above violation, and make peace with the past— all without forgiving an unrepentant offender.

Is Acceptance Good Enough?
The problem is that often when we suffer an injury, the person who hurt us is not available to make amends. They may be narcissistic, not sorry, not able to feel or hear our pain or have any regard for us as a separate person. They may be deceased or geographically or medically unavailable. In these situations, I believe Acceptance offers an authentic and healing response to an interpersonal injury. People may not be able to forgive, but they can go through the steps of Acceptance to make peace with what happened and with the person who hurt them.

The process of Genuine Forgiveness, though, I believe, is “superior.” Here, both parties work to take a fair share of responsibility for righting the wrong and repairing the relationship. The cleansing that takes place is deeper and more satisfying because the offender actively works to make amends and earn forgiveness. The hurt party, in turn, works to let go of their resentment and need for retribution.

Forgiveness is like love. We can love someone unilaterally: “Regardless of how you treat me, I still love you.” But doesn’t love feel more genuine, more deeply satisfying, when the person you love, loves you back and demonstrates that love through their caring behavior?

Janis Abrahms Spring, PhD, ABPP, is the author of After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner Has Been Unfaithful and How Can I Forgive You? The Courage to Forgive, The Freedom Not To. Her latest book is Life with Pop: Lessons on Caring for an Aging Parent. In private practice for 34 years, Spring is an AAMFT Affiliate Member and a recipient of the Connecticut Psychological Association’s Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Practice of Psychology. She is a Diplomate in Clinical Psychology, a former clinical supervisor in the Department of Psychology at Yale University, and has been a guest on programs such as NPR, Good Morning America, and Sirius XM Radio. Spring trains therapists at venues such as Harvard’s Educational Conferences, the Ackerman Institute, Smith College, and annual conferences for psychologists and MFTs.