

## Forgiveness

Some believe that forgiveness is a prerequisite to resolution and some unfortunately still talk in simple terms of being able to forgive oneself. These can be highly damaging beliefs. Such beliefs are more likely to suit abusers, those who remained passive, and others that failed to create the healthy environment that children and young people needed.

'Forgiveness'; and abuse; what does it mean in this context?

There are many problems with the concept of forgiving, not least that it is believed by so many to be a moral virtue and hence by implication a moral obligation. The very thinly veiled suggestion is; that despite what the perpetrator did to the victim, the victim is 'wrong' if they do not forgive. For victims who have religious beliefs, this can be particularly painful as they may feel that they will be excluded from their congregation, even an afterlife in Heaven, if they don't forgive.

Where the idea of forgiving can be harmful is when it plays into the hands of the abuser by tapping into the natural desire of the victim to suppress and deny the pain or terror. And arguably, the most harmful concept, that of self-forgiveness, can be seductive and appear to be away forward to those already holding beliefs of shame, blame and guilt. Forgiveness and self-forgiveness can obstruct true resolution. It can play into the hands of all of those more interested in sweeping matters under the carpet.

Many victims of abuse have been conditioned to self-sacrifice which makes them easy victims for perpetrators who merely say sorry as their strategy to maintain a position of power.

Even if it is the case that forgiveness holds the key to healing, how can any of us forgive in a meaningful way something that is not properly understood by victim and perpetrator alike? To forgive without the crime or wrongdoing being properly evaluated and acknowledged by the abuser has a grandiose air about it, a resonance of being above the one who is being forgiven. This is very tempting, but for the victim it is a trap and a way of avoiding the real work to be done.

Problems can also arise when some members of a family and friends 'forgive' the abuser and others do not. Such acts of 'forgiveness', usually by those not directly abused, can be felt by a victim as dismissive of their pain, and may cause fractures in the wider family. Perpetrators will usually find such outcomes very satisfying, splitting a family into those for and against, because it diverts attention away from them.

It is helpful to understand that where abuse is concerned all are affected in different ways, and therefore all are victims. It is preferable for a person who feels that they must forgive to do so in respect of the harm and pain caused to them; and ONLY them. Such forgiveness cannot extend to the harm and pain caused to others because they have no right to do so; and to do so will cause a victim to feel further betrayed and isolated. It may also be experienced as an invasion of their privacy especially if the abuse was of a sexual nature.

While individuals do have a right to follow their own path where forgiveness is concerned, this will demand considerable understanding by all concerned if it is not to cause more suffering to the victim, and result in a situation which can be exploited by an abuser. Third parties, who step in with their own needs to forgive, without consideration for the feelings of the principle victim, may unwittingly be colluding with the perpetrator.

Forgiveness is often suggested by those who either do not know of other options, or who are themselves in denial. Mike Lew in *Victims No Longer* has written: 'True forgiveness does not arise from denial. It can only occur when there has been a complete understanding of what has happened, including the nature of the wrongs, and where the responsibility lies.' Mic Hunter in his book *Abused Boys*, describes forgiveness before true resolution as 'pseudo forgiveness'.

Equally, where the abuser (and passive others) are concerned, just saying sorry is not enough. Genuine remorse can only follow if the perpetrator acquires a complete understanding of what they did, the effect it has had on the victims and others, and that responsibility lies wholly with them; this is essential, otherwise it can only be 'pseudo-sorry'. And a 'pseudo-sorry' is more often given because they are sorry for themselves, their predicament; or once again as a strategy to wrong-foot victims as part of continuing abuse and control. In other words, the concepts of forgiveness can be used as a weapon by an abuser to continue the abuse...

Most abusers have strong Psychopathic / Sociopathic traits, or they are narcissistic and lack empathy. To them forgiveness can be perceived as an insult; or it may be understood as a sign of weakness or foolishness and therefore will confirm their sense of power. Generally, they have contempt for those who forgive them or try to help them. It is much more likely that if perpetrators are caught, they will attempt to present themselves as the victims of sexual provocation. They will attempt to cultivate sympathy for themselves. Regrettably it has been the case, that some abusers have succeeded, convincing judge and jury, friends and family that this is true, overlooking the reality that no mature loving adult would engage in sex with a child or vulnerable person even if that person tried to initiate such behaviours. A mature healthy adult would instead be concerned for the child, or vulnerable person's emotional welfare.

Those who advocate forgiveness, such as the author Fitzgibbons, describe some of the benefits as:

'Freedom from the bond of hatred, the subtle control that perpetrators and the events of the past may still have in the lives of their victims.'

'A decrease in the possibility that anger will be expressed towards others who were not responsible for the crime.'

'A lessening of fear.'

'Facilitating reconciliation if this is desired.' (Unfortunately issues of trust are overlooked)

A different view is that the four 'benefits' stated above can be achieved by fully resolving past issues. It is possible to reach a point of understanding and peace about one's history of being abused, where there is no longer any anger or desire for revenge, and forgiveness is experienced as superfluous.

One client said, "Even God has told us that to be forgiven, the sinner must be truly sorry and repent. And He has said that if they don't they will go to Hell; so, who am I to forgive those who He can't forgive? He makes it clear that without true repentance, forgiveness cannot be granted. Am I greater than God?" To her the idea of forgiving someone who denied the crimes against her was illogical and without bothering about forgiveness she was equally able to let go of her past and move on.

Another important consideration is that there is an implied presupposition in the concept of forgiveness that all concerned can now reunite and live as 'happy families'. Reconciliation is the term most frequently used here. Well, one may forgive but still not like the abuser or wish to associate with them. There is usually some degree of trauma associated with abuse, and just as one would not expect someone who had suffered with post-traumatic stress to return to the frightening environment, the same holds true for other victims.

We all have free choice as to whom we wish to relate and share our lives. Many survivors of abuse from family members reach a point where they genuinely no longer have loving or positive feelings for those that abused them, failed to protect them and betrayed them. The emotional links have been broken and are now substantially depleted if not gone. Such feelings cannot simply be reinstated and to pretend that they are there can be harmful to the survivor as well as misleading to the perpetrator and wider family. **Forgiveness cannot establish trust.**

It is not true that you must forgive your abuser to heal. It is not necessary for you to forgive the person that abused you and it is only an appropriate consideration in very rare circumstances. What may be appropriate is a form of self-acceptance, not about any of the issues around the circumstances of the abuse committed against you, but critically to take responsibility for any past actions you did that you now know were wrong. Abuse frequently causes victims to act out in antisocial or unpleasant ways towards other people. It can also cause victims to engage in what are broadly described as self-harming behaviours. In accepting responsibility however, all victims, **MUST** factor in that that much of their behaviours were direct results of the harm caused to them, and therefore responsibility, in the first instance, rests with their abuser/s.

The concept of forgiving the perpetrator/s is often harrowing for the victims of abuse and sexual violence, a final insult to add to the injury of the crimes against them. Many however insist that it is the goal and claim that healing cannot be complete unless victims take this step. Some go as far as to say those victims should not only forgive, but also forget. The choice to forgive or not will always be a personal one, but to forget? To forget for example, that your father abused you - and then to let him do the babysitting when you have children of your own?

To conclude, while the idea of forgiving either suits you or not, resolving one's history is far more important and until that is done, forgiving can wait. Mic Hunter states: 'Forgiveness is a process, not an event'. True resolution, healing and peace lies in experiencing the process, not in attempting to bypass it by effecting forgiveness'.

In the war between falsehood and truth,  
Falsehood wins the first battle, and truth the last  
*Mujibur Rahman*

Integrity rings like fine glass. True, clear and reassuring.  
*Pam Brown*