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## The Science of Forgiveness

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Forgiveness is a basic trait of healthy relationships. Like other competencies within SEE Learning, forgiveness can be viewed as a skill that can be developed, practiced, and strengthened overtime.

On its most basic level, forgiveness involves letting go of a feeling of hurt or harm that you experience regarding another person or group of people. When an experience of harm occurs a person can hold on to that experience with a sense of anger, resentment, or even thoughts of revenge. Or a person can practice forgiveness and move beyond feelings of anger, resentment, or revenge.

The choice to forgive someone or a group of people has significant health benefits. These include reduced anxiety, depression, and major psychiatric disorders. It also correlates with improved physical health symptoms such as decreased inflammation, overall heart health, stronger immune response and overall mortality rate. In synthesizing the benefits of forgiveness the Mayo Institute identified the list below as beneficial outcomes of forgiveness.

- Healthier relationships
- Improved mental health
- Less anxiety, stress and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- A stronger immune system
- Improved heart health
- Improved self-esteem

### **What is Forgiveness?**

Forgiveness is the act of letting go of anger, resentment, or feelings of hurt that a person experiences specific to another person or group of people. Forgiveness is not an all or nothing proposition. The experience that hurt or offended you might always stay with you. However, forgiveness can lessen the impact that experience has on you and can allow you to become liberated from the control that person or experience has over you. Forgiveness can lead to feelings of understanding, empathy, and compassion for those who hurt you or others.

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### What Forgiveness is Not

Forgiveness does not mean that you forget or excuse the harm that was done, rather it provides a sense of perspective and inner peace about the situation. Also forgiveness does not necessarily have to occur just once or as a one time experience. Forgiveness can be something that is worked on and deepened over time. Forgiveness is also not an act of weakness. It takes a lot of courage to engage in forgiveness and requires inner strength.

### The Difference Between Conditional and Unconditional Forgiveness

When it comes to forgiving another person, we often think that forgiveness requires that the other person express that they are sorry. This is called conditional forgiveness: we forgive on the condition that the other person express remorse or regret for what they have done, or that they commit to making amends. Unconditional forgiveness, on the other hand, is when we forgive another person from our own side regardless of what that person feels or does to warrant our forgiveness. Scientists have found that those who practice unconditional forgiveness have better health and even may live longer than those who only practice conditional forgiveness. Also, sometimes conditional forgiveness is not possible, because the other person is no longer around to express remorse.

Similarly, it is important to distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation. Reconciliation involves two sides agreeing to remain in relationship with one another. This can happen with or without forgiveness. Forgiveness, however, does not require that we continue to be in a relationship with another person. Sometimes the other person is gone and outer reconciliation is impossible. But forgiveness from one's own side can be considered an act of "inner reconciliation."

### What Are the Downsides of Not Forgiving

As you engage in the process of forgiveness, it can sometimes be helpful to remember the downsides of not forgiving. When you lack forgiveness it is possible to bring anger or bitterness into other relationships that are either established or newly formed. This is because there is a lack of trust or a feeling of safety. One of the most significant downsides is that a lack of forgiveness plays directly into our negativity bias. In short, we become so wrapped up in the harm that others have caused us that we forget about the good things that are also true. A lack of forgiveness has been shown to contribute to experiences of anxiety and depression. It also correlates to a lack of meaning or purpose in our life. Finally, a lack of forgiveness hinders our ability to feel connected with others.

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### How to Practice Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a skill that can be practiced and developed. One of the best ways to cultivate forgiveness is to recognize the value it has for you and the role it could play in improving your life. It is important to become clear on what and who is being forgiven. Identify what needs to be healed and who needs to be forgiven. Sometimes forgiveness is not a strictly personal process; it may involve family members, friends, or others. Through SEE Learning you have developed the ability to recognize the emotions you are feeling, and returning back to this competency is critical for engaging in the process of forgiveness. Ultimately the process of forgiveness occurs when you choose to forgive the person who harmed you. This can only occur when you shift away from one's direct experience, let go of the power the offending person has over you, and that the situation has over your life.

### What if Forgiveness Does Not Come Easy?

If forgiveness does not come easily, it is all right to not engage in forgiveness right now. To lessen the impact that feelings of anger and resentment have on you, try the following strategies recommend by the Mayo Institute:

- Practice empathy. Try seeing the situation from the other person's point of view.
- Ask yourself why he or she would behave in such a way. Perhaps you would have reacted similarly if you faced the same situation.
- Reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who have forgiven you.
- Write in a journal, pray or use guided meditation — or talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, or an impartial loved one or friend.
- Be aware that forgiveness is a process, and even small hurts may need to be revisited and forgiven over and over again.

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