

# Defining Forgiveness

## PURPOSE

In this learning experience, students explore the science of forgiveness and the impacts it has on our physiology, as a strategy for letting go of anger and negative emotions towards oneself and others. Students will examine how to practice forgiveness without necessarily approving of the action that led to harm. Students will define and reflect on experiences they may have had in which they let go of anger and negative emotions towards others and themselves. Finally, students will develop a classroom and personal plan to relate with forgiveness towards themselves and others.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Identify how the practice of forgiveness can serve as a release of negative emotions towards oneself or another person
- Understand the scientific basis for forgiveness
- Understand how seeing another person's behavior and emotions in context may help us understand others and have compassion for them and oneself

## PRIMARY CORE COMPONENTS



**Interpersonal  
Awareness**



**Compassion  
for Others**

## MATERIALS REQUIRED

- Provide enough space for students to move around an imagined continuum line
- Science of Forgiveness reading handout
- Sign that reads "Total Forgiveness"
- Sign that reads "No Forgiveness"
- Drawing/writing utensils and paper

## LENGTH

45 minutes

## CHECK-IN | 5 minutes

[PAUSE]s can be up to 10 seconds each

### Attention Practice

- *"Let's prepare for a short attention practice. Find a posture that feels both alert and comfortable."*
- *One way to find an alert and comfortable posture could be to sit up right with our feet on the ground. We want to feel comfortable but not sleepy. If it helps to keep focused, you can close your eyes or look with ease at the ground, but if that feels uncomfortable feel free to leave them open.*
- *Before we strengthen our attention, we'll do some resourcing or grounding to calm our bodies. Choose one of your resources from your resource kit, or you can choose a new one, or you can imagine one.*
- *Now let's bring our resource to mind. And let's see if we can just pay attention to our resource with our mind for a few moments, quietly. Or if you'd rather do grounding, you can do that too. Whichever you choose, we're going to rest quietly and pay attention for a few moments. [PAUSE]*
- *What do you notice inside? If you feel pleasant or neutral, you can rest your mind on that.*
- *If you feel unpleasant, you can shift to a different resource, or you can ground. You can also change your posture. Otherwise, just keep your attention resting with your resource. [PAUSE]*
- *Now let's become aware of our breathing. Let's see if we can pay attention to the breath as it enters and leaves our body.*
- *If you find paying attention to the breath uncomfortable, then feel free to go back to your resource or grounding, or just take a small break, making sure not to disturb anyone else. [PAUSE for 15-30 seconds.]*
- *If you ever get distracted, you can just return your attention to the breath. You can also count your breath. [Pause for a longer time, such as 30-60 seconds or longer.]*
- *You can strengthen your attention by focusing on sensations or by focusing on the breath. It's your choice. It's always up to you.*
- *What did you notice? [Invite students to share aloud.]*
- *Please take a moment to bring to mind an experience in which you helped a family member or friend when they experienced adversity, distress, and hardship.*
- *How did you support them, provide mentoring, encouragement, perspective taking, etc?*
- *Now remember a time when someone gave you words of comfort or support when you needed it. If it helps you can bring to mind a few reflections:*

- *Are you in control of every outcome or factor that occurs outside of you?*
- *Can you learn and grow through experiences that cause hardship and adversity?*
- *Who among us has never made a mistake? Are you unique in your setback or is it part of the human condition?"*

[Close out practice]

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## **PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION** | 15 minutes

### **Activity Overview**

Students will explore forgiveness and deepen their understanding by identifying key attributes of forgiveness.

### **Instructions**

Engage students by asking them to identify an act in which they offered forgiveness to another person and/or received forgiveness from another person.

***"Remember in our last learning experience we explored how attitudes and expectations shape our outlook of self and others.***

***How is happiness defined by society and how does that differ or align with our lived experience? Why is it important to recognize that we are not perfect and that making mistakes is both a natural extension of being***

***human and essential in helping us to learn and grow?"***

To set this activity up, have students engage in a written reflection using the following prompts:

***"You will work independently to reflect on a time that you offered forgiveness to another person or received forgiveness from another person. If you can't think of a time of forgiveness, you can imagine an instance of forgiveness: what it would be like to forgive another, or to be forgiven by another.***

***If you are having a hard time imagining one you can think of a time you read about or saw an act of forgiveness on TV, in a movie, or other media sources.***

***How did it feel to offer or receive forgiveness? What did you notice on the inside as you thought about this?***

***What benefit did it provide yourself and others?"***

After students have constructed their responses in writing, they can then engage in a pair or triad to share. The student groups will be asked to identify key attributes of forgiveness within the examples of forgiveness that they generated. Use the following prompts:

***"What were similar traits regarding how forgiveness felt, among the examples you identified?***

**Why do you think people engage in forgiveness?**

**What benefits are associated with forgiveness?**

**What problems might arise with forgiveness?"**

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### **INSIGHT ACTIVITY** | 15 minutes

#### **Activity Overview**

Students will identify the benefits of forgiveness on themselves (personal), others (social), and the systems that they impact and that are impacted by them.

#### **Instructions**

Ask students to read the Science of Forgiveness reading. Present on topics and various research studies that explore the topic of forgiveness and outline the physical, psychological, emotional, and relationship benefits of forgiveness. Students will be provided with a list of scenarios and will identify where they would respond to scenarios, using a continuum from "no forgiveness" to "total forgiveness."

***"Now that we've explored the topic of forgiveness, we are going to review a few scenarios and use responses ranging from "no forgiveness" to "total forgiveness, to identify where we stand. You will physically move along the line we have created."***

Prompt students to respond on the continuum, using the following examples:

**Example 1:** A person bumps into you and causes you to spill your drink all over yourself.

**Example 2:** A family member says something critical of you that triggers a strong response.

After each scenario ask a couple of students why they chose to stand where they did.

#### **Scenarios**

- A drunk driver hits another car and injures a person who was in it.
- A woman hits a pedestrian while driving, as she was trying to help her crying baby in the back seat.
- An old man loses consciousness while driving and runs into a house.
- A teenager hits a deer with their car while checking a text message.
- A corporation is caught dumping waste into the local waterway.
- A protester destroys a bulldozer that had been creating a logging road.
- A boyfriend cheats on his girlfriend with a stranger.
- A girlfriend cheats on her boyfriend with his best friend.

Allow for the relative experiences of forgiveness to highlight key enduring traits that contribute to our capacity to forgive. Please reflect on the below listed traits in the discussion:

- Intention
- Impact
- Resolve not to Commit the Action Again
- Remediation

After the activity, asks students these prompts and have them respond or reflect as you transition to the reflection activity.

- ***"How does our ability to relate to others influence our capacity to see things from their perspective?"***
- ***How does our ability to see things from their perspective promote a compassionate response?***
- ***What is the relationship between feelings, a sense of connection to another and having a compassionate response towards them?"***

### Teaching Tips

Before engaging the students in this activity you can share an example in which you as the classroom teacher engaged in forgiveness. If that is challenging for you, feel free to share the following examples provided:

- Speaking harshly to a loved one or friend
- Breaking something due to being absent minded
- Getting agitated and losing one's patience
- Forgetting something important
- Offending someone either intentionally or unintentionally

Please remember to share with students that although there are many benefits to forgiveness and downsides to not engaging in forgiveness, it is not always necessary or possible to forgive another, which is perfectly all right. It is a very personal decision.

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## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE | 10 minutes

### Activity Overview

In this reflection experience, students connect forgiveness for oneself, personally, to the broader practice of forgiveness by identifying the benefits for self and others.

### Instructions

Guide students through a reflection of the learning experience in which they identify once again with the benefits of forgiveness for themselves and others.

***"What are the benefits of forgiveness for yourself and others?"***

- Personal
- Social
- Systems

developing self forgiveness towards ourselves when we make mistakes.

***What prevents forgiveness?***

***Are there thinking traps involved in unforgiveness? What role might trauma play in struggling to forgive, and how might one deal with that?***

***What evidence do you have from your personal experience or observations that forgiveness has a benefit for us and others?"***

***What's one thing you could do to help explore forgiveness more in your daily experience?"***

Explore possible classroom applications of forgiveness. Prompt students to determine how they and the class as a whole can carry these intentions for forgiveness as an applied practice within the classroom.

Let the students know that you are going to compile a list of the examples that they provided, and that in the next lesson we will review them. Make a commitment to apply forgiveness in key areas of your life. This could be cultivating patience and understanding towards people you find annoying or

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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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## The Science of Forgiveness

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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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## The Science of Forgiveness

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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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