



Forgiveness in Strong Marriages

There was a time when psychologists believed that it was important to get all your feelings out. "You must tell off any person who has offended you. If you let feelings of resentment build up they will poison your soul," according to that way of thinking.

New research challenges the idea that you must express all your feelings. It turns out that, as people talk about their angry feelings, often they get angrier. In addition, when we chew people out, we damage relationships. Usually the best way to deal with angry feelings is to forgive.

All these lessons are especially important in marriage. It is easier to sustain a short, occasional friendship than to work and live intimately with another person over years and years. There are the challenges of money, lifestyle, children, shared responsibilities and a myriad of irritations. Problems and offences are inevitable. How can a person deal with the anger and resentment that can build up in marriage?

Some problems don't need to be discussed. Some problems are problems only because we are tired. Sometimes we just see the world in a different way from our partner. There are some things (such as physical features and personality quirks) that are not going to change. We may as well laugh about them and forget them.

Some problems need to be discussed. They are best handled when both people feel peaceful. Such problems can be discussed in a way that invites help. "My evenings are very stressful. If you can help me for a while after work, we will have time to be together later."

The many problems between partners can build up and leave a distaste or resentment. That is where forgiveness can help. **Forgiveness is a choice to let resentment go.** We choose to accept and enjoy another person. We choose to distill the helpful and positive out of the total experience of a relationship.

Sometimes it is easier to get past bad feelings when we talk with a trusted friend or write in a journal. Rather than focus on the anger, it can help to try to see things from our partner's perspective. We can choose not to dwell on bad memories and resentments. We can have a positive thought ready to replace petty complaints about our partner.

There is a funny quirk in human nature that we often focus on the tiny detail that is annoying. When a person has a broken tooth, the tongue will not leave it alone. If the car has a dent or scrape, it can become the only thing we see. That tendency may be useful when we are dealing with things that can and should be fixed, but many small dents should merely be ignored. They are a part of the traffic of life.

In every relationship there are many dents and scrapes. John Gottman, a marriage therapist and researcher observes that the healthiest couples tend to see problems as temporary. Rather than dwell on the troubles, happy couples look for the good, dwell on it, and believe it to be the core of their relationship. He encourages us to "find the glory in our marital story."

Of course **forgiveness does not mean tolerating bad behavior**. No one should have to be abused. If a person is regularly abused in a relationship, that person should seek counsel and may need to leave the relationship.

Yet most of the scrapes and dents in marriage don't need to keep us from enjoying a growing and loving relationship - if we learn to forgive.

Applications:

There are times when we dwell on an insult or fault in our partner. Sometimes we are not sure what to do.

When we feel fear for our well-being or safety, we should talk to a wise counselor.

When we are confused by a situation, we should talk to a wise friend or counselor.

When we are trying to justify ourselves by blaming the other person, we should forgive.

When we are holding onto pain that won't help anyone, we should forgive.

What tools have you discovered help you forgive your partner? Distraction? Humor? Relaxation?

When you find yourself obsessing on a problem - worrying, blaming, fretting - stop and make a list of good things in your life. When you find yourself focusing on the negative, pull out the list and put the problem in perspective. Do not let a dent in a fender cause you to hate the car.

John Gottman says that there is never a time when a problem in a relationship is entirely the fault of one partner. Sometimes it is helpful to consider what we can do differently to prevent a problem. We are not responsible for making our partner happy, but we can be sure that we are not aggravating a difficult situation.

Gottman has written an excellent book on increasing the positives in marriage. In fact, his book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, is one of the best books written on marriage. He discovered that, in strong marriages, there are five positives for each negative. Read more about this in his book or in the unit, *Kindness Builds Strong Marriages*.

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