

Forgiveness: Learning the Art of Letting Go

Cort Curtis, Ph.D. has been practicing psychotherapy for over 33 years. When he went back to get his doctorate 20 years ago, it was an opportunity for him to re-examine the whole nature of psychotherapy and what it was really about. He observed that there were 2 basic complaints that many people had coming into therapy: a complaint about *somebody else's* behavior or a complaint about something that happened *in the past*.

Dr. Curtis admits, "When things get rough for me in my life, I call on a very simple prayer called the serenity prayer which goes, 'God, grant me the serenity to change the things I can change, to accept the things I can't change, and the wisdom to know the difference.'" He observed about his own life that there were two basic things that were *impossible* to change: *other people's behavior and the past*. "If patients were coming into therapy with the unexamined assumption that therapy was somehow going to change another human being or change what happened in the past, *and* if it were true that it is *impossible* to change someone else or the past, then therapy was going to last a very, very long time,

virtually forever with very little change and very little results."

"What I realized was that therapy was at its very core really a process of learning to forgive," says Dr. Curtis. "Typically, we think of forgiveness as a spiritual concept, which of course it is, but it is also a psychological process as well." The hardest thing about forgiving is the misconception of what forgiveness really is. "Typically, we think of forgiveness as something that we do for the benefit of another human being. Or, we're afraid it gives a stamp of approval on somebody's negative behavior, which might lead to the repetition of that behavior. So, if we think that a person doesn't *deserve* forgiveness then naturally we won't forgive. In actual fact, however, forgiveness is really for the benefit of the forgiver. No one benefits more from forgiving than the forgiver himself."

Dr. Curtis defines forgiveness as essentially a process of "letting go"-- a letting go of negative emotions that persist way beyond their time. "It is important to realize that no emotion is negative in itself. Emotions such as anger, resentment, disappointment, hurt, worry, regret, guilt and so on are

normal human emotions and appropriate responses to certain events. The only thing negative about any human emotion is how long we hang onto them. We can hang on to negative emotions for an instant or a lifetime. It is our choice."

We have an unconscious assumption that somehow holding on to certain emotions is going to protect us from hurt or control someone else from acting in a particular way. When we realize that hanging on is not changing anyone nor is it protecting us from any future negative event then there really is nothing else to do *but* to let go. This is one of the hardest things for couples to understand. But when they can learn it, they are building a foundation for a relationship that is love-based rather than control-based.

The motivation for letting go is *always* the realization that our personal happiness is at stake. When we learn to take responsibility for our own experience, when we recognize that our negative thinking and feelings are only bringing us personal unhappiness, then we are glad to learn the art of letting go.

Dr. Curtis has developed a very rapid and predictable process to enable his clients to eliminate unwanted emotions. "I help people get to the core of their negative thinking often in just a few sessions. Then, through a very simple but powerful process, my clients are able to eliminate negative feelings, often feelings they have been carrying since childhood." Whether our emotions are directed toward ourselves or toward others, when we can recognize how certain emotional states are generated and sustained by unconscious thought processes and beliefs, then letting go can be as simple as releasing an object from your hand. "I am simply tapping into the core of our nature--our inheritance as happy and joyful beings."

Dr. Curtis can be reached for consultations at his office in Laguna Niguel (877) 372-8784.



Cort Curtis, Ph.D.
Lic #: PSY 12900

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