

The Path of Forgiveness

Releasing shame and fear allowed me to dump my emotional burden, and I could finally be the man I wanted to be, more at ease and more confident, because I was making decisions from a place of strength rather than weakness. The next step was to forgive myself for creating my defeatist story in the first place. I forgave myself for having the feelings of shame, guilt, and anger that I was using to keep others at bay.

There will be times when your pain or suffering doesn't involve anyone else and the only person you have to forgive is yourself. Think of it as cleaning the slate. You are lightening your load so that you can actually do what you want to do and be as happy as you can be. And if you are anything like me, start by forgiving yourself for wanting to be perfect. The truth is, the best we can be is perfectly imperfect.

We're all a little fucked up, and so what? even Superman had his kryptonite. As long as you make an effort, you don't have to beat yourself up, and you can forgive yourself and start to move forward.

My forgiveness mantra is I'm not perfect, and I accept myself for being exactly who I am. I am forgiven. I am pretty damn good. Say this enough and you will rewire the beliefs your stories are built on.

Next figure out who else you want to forgive. There might be instances when you feel someone has wronged you and you will want to forgive them so that you can release your shame. It might involve your parents or others who influenced your childhood, such as a grandparent or a sibling. We form strong impressions about how life works during the ages of 3 to 7 years old, and our perceptions of events during these years is often melded into our story.

Forgiving these people is a crucial step for healing: If you don't forgive others, regardless of their intentions, you cannot release the negative emotions holding you back from optimal health. The reason is that forgiveness is personal. It is for you and you alone, regardless of whomever you need to forgive. even though your suffering may be connected to another person, it's your experience and your feelings. It's your pain to let go and not someone else's. You don't have to tell someone you forgive them, and I am not asking you to forget anything or absolve anyone of their actions. In fact, sometimes you may have to remove yourself from their circle of influence. I am asking that you let shit go because it is good for you and only you. When you remove anger and forgive, it is like a lead weight has been lifted off of your shoulders and you can breathe again.

We can forgive somebody without ever uttering a word to them. When you are alone in a quiet, safe place, try saying something like this out loud (tailoring it to your situation): You hurt me. Who treats a child like that? I still get emotional when I think of you exploding with rage and hurling a wine bottle at the wall. But I know

you are human and have flaws like us all, and although I don't forget, I am no longer carrying the burden of that pain. I am letting it go for myself, because it is in the past. I forgive you and accept you for being imperfect.

You can actually tell the person that you are forgiving them, but remember, forgiveness is for you. Don't expect them to respond in any particular way or you will likely be disappointed.

BURN, BABY, BURN

Melvin taught me an amazing technique for achieving forgiveness and letting go of shame and guilt that has nothing to do with the person who has harmed you and everything to do with you as an individual. Again, you don't need to involve the other person in order to heal: Forgiveness starts with you.

This simple exercise is both ritualistic and symbolic. It's about making the decision to let go and create a new story. Write down all the things that you feel upset about, feel shame and guilt about, and want to get over and forgive. Write each one down on separate small pieces of paper. Then get a small metal trash can or make a fire in your fireplace or outdoor fire pit. Read each piece of paper out loud and then rip it in pieces and toss it into the fire. As they burn away, realize you are letting them go. Last, say aloud, I have let this go.

When I did this ritual for the first time, I had had enough of my stories. I was exhausted from my lies around my illness and motorcycle accidents as well as the macho stories and the belief that I had to still act like the tough guy of my youth. I realized it wasn't working: The burden I was carrying was too great. Oprah would be proud of me: It was an aha moment, and once I got there, I realized that this ritual opened me up to a lot of possibilities for letting go psychologically and emotionally. It is all about small realizations that lead to a much bigger understanding.

Now I am a different kind of tough guy, one who burns little pieces of paper when I'm alone in the dim lights of my bedroom with the details of my shame written on them. I can do that because my story now is that there isn't anything I can't do, and I accept the shit out of myself.

You can do this ritual as many times as you need, because old habits of shame and guilt tend to stick around. It's likely you will need reinforcement, but I am betting you will immediately begin to feel lighter and find new doors to open. You have to keep making the same choice over and over again to let these negative emotions go. If they do reappear, you can be aware of these feelings and then release them again. Before you know it, they will be gone for good.