

Trauma Recovery on Your Own Terms

YOU DON'T NEED TO FORGIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness should never be forced, pressured, encouraged, or recommended to trauma survivors. Instead, survivors need the agency to explore, discover, embrace, ignore, oppose, or withhold forgiveness throughout their trauma recovery as needed.

Have you ever felt forced, pressured, encouraged, or recommended to forgive your offender(s)?

How has this impacted your perception and experiences of forgiveness in your recovery?	



TRAUMA: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

diagnosis, weakness, or mental health disorder. Trauma survivors have defined trauma as "unintegrated pain," "distress at a cellular level," and "my body, mind, and heart's response to a situation that I experienced as unnatural, unpredictable, and unsafe."	
How do you define trauma? How has trauma impacted your actions, thoughts, body sensations, beliefs about yourself and the world, daily life, and ability to thrive?	
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FORGIVENESS: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Researchers do not agree on one clinical definition of forgiveness. As a result, many people have endorsed forgiveness without knowing what they are actually recommending. Forgiveness is often confused with excusing, denial, condoning, justifying, acceptance, pardoning, forgetting, and reconciliation.

Have people encouraged you to forgive without understanding what forgiveness means? Have people used the term forgiveness but wanted you to engage in non-forgiving experiences such as reconciliation, excusing, forgetting, or justifying? How has this semantic confusion or manipulation impacted your perception and experiences of forgiveness?



THE LIMITATIONS OF FORGIVENESS RESEARCH AND **FORGIVENESS THERAPY**

Forgiveness therapy is a psychotherapeutic modality that considers forgiveness a necessary—not elective—part of trauma recovery. Forgiveness therapy practitioners believe you must forgive your offender(s) if you are to progress in recovery. However, due to several research limitations, studies do not indicate that forgiveness therapy is an effective trauma treatment.

How does it feel to learn that forgiving your offender(s) has not been proven necessary for progressing in recovery? Since you are not required to forgive, how would you feel if you made significant progress in recovery and forgave your offender(s), or if you made progress and never forgave them?



SAFETY PRECEDES FORGIVENESS

You must feel safe before you can forgive your offender(s). If you do not feel safe, you likely won't be able to forgive. Therefore, if you choose to forgive, you must first focus on establishing safety.

Think of your offender(s). Do you feel physically, emotionally, sexually, relationally, spiritually, and financially safe enough to consider forgiving them? If not, what would it look
like to prioritize your safety before you consider forgiving them? What do you need in order to feel safer?



DESTIGMATIZING AND EMBRACING ANGER

We live in an anger-phobic society, where people are afraid of their own anger as well as yours. As a result of this fear, people attempt to fix, restrict, minimize, deny, or ignore anger. This stigmatization of anger hinders recovery, as anger is a valuable emotion that can support survival, enhance emotional processing, promote self-worth, and aid in recovery.
How has your anger benefited you? Has your anger helped keep you safe, informed you when someone was treating you poorly, or helped you access feelings of sadness, grief, or anxiety? How can you embrace, not alienate, your anger to support your recovery?
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SHAME OBSTRUCTS FORGIVENESS

Most trauma survivors experience pervasive shame. Forgiving your offender(s) can feel impossible when you feel shame, as self-worth precedes forgiveness. Therefore, you may need to address your shame before you focus on forgiving your offender(s).

If you experience shame, what do you believe deep down about yourself? Some examples of shameful beliefs are: I'm bad, I'm unlovable, I'm not good enough, and I should have done something (see more in chapter 6). How do you feel about addressing your shame before focusing on forgiving your offender(s)?



RECOGNIZING RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

Your religious and spiritual beliefs, or lack thereof, impact your perception and experiences of forgiveness. It's essential to be aware of these influences as you navigate forgiveness in your recovery.

Do you identify with particular religious, spiritual, or cultural beliefs, or were you raised
in a religious group, environment, or culture? If so, how do your beliefs influence your
conceptualization of and experiences with forgiveness in recovery? Have you had any negative
experiences associated with religious groups or communities? If so, how have these experiences
impacted your experiences with forgiveness in recovery?



FORGIVENESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Trauma survivors from oppressed groups (those who are undervalued and mistreated in society based on their biological attributes or the material conditions into which they are born, such as sex, sexuality, gender, class, race, ethnicity, and ability) are more likely to feel pressure from society to forgive their offender(s). For example, society tends to encourage women to forgive so they will fulfill the role of a "good woman" or a "virtuous victim," and Black survivors to forgive white assailants so society can avoid the reality of racial injustice.

If you are a member of an oppressed group, how has your status in society influenced your experiences of feeling pressured, forced, encouraged, or recommended to forgive your
offender(s)? If you are a member of an oppressed group and your offender(s) are not, do you believe that you can authentically forgive them when you are not considered their equal in society?



RESPONDING TO FORGIVENESS ADVOCATES

Forgiveness promoters have many different intentions when they encourage forgiveness. Some wish to help you progress in recovery or want you to feel better, while others seek to sustain dysfunctional relational dynamics in a partnership, family, or community. Unfortunately, some promoters may be advocating for the needs of your offender(s). Regardless of their intentions, knowing how to respond to promoters can be helpful.

What phrases can you say to those who encourage you to forgive? How can you communicate a clear and straightforward boundary to those who attempt to force or pressure you to forgive? Who can support you in your efforts to communicate with forgiveness promoters?



EMBRACING ELECTIVE FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness in all aspects of trauma recovery should be viewed as an elective component, not a compulsory goal. Elective forgiveness promotes your agency to explore, discover, embrace, ignore, oppose, or withhold forgiveness throughout your recovery as needed.

hat would it look like if you embraced elective forgiveness in your recovery? How would you feel, you made progress in your recovery and 1) forgave your offender(s), 2) didn't forgive them, or 3
ever considered nor cared about forgiveness at all?



TWENTY TRAUMA RECOVERY METHODS

There are many trauma recovery methods that you can try in which forgiveness is not a requirement. No one method works for every survivor, and many engage in multiple therapeutic and holistic methods at different times during recovery.

What recovery methods have you tried? Which methods were successful and which were not? What methods listed in chapter II are you interested in trying, and what's your plan to implement them
in your recovery journey?



CONCLUSION

You can progress in trauma recovery with or without forgiving your offender(s).
Imagine that you have not forgiven your offender(s) and have made progress in recovery. What do you imagine? What does this image feel like? Now, imagine that you have forgiven your offender(s and have made progress in recovery. What do you imagine? What does this image feel like?

