

Conflict and Forgiveness: For those who "hate confrontation"

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Forgiveness is the word we use when one chooses to let go of a particular grievance or hurt. It is a means to attain peace by not dwelling on the pain which keeps your body in that revved up "fight or flight" mode. Few of us have been taught how to forgive and one of the reasons is a cultural misinterpretation about "conflict." Most of us see conflict as negative or bad which too often creates anger and aggression.

In her book *"Anger the Misunderstood Emotion,"* by Carol Tavris, she shares a story about the Buddha coming to his temple and seeing his congregation outside fearful of entering. He asked why and was told that a large snake was stopping them. The Buddha apparently being like Harry Potter was able to talk to the snake, and asked him to not bite any member of his congregation. The following week, his temple was full, and he had a great sermon, yet upon leaving he heard a sound of anguish in the bushes. There he found the snake all beat up and bloody. The Buddha asked what had happened, and the snake replied that he did not bite anyone as the Buddha suggested and he was beat up for his kindness. The Buddha stared at him and replied that he had suggested that the snake not bite, but he did not tell him not to hiss.

It is our sense that conflict is neither bad nor good; it just is an inescapable part of life. The Greeks described the process of nature or "Gaia," as a process where the whole is more than the sum of the parts. There is plenty that we could call bad or good, in nature; pretty baby cubs being eaten by larger predators, or the yin/yang of life where there are choices between focusing on the glass half full or empty. The up shoot is often conflict is simply grist for creativity or change. Take the shell fish that gets some muck into its shell and resists it with its own mucous like liquid, eventually producing a valued pearl. Which part was good and which part was bad? Mountains, canyons and much of human beings works of art are in some way products of conflict.

Carl Jung once described conflict as resulting from the formation of paradoxes (something good in one context but not in another wider context; but that can be seen as something that if worked through, creates resolution and happiness. In her book *"The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes and Why,"* Amanda Ripley describes how catastrophe (or a grievance) is not the end, but the beginning. It is part of history which has no end and opens up possibilities. Being in the present according to Ripley is more interesting since it is reality. Understanding conflict is a vehicle for not blaming. This is what Hunter S. Thompson meant when he said, *"Call on god but row away from the rocks."* Doing nothing is being a victim; its opposite is being a hero.

We position forgiveness, which, in its true sense is not minimizing nor condoning the pain that may come from conflicts as a central healing metaphor for conflict. It addresses the problem that many of us have and that is letting go of our "tale of woe." Recently a woman (Megan) came for psychotherapy. She said that what she was not getting in life was empathy from her husband. She narrated many instances where he dismissed or devalued her feelings. When asked if she had discussed that with him, Megan said, *"no way, he would only get mad at me."* Her family background was full of stories of authoritarian discipline. She could never dialogue with her parents. In this instance, Megan's brain was very "state dependent," meaning it recognized patterns of emotions rather than content and so she got stuck in her story and her bad content. She could not let go, forgive or deal successfully with her experience or her husband until she learned how to forgive.

Following are nine steps to help Megan deal with her real and imagined conflict:

1. Megan was asked to ***express what she felt*** so she could allow openness to produce a "non-denial" of her feelings. I did this to help widen her lens to view the "wrong" that was hurting her. Our good side is constantly overtaken by our shadow side when we lose perspective and Megan was putting herself down. She said she felt "stifled and fearful to express herself."
2. We then discussed what ***forgiveness was for her and I explained that it is a process and commitment*** to make peace with what is. This was accepted by her when we discussed the negative effects her pattern of conflict avoidance had

on her life. Her "aha" moment came when she articulated how she would get sick and nervous after she refused to express her truth.

3. Megan needed reassurance that **forgiveness is not about minimizing her hurt** it is about changing her grievance story. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning their action. It is to set a goal to let her, in this case go to a healed place that does not blame or live in fear.
4. Next, we discussed how **choosing to forgive** is choosing health and not being a victim. Megan now worked on getting the right perspective on what is happening. By sharing with her how our brain and nervous system works she began to recognize that her primary distress was coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset that she was suffering now, not what offended or hurt her two minutes or even ten years ago. Megan's tale of woe kept on getting bigger and bigger from practice and kept her captive. This is not to minimize hurt but to realize that the grievance story is likely not the most skillful way to construct our reality. I suggested that she think of the grievance, take a deep breath and create a loving image of her positive possibilities. She also participated in some visualizations (see below), which further helped gain a wider perspective on what was happening.
5. Visualizing loving images and feeling of gratitude supports **positive emotions** that manage stress and increase your confidence. Megan was instructed, at the moment she felt upset, to practice the Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique (PERT) to soothe her body's flight or fight response. PERT consists of relaxing the body, softening the belly as you breathe and visualizing something you are grateful and compassionate about. This helped her see, similar to being able to choose the TV channel that she might wish to see, that she could also choose the life view that she wanted to live within.
6. Megan admitted that she was, if only in her head, making many demands of her husband regarding him being empathic. She had to "confront" the reality that she had to **give up expecting things from those who will not give them to you**. There are certain unenforceable rules that strengthen the grievance story such as my husband has to be empathic to me when I want him to. She began to accept that by letting herself make peace with who he actually is a relationship could begin with a real human being. John Welshons writes in his recent book *When Prayers Aren't Answered* that "...the acceptance of things as they are in this context does not imply complacencyâ€the acceptance of things as they are is intended to alleviate suffering we habitually create in our minds with the desire to change things we simply cannot change."
7. Megan now had to learn to **put her energy in a positive direction**. Embracing positive intention does not entail writing off the one who hurt us. It may have just not worked out or the other person had different desires or the

communication was poor. if the other is willing to join you in an honest win-win volley. Wonderful. Acceptance of who you are and your desires and wishes is one way to exhibit self-love and that is what was offered to Megan. Megan learned to express her desires and wishes in a compassionate manner.

8. As Megan experienced the freedom of genuinely and kindly expressing her wishes, she felt that she was ***living a life well lived***. Instead of focusing on her wounded feelings, and thereby giving her husband and parents disproportionate power over her, she had more opportunity to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around her. Megan saw that she need not define herself by those who had hurt her.
9. Megan was able to ***amend her grievance story*** by reminding herself of her heroic choice to forgive and release herself from the stress and anxiety of fearing confrontation. She also began the long and arduous process of creating a relationship with her husband less focused on mind reading and regret and more on communication and sharing.

About the Authors

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