

From Conflict to Healing

In Talk 4 we learned how to navigate conflict well.

But what about the hurts that conflict leaves behind?

What about wounds so deep that talking it through isn't enough?

Today we look at the most powerful tool we have for healing relational wounds —

forgiveness.

The Power of *Forgiveness* in Healing

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CONNECTED

The Science and Soul of Healthy Relationships

Talk 5

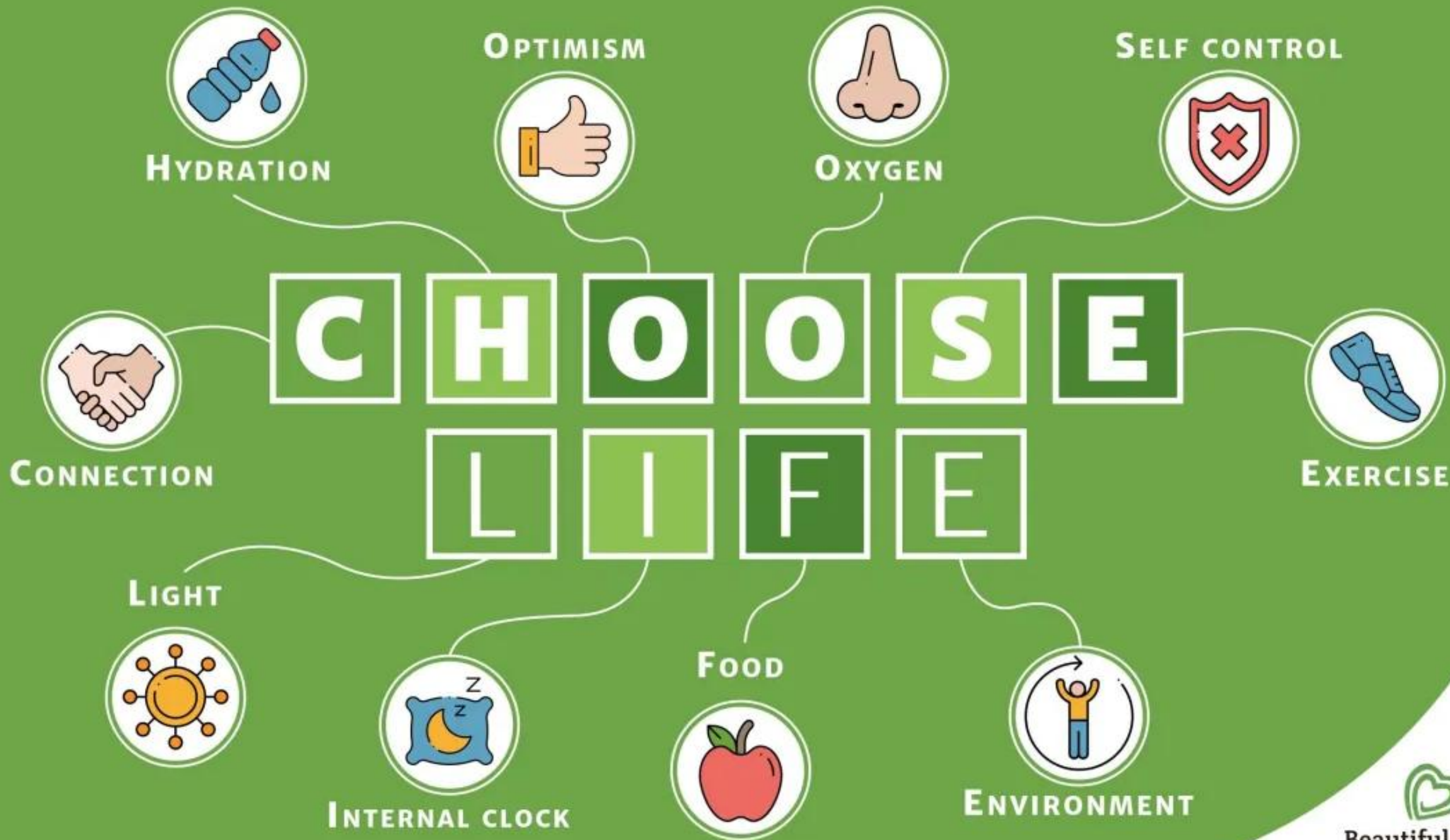


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YOUR MIND IS
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Today's Roadmap

1

THE PROBLEM

Why bitterness destroys us — body, mind, and relationships

2

THE DEFINITION

What forgiveness is (and what it is NOT)

3

THE EVIDENCE

What the research shows about forgiveness and health

4

THE METHOD

Ev Worthington's REACH model — a practical framework

5

THE HEART

The spiritual dimension and our greatest Example

Case Study

Imagine if...

A 25-year-old young man — a stranger to the family — broke into your mother's house, where she was living alone

She was bound and brutally murdered

After killing her, he stole valuables from the house

He was eventually caught and confessed to the crime

How would you feel?



*Would you be tempted
to be bitter?*

Bitterness: The Hidden Cost

M I N D	B O D Y	R E L A T I O N S H I P S
Chronic stress, anxiety, depression	Cardiovascular problems	Suspicious, mistrustful view of others
A sense of victimhood	Weakened immune system	Increased isolation
Negative self-perception	Inflammation & pain	Frequent conflict
Self-medication / addiction	Sleep disturbances	Impeded intimacy
	Digestive problems	
	Accelerated aging	

“Toxic fuel for stress” — a self-inflicted wound, where the harm of harboring negative feelings often outweighs the original offense.

Bitterness: “Toxic Fuel” for Stress

A silhouette of a person stands with arms outstretched in front of a large, intense fire. The fire is bright orange and yellow, with flames reaching upwards. The person's silhouette is dark against the bright light of the fire. The overall scene is dramatic and evocative, suggesting a person being consumed or fueled by the fire.

FUEL TO THE FIRE

Why do we hang on to past hurt?



It feels protective

We believe bitterness will shield us from being hurt again

It feels just

Forgiving feels like letting the offender “off the hook”

It feels safer than vulnerability

Unforgiveness keeps the wound closed — but it never lets it heal

What is Forgiveness?

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

“Forgiveness involves willfully putting aside feelings of resentment toward someone who has committed a wrong, been unfair or hurtful, or otherwise harmed you in some way.

It is not merely accepting what happened or ceasing to be angry. Rather, it involves a voluntary transformation of your feelings, attitudes, and behavior, so that you are no longer dominated by resentment and can express compassion, generosity, or the like toward the person who wronged you.”

What Forgiveness is NOT

NOT

Forgetting or excusing the offense

NOT

Accepting what happened without acknowledging the hurt

NOT

Being obligated to reconcile with the person who harmed you

HOWEVER — forgiveness is a PREREQUISITE for any true reconciliation.

Mental Health Benefits



Decreases anger and hostility



Decreased risk of anxiety and depression



Decreased stress



Better sleep



Increases confidence



More hopefulness for the future

Physical Health Benefits

Individuals who practiced forgiveness experienced...

Improved

cholesterol levels

Reduced

pain

Lower

blood pressure

Lower

risk of heart attack

Relational Benefits

1

Improved psychosocial well-being

Longitudinal study of female nurses (Long, Worthington, VanderWeele et al., 2020): higher forgiveness predicted higher positive affect ($\beta = 0.18$) and lower depressive symptoms ($\beta = -0.16$) years later.

2

Activates the brain's empathy network

fMRI study (Ricciardi et al., 2013): forgiveness activates cortical regions for perspective-taking, appraisal, and empathy — supporting the “adaptive extinction of negative affect.”

3

Stronger, more satisfying relationships

Contributes to healthier relationships — increased satisfaction and stronger commitment.

Psychological Resilience

“Victims can positively adapt to severe interpersonal transgressions, and even flourish, by regulating their emotions through the forgiveness process.”

Halilova et al. (2020) tested the link between resilience and forgiveness across a range of transgression severities. Their finding: resilience predicts forgiveness more strongly than unforgiveness — even after severe hurts. Forgiveness is part of how resilient people heal.

Erasing Psychological Distress

HIGH FORGIVENESS

zero

the link between high lifetime stress and poor mental health

Toussaint et al. studied stress, well-being, and forgiveness:

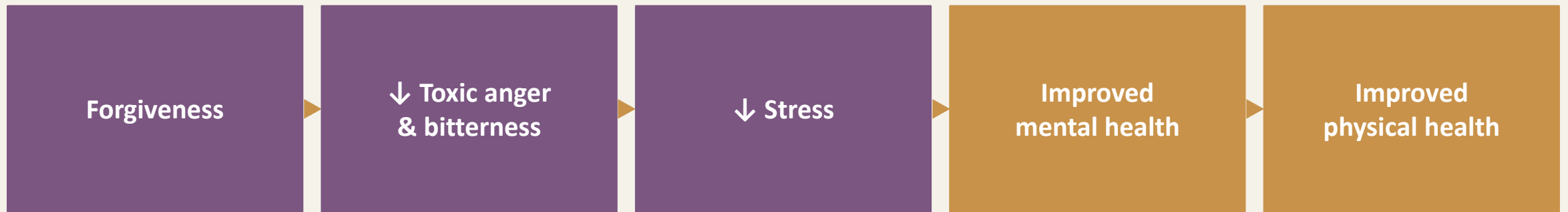
As expected, greater accumulated lifetime stress predicted worse mental health.

BUT — among volunteers who scored high on forgiveness, high lifetime stress no longer predicted poor mental health at all.

“The power of forgiveness to erase that link was surprising... we didn't expect it to zero it out.”

— Loren Toussaint, PhD

The Pathway to Health



A caveat for hard cases

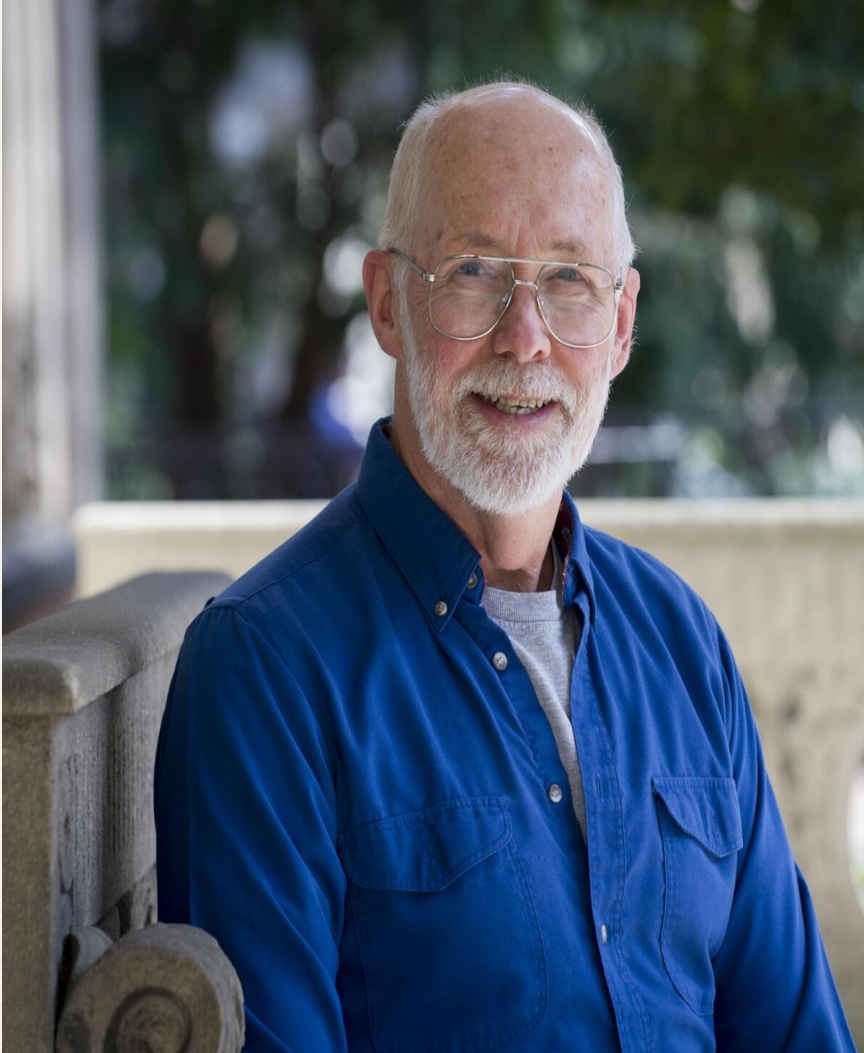
Trauma recovery does not require forgiveness, and pushing for it too early can do harm — by short-circuiting other essential parts of healing. Forgiveness is offered as a path, not a demand.

SECTION TWO

But HOW do I forgive?!

From research and theory → to a practical method we can actually use.

Meet Everett Worthington



“Why I favor Worthington's framework:”

It places forgiveness on the side of moral choice — independent of whether the offender ever “deserves” it.

- Professor Emeritus, Virginia Commonwealth University
- Authored or co-authored 40+ books and hundreds of scientific papers on forgiveness
- Developed the REACH Forgiveness Model — used in clinical and Christian-accommodated forms worldwide
- Frames forgiveness as a moral choice, not a feeling we wait to arrive

Research Put to the Test

Remember this case study?...

A 25-year-old young man broke into an elderly woman's home, where she was living alone

She was bound and brutally murdered

After killing her, he stole valuables from the house

He was eventually caught and confessed to the crime

*This wasn't a hypothetical case study...
This was Everett Worthington's own mother, Grace.*

The Researcher Becomes the Subject



Worthington had been researching forgiveness for 10 years when his mother was murdered

He struggled with anger and a desire for revenge

He eventually met with the offender in prison and told him directly: “I forgive you.”

The offender responded with surprise, then deep emotion — expressing remorse

Worthington later reflected: forgiveness is a moral and spiritual decision, not just a psychological process

But What About the Hardest Cases?

Worthington's story raises an honest question:

“What about abuse? Betrayal? Wounds that never should have happened?”

1

Safety first

Forgiveness is never the first step of trauma recovery. Safety, stabilization, and grief come first.

2

Forgiveness ≠ reconciliation

You can fully forgive someone you will never see again. Reconciliation requires trust; forgiveness only requires your decision.

3

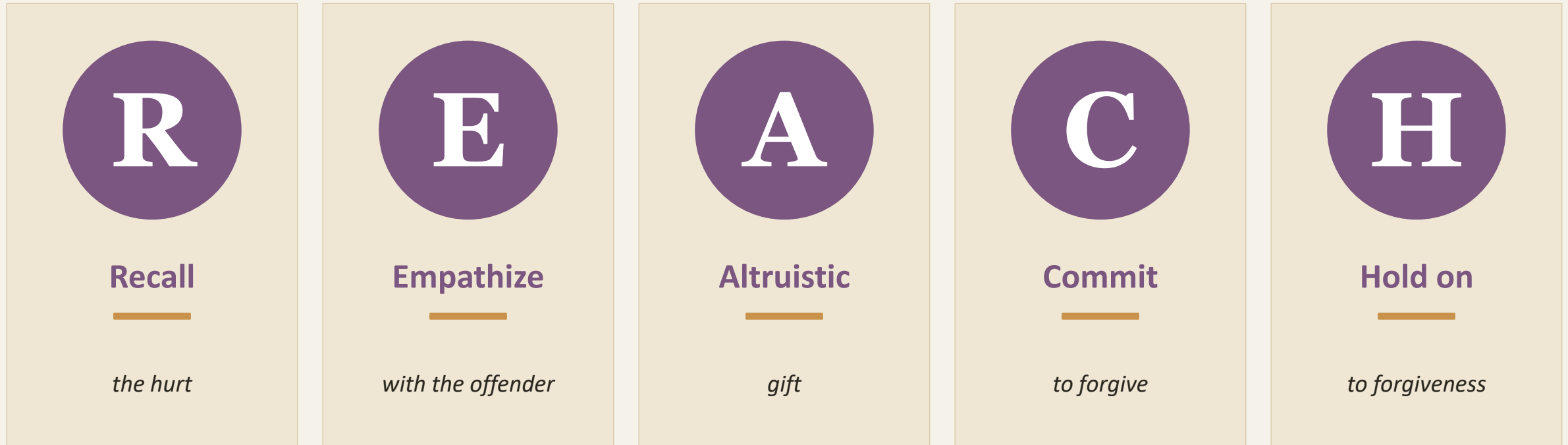
On your timetable — and God's

Pushing too early can re-traumatize. Forgiveness in hard cases is a journey, not an event — often years, often with help.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and
discover that the prisoner was you.
~Lewis Smedes



The REACH Forgiveness Model



A research-validated, five-step framework for moving from hurt toward healing.

Forgiveness Takes Time

Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell & Worthington (2014) — meta-analysis of all outcome research on forgiveness:

0.1 SD

increase in forgiveness per hour of treatment

0.6 SD

gain after a 6-hour psychoeducational group

0.3 SD

improvement in BOTH depression and anxiety

0.6 SD

increase in hope (likely the underlying mechanism)

Key insight: time is the primary driver — no treatment is dramatically superior. The act of doing the work, not the brand of method, drives the gains.

Two Aspects of Forgiveness

DECISIONAL

A choice of the will

I decide I will not pursue payback. I decide to treat the offender as a person of worth — regardless of how I feel.

EMOTIONAL

A transformation of feeling

Resentment, anger, and bitterness are gradually replaced with compassion, empathy, even love. This takes time.

Which is easier? Which comes first?

R — Recall the Hurt



Individuals who revisit the hurt are more likely to forgive

Avoidance or suppression hinders forgiveness — and worsens anger and depression

“To heal, you have to face the fact that you've been hurt. Make up your mind not to be snarky, not to treat yourself like a victim, and not to treat the other person as a jerk.

Make a decision to forgive. Decide that you are not going to pursue payback but you will treat the person as a valuable person.” — Worthington

Recalling Differently

“We aren't going to get anywhere if we keep telling the same story repeatedly. We need another, more objective (yet still true) story.

So recall the event again, but this time as an observer — not as yourself. Get more distance on the story. Write it again, but without emphasizing how bad the wrongdoer is or how much you have been victimized.”

Exercise: Hold the hurt... and let it go.

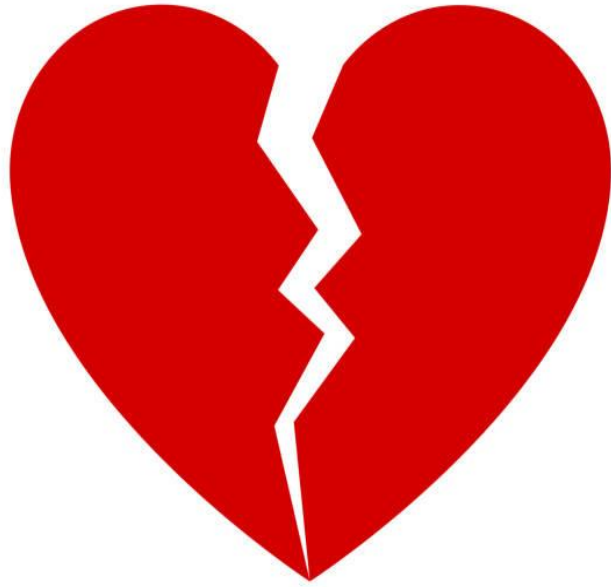
Hold your arms outstretched, hands cupped, as if holding the hurt at arm's length. After a minute, your arms grow tired and heavy — like a grudge.

Then, silently choose: I decide to forgive my wrongdoer.

Open your hands. Let your arms fall to your sides. You decide to act more positively, to treat the person as a valuable person.

If you can't yet — keep going. It may come more easily later, as feelings shift.

“Everything Depends on the Right Action of the Will”



“What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will.”

You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure.

Through the right exercise of the will, an entire change may be made in your life. By yielding up your will to Christ, you ally yourself with the power that is above all principalities and powers.”

E — Empathize with the Offender



“Empathy is putting yourself in the other person's chair.”

Pretend the other person is in an empty chair across from you. Talk to him. Pour your heart out. Then sit in his chair. Talk back in a way that helps you see why he might have wronged you.



THE EMPTY CHAIR EXERCISE

“Research supports that if you do this seriously, it can be the single most effective thing you can do to forgive the wrongdoer emotionally.”

— Everett Worthington

A — Altruistic Gift



Forgiveness is a gift — and unselfish givers benefit most.

“When a person forgives because forgiveness makes them healthier, more positive, more reconciled, more spiritually at peace — that person benefits. BUT when a person forgives unselfishly — altruistically — to benefit the wrongdoer, they enjoy even greater benefits.”

Think back...

Remember a time when you wronged someone — a parent, teacher, friend — and they forgave you. Remember how light and free you felt. How you didn't want to disappoint them again. By forgiving unselfishly, you give that same gift to someone who hurt you.

C — Commit to the Forgiveness



Make it concrete. Make it traceable.

“Once you've forgiven, write a note to yourself — something as simple as, ‘Today, I forgave [person's name] for hurting me.’ This helps your forgiveness last.”



LUSKIN'S “CHANGE THE CHANNEL”

Psychologist Fred Luskin: experiencing negative emotions is like watching a television channel that makes you feel depressed, angry, afraid, or bitter. You can change emotion channels. Commit to choosing a more positive emotion channel.

H — Hold On to Forgiveness



“We write notes of commitment because we will almost surely be tempted to doubt that we really forgave. We can re-read our notes. We did forgive.”

— Worthington

AN IMPORTANT CAVEAT

When you see the person who hurt you and feel the negative feelings rise again, remind yourself:

“The pain, anger, and fear I’m feeling are not unforgiveness. They are my body’s way of protecting me, so I don’t make the same mistakes again.”

Psychotherapy or DIY Workbooks?

PSYCHOTHERAPY

Individual treatment produces slightly larger gains than group, but not by much.

DIY WORKBOOKS

Studies have shown them at least as effective as psychoeducational groups — about the same as individual treatments.

Download Worthington's workbooks FREE

eworthington-forgiveness.com



SECTION THREE

The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness

Where research touches the soul.

For religious people, prayer can boost forgiveness.

- 1 Toussaint & Kamble studied Americans and Indians from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim backgrounds
- 2 Participants said a brief prayer for their romantic partner
- 3 Those who prayed were less likely to endorse retaliatory motives — e.g., “When my partner wrongs me, I do something to even the score”

The Christian Forgiveness Advantage

Worthington developed a Christian-accommodated version of REACH for hurts inflicted by other Christians.

Its gain in forgiveness was...

2x

the usual gain — about 1.4 SDs over 7 hours of workbook time.

When forgiveness is rooted in shared faith, the soil is richer.

Is Christian Forgiveness Different?

- In no other religion is forgiveness the central key to salvation
- A gift that sets us free — not a debt we work off
- Christianity teaches that it is only in trusting God's forgiveness that we are saved

“You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.”

— Colossians 2:13, 14

OUR GREATEST EXAMPLE



*“Father, forgive them,
for they do not know what they are doing.”*

Luke 23:34

At the Cross

“The Saviour made no murmur of complaint. His face remained calm and serene, but great drops of sweat stood upon His brow. There was no pitying hand to wipe the death dew from His face, nor words of sympathy and unchanging fidelity to stay His human heart.

While the soldiers were doing their fearful work, Jesus prayed for His enemies, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’ His mind passed from His own suffering to the sin of His persecutors, and the terrible retribution that would be theirs.

No curses were called down upon the soldiers who were handling Him so roughly. No vengeance was invoked upon the priests and rulers, who were gloating over the accomplishment of their purpose. Christ pitied them in their ignorance and guilt. He breathed only a plea for their forgiveness — ‘for they know not what they do.’”

His Prayer Embraced the World

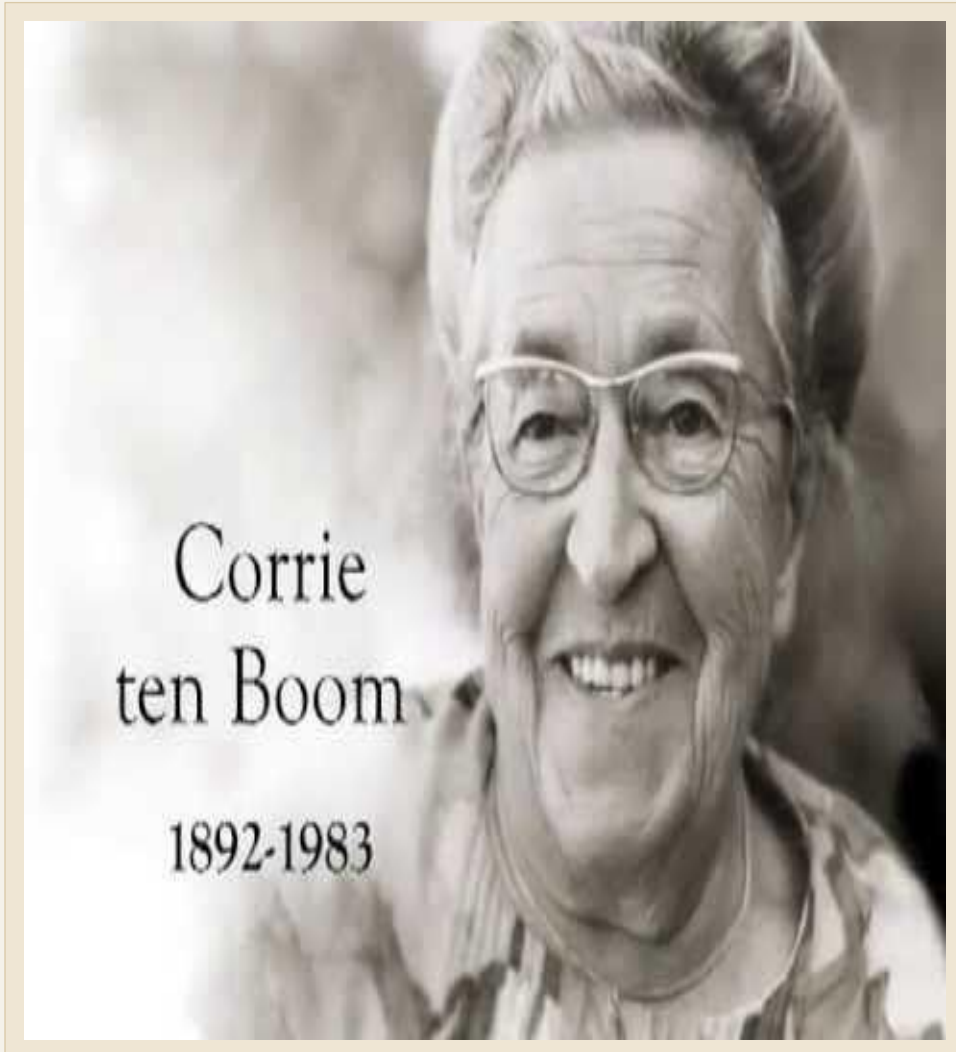


“That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world. It took in every sinner that had lived or should live, from the beginning of the world to the end of time.

Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God.

To all, forgiveness is freely offered. ‘Whosoever will’ may have peace with God, and inherit eternal life.”

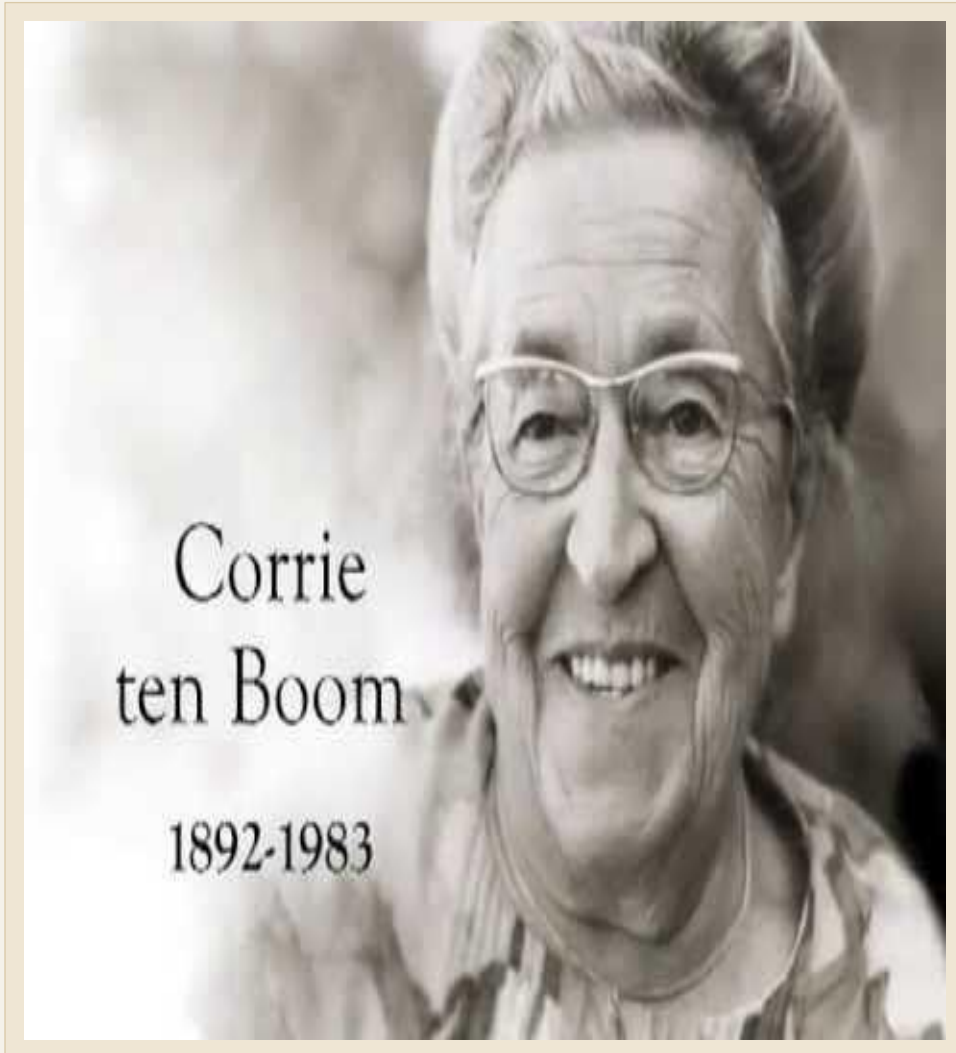
Decisional Meets Emotional Forgiveness



Holland, 1944 — arrested for hiding Jews in her home during the Nazi occupation. Sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp, where her sister Betsie died.

Munich, 1947 — speaking on God's forgiveness in a church, when she sees a face she will never forget...

Decisional Meets Emotional Forgiveness



“Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.”

WHAT WE'VE SEEN TODAY

The Power of Forgiveness

1

Bitterness costs us — in mind, body, and relationships.

2

Forgiveness is research-supported medicine — for stress, mood, blood pressure, even mortality.

3

REACH gives us a path: Recall · Empathize · Altruistic gift · Commit · Hold on.

4

Decisional forgiveness comes first. Emotional forgiveness follows — sometimes years later.

5

At the cross, we see forgiveness perfected. And Corrie ten Boom reminds us: the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

Thank you

Daniel Binus, MD · Beautiful Minds Medical

Connected · Talk 5 of 6 · The Power of Forgiveness