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HOW TO FORGIVE

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO
RECLAIMING YOUR LIFE



by Dr. Karin Sternberg

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Welcome!

You are here because you are suffering. Something happened in your life that caused you great pain and disappointment, and you are finding it hard to move forward. Maybe your partner has been unfaithful, or they have repeatedly broken promises so there is no trust left between the two of you. Perhaps you have been abused in the past, or your partner has deceived you and hidden their secret spending habits. No matter what happened to you — the weight of the past makes it hard for you to navigate the present.

If you are currently in a relationship, you may feel a lack of goodwill and growing resentment toward your partner. The things that happened between you two have created a wall that hinders the rebuilding of the intimacy and trust you once shared.

Forgiveness is different from reconciliation. It is something you don't need your partner for. It is often helpful to actively include your partner in your efforts to forgive them — perhaps by asking them to admit they had an affair, or to ask for more details to help you understand what happened.

But ultimately, forgiveness is a personal decision. You have the power to choose whether to forgive and when to forgive your partner.

Moving on is not an easy task. If only it were as simple as flipping a switch. That's why this workbook offers you a step-by-step process designed to help you move forward and forgive your partner for what they did. The workbook will assist you in your journey toward forgiveness and recovery, no matter whether you are suffering from the load of accumulated hurts or a single traumatic event. It doesn't matter if you're still with the partner you're seeking to forgive or if you've moved on but are still suffering from past experiences.

There will be days when you feel like you're making three steps backward instead of moving forward. Please keep in mind that this is completely normal. Your desire to forgive and to salvage your (present or future!) relationship is admirable. I wish you the best of luck in your journey towards healing and happiness. You're not alone, and I believe in your ability to overcome this pain.

All my best,

Dr. Karin

What Do You Need to Know About Forgiveness?

When we're in a relationship with a partner, forgiveness means that we consciously and intentionally decide to release our feelings of resentment, anger, and the desire for revenge. We let go of past hurts and embracing compassion, empathy, and understanding.

Forgiveness

- **does NOT mean that you condone or forget** your partner's actions. Rather, forgiveness is your choice to move forward without holding onto grudges or seeking retribution. You acknowledge the pain, accept the imperfections of your partner, and work towards healing and growth together.
- **is NOT a sign of weakness.** To the contrary, forgiveness requires strength and courage. By forgiving your partner, you face the pain you were caused, let go of your feelings of resentment, and actively work towards healing.
- **does not happen over night.** Forgiving your partner takes both time and effort. You'll go through multiple stages — sometimes more than once — and you'll need to practice patience and be committed to the re-building of trust and your relationship.

There is no obligation to forgive. It's your choice. But if you choose to forgive your partner, there are numerous benefits for both you and your relationship:

Forgiveness

- frees you from (or at least reduces) negative feelings such as anger, hostility, and resentment toward your partner. You may feel less anxious and stressed.
- increases your general life satisfaction and happiness
- has the potential to heal your relationship. Forgiving your partner promotes feelings of empathy and compassion, thus strengthening the bond between you and your partner. It creates a positive and nurturing environment leading to greater relationship satisfaction and happiness.

In the next sections of this workbook, we will delve deeper into the cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) approach to forgiveness, providing you with practical strategies and techniques to cultivate forgiveness within your intimate relationship. Take your time working through the exercises, and do not rush the process.

Remember, forgiveness is a journey, and by embarking on this path, you are taking a significant step towards a healthier and more fulfilling relationship.

How To Forgive

Forgiveness is a journey that can be both lengthy and complex. It's a process that unfolds in stages, each requiring patience, introspection, and compassion. In the pages of this workbook, we will guide you through these different stages, offering insight and support as you navigate the path towards forgiveness.

At the very outset, it's essential to understand that forgiveness is a deeply personal endeavor. It's not something that can be rushed or forced. As you embark on this journey, you may find that you need to recommit to forgiveness at various points along the way. It's normal to have setbacks, doubts, and moments when forgiveness seems out of reach. Be gentle with yourself during these times and remember that progress is not always linear.

Truly forgiving and letting go takes time. It's not an instant switch that can be flipped, but rather a gradual unfolding of healing and understanding. It's a process that demands patience, self-reflection, and a willingness to confront difficult emotions. It's important to respect your own feelings throughout this process and honor the range of emotions that arise within you.

Here is a brief overview of the three steps that will guide you through your journey toward forgiveness:

Step 1: Identify and Acknowledge the Hurt - In this step, we will explore the pain and disappointment you have experienced. By examining the specific ways in which you have been hurt, you can begin to acknowledge the deep wounds that need healing. This process of identification and acknowledgment is an essential first step toward forgiveness.

Step 2: Understand and Decide to Forgive - In step two, we delve into the complexities of forgiveness itself. Here, we will explore the emotions, beliefs, and obstacles that may be impeding your capacity to forgive. By gaining a deeper understanding of the concept of forgiveness and making a conscious decision to forgive, you can take an important step towards releasing the burden of resentment and finding emotional freedom.

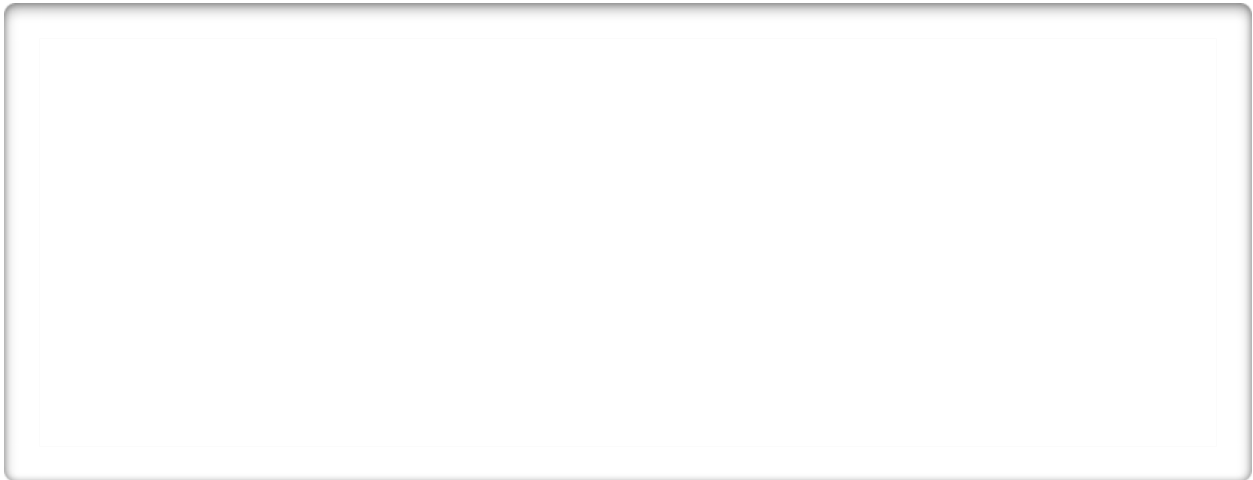
Step 3: Let Go and Move On - Finally, in step three, we focus on the crucial task of letting go and moving forward. This stage involves cultivating empathy for your offender, challenging negative thoughts and beliefs that hold you back, and releasing the grip of the past on your life.

In the pages that follow, we will delve into each of these steps, providing you with tools, exercises, and insights to support you on your journey towards forgiveness. Remember, this process is unique to you, and there may be twists and turns along the way. Be patient with yourself, be open to self-reflection, and know that you are not alone. Together, we will navigate this path towards healing and give you the opportunity to cultivate a future filled with love, acceptance, and peace.

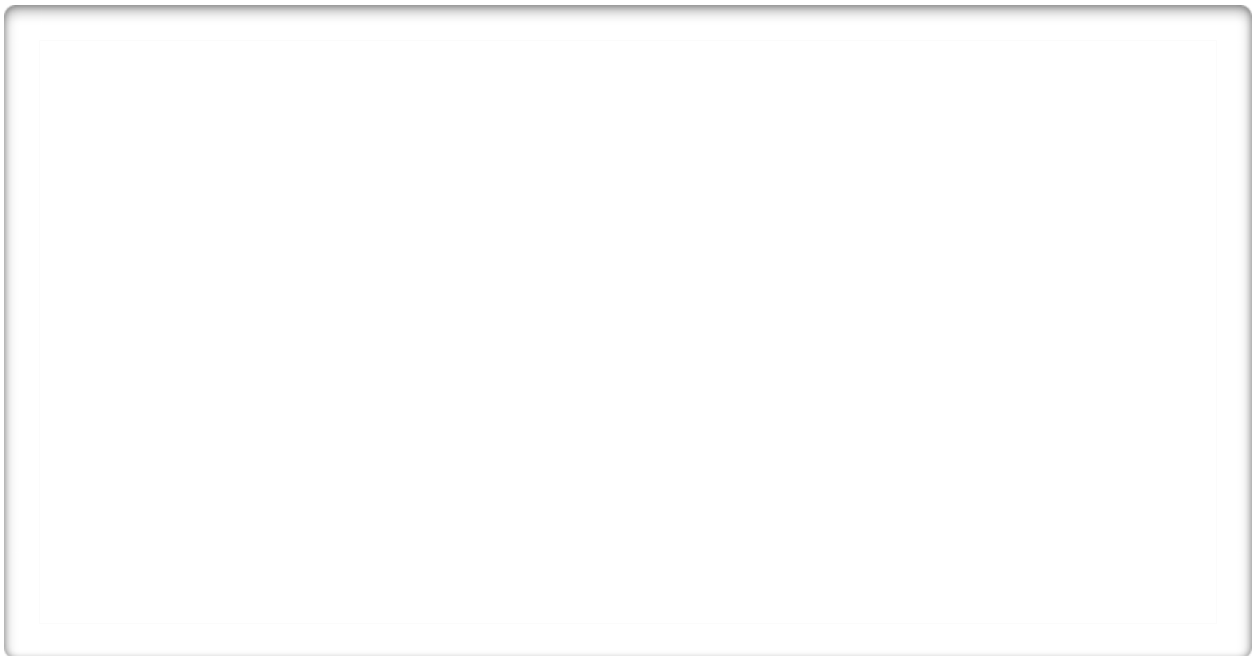
1. Identify and Acknowledge the Hurt

In the journey towards forgiveness, the first crucial step is to identify and acknowledge the hurt that needs to be addressed. This section of the forgiveness workbook invites you to delve into the depths of your experiences and to bring forth a clear understanding of what it is that requires forgiveness.

Who hurt you?

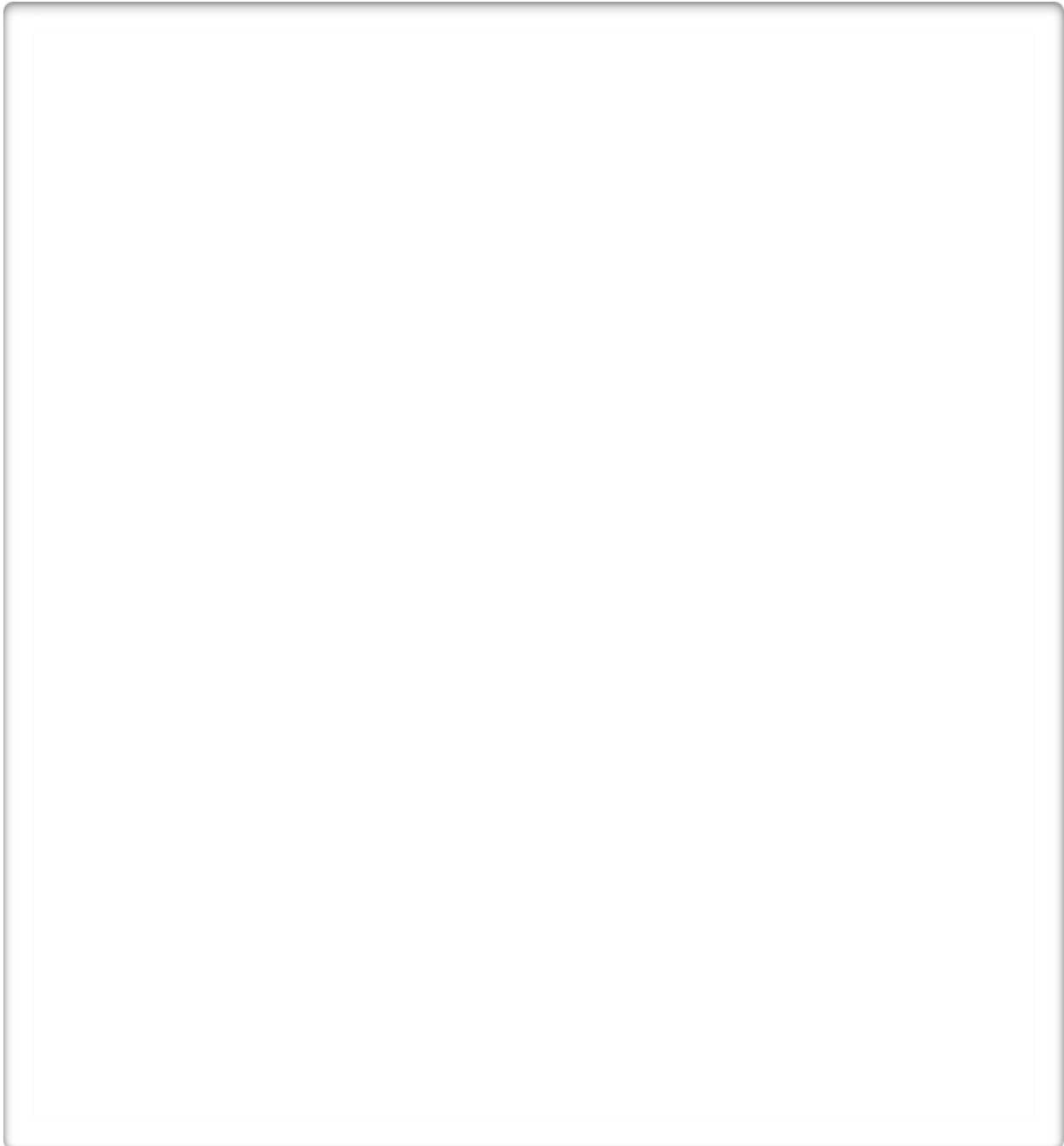


What is the incident(s) that you're trying to forgive?



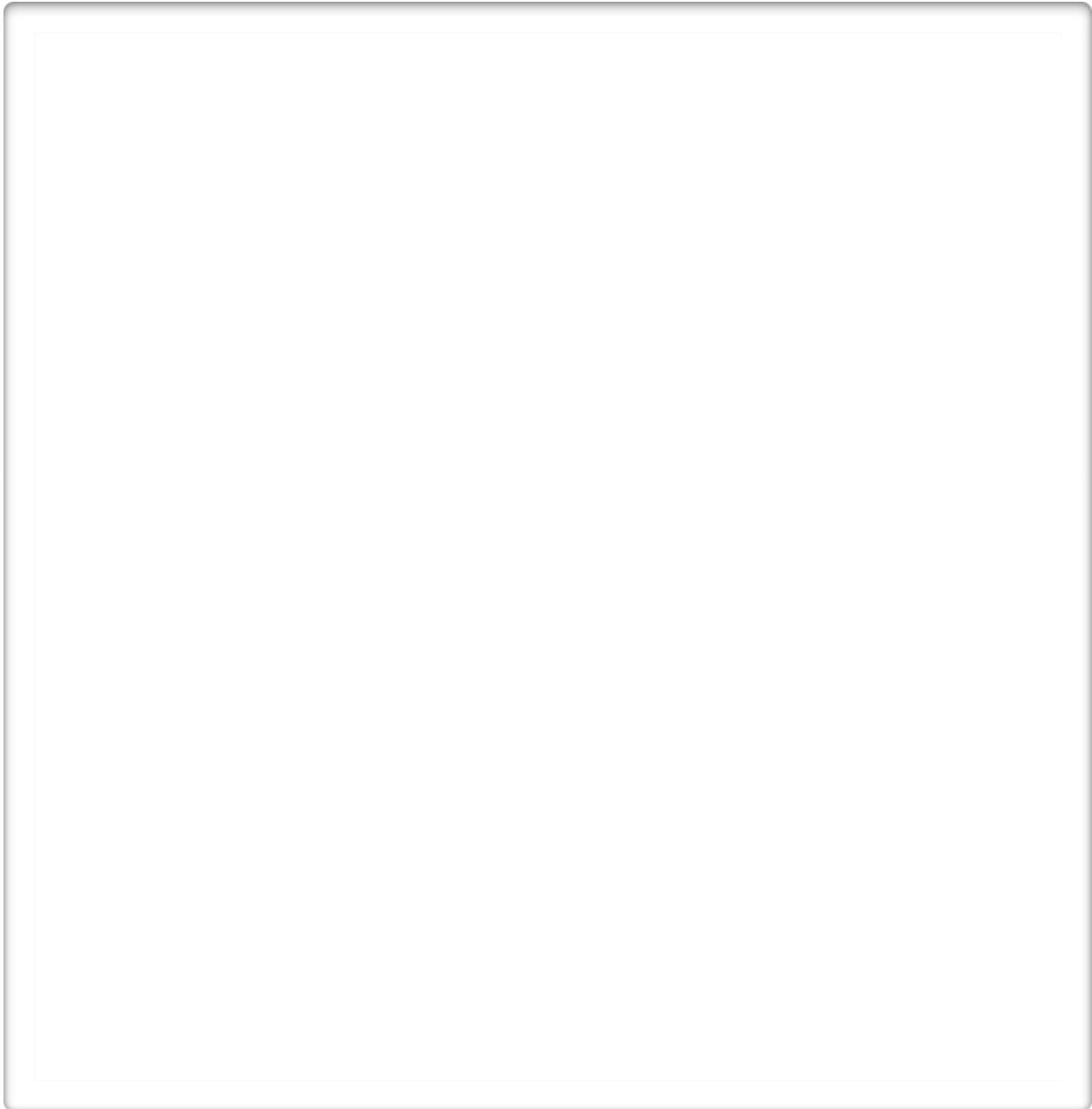
What are the circumstances of the transgression?

Here are some questions to get you started (there may be others that are of importance with respect to the circumstances — explore them all): Was it a single incident, or several? Were other people involved? What was said? If you weren't aware of the transgression at first, how did you find out? How did you react?



What's the personal impact that transgression?

Think about the emotions you have, your thoughts about the issue, how your life or wellbeing has been affected, how your relationship may have changed, etc.



Do you need any more information to fully understand what happened?

Sometimes, and in particular when we're faced with the painful aftermath of infidelity, we feel the need for more information, seeking a deeper understanding of what happened and why.

Each person's need for information is unique, and what feels right for you may differ from others. Here are some gentle reminders to guide you:

While the thirst for knowledge may be strong, exercise caution. Some details may provide the closure you seek, while others could linger and hinder your healing process. With the passage of time, you may find that the burning desire for more information gradually fades. It's worth noting that many individuals have shared their regrets about knowing too much, realizing that it's not the quantity of answers but the quality of their own emotional well-being that truly matters.

Remember, once you hear something, you cannot unhear it. If you are navigating the aftermath of an affair, consider the implications of connecting specific details to situations, behaviors, events, or places. By doing so, you risk being persistently reminded of the affair whenever you encounter those triggers in the future. Be mindful of the potential impact on your healing journey.

Additionally, it's important to reflect on the value of inquiring about explicit sexual behaviors. While the desire to know may be understandable, it's crucial to consider whether this knowledge will genuinely aid your progress in moving forward. Sometimes, dwelling on such specifics can hinder your ability to let go and lead to rumination, preventing you from finding the peace and growth you seek.

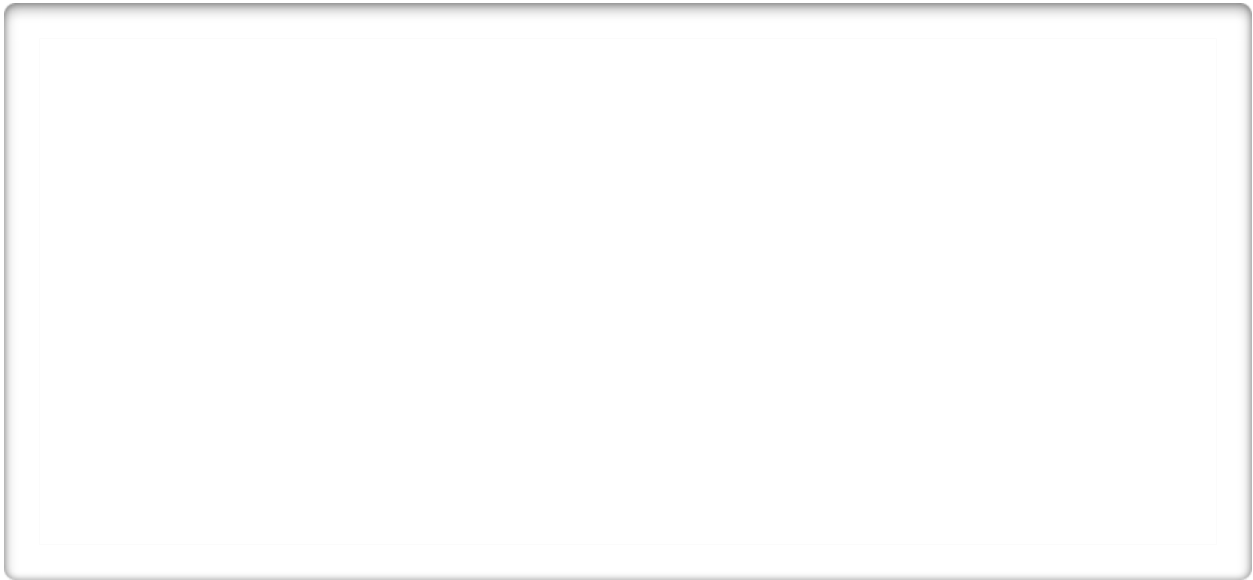
Remember, dear friend, this journey is about nurturing your emotional well-being and finding the strength to heal. Trust your instincts, be kind to yourself, and prioritize your own growth and happiness above all else.

What do you still need to know to move on?

2. Understand and Decide

In this step, we're going to dive deeper into your experience. Our goal is to gain a profound understanding of how you have been coping with the aftermath and how it has impacted your life. Through this process of introspection, you will ultimately arrive at a decision – a decision to embark on the transformative path of forgiveness.

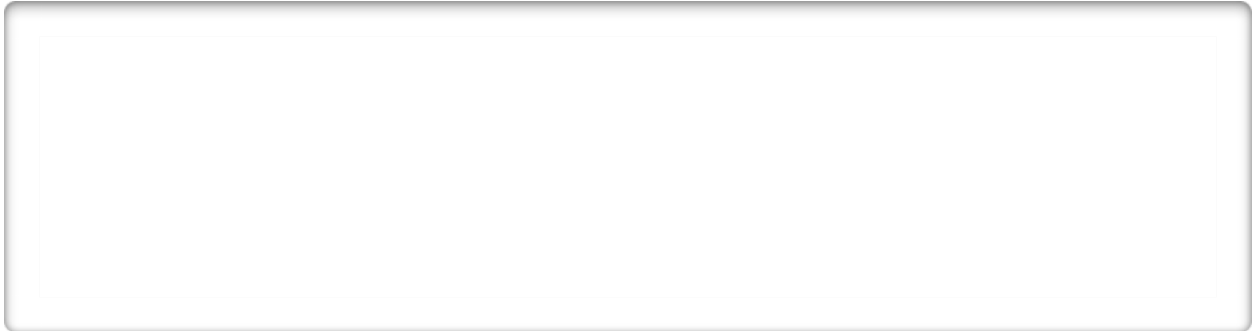
Have you faced your emotions, or have you avoided them? If you have avoided them, how?



Do you feel shame or guilt over what happened? Why?



Do you obsess over the transgression?



Has the transgression in significant ways changed

- **your life**
- **your worldview**
- **your relationship?**



Have your emotions (that is, how you *deal* with the transgression) affected your

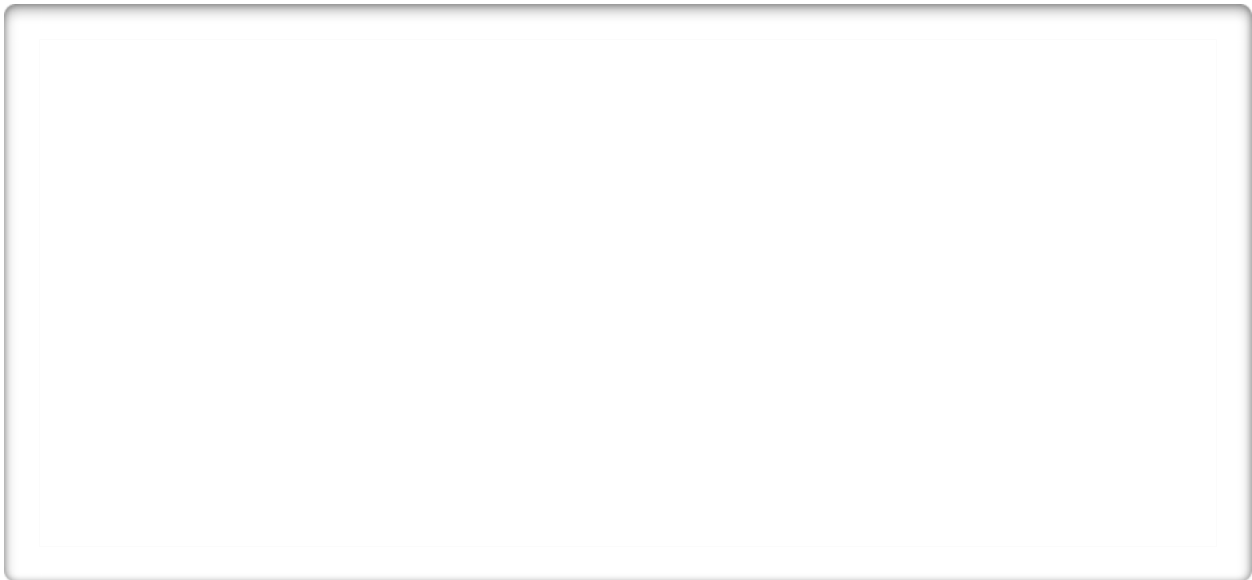
- health
- everyday life
- mental well-being
- relationship?

If so, how?



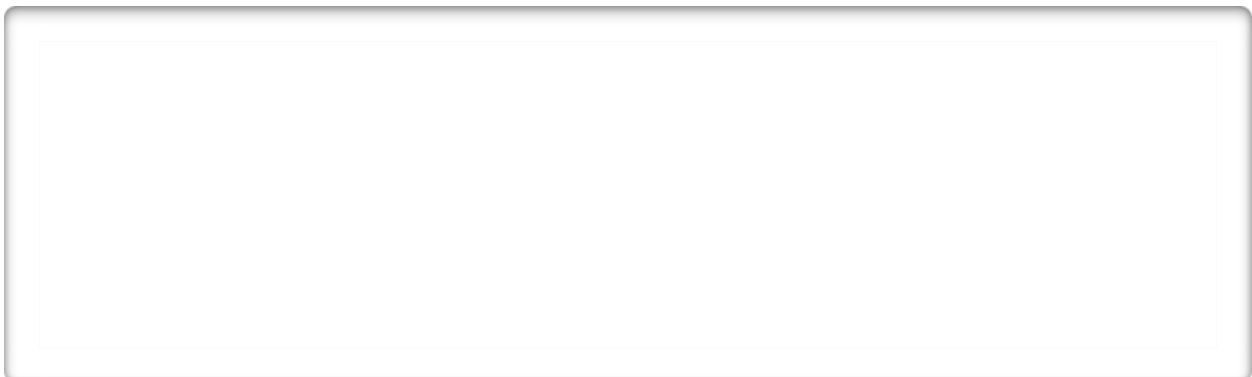
What hasn't worked, and what you need to change in order to let go and move on?

Read through your answers in this section. Consider carefully: What has worked for you so far, and what has not worked? Is the situation weighing on you, or are your emotions making your life hard?



Are you ready to forgive your partner?

If you're ready, make a written commitment here. Remember, committing to forgive is only the beginning of your healing journey. Be patient with yourself and give yourself time to forgive. You'll find lots of tools to help you heal on the next pages.



3. Let Go and Move On

Now that you have made the courageous decision to embark on the path of forgiveness, it's time to begin the hard work of letting go and moving on. You'll do this in several steps:

Step 1: Cultivate Empathy for Your Offender

In this step, you begin to nurture a profound sense of empathy for the person who has caused you pain. Empathy allows us to step into another person's shoes, to understand their perspective, and to connect with their humanity. By cultivating empathy, you begin to shift from anger, resentment, and blame towards a place of compassion and understanding.

Step 2: Challenge Negative Thoughts and Beliefs

Negative thoughts and beliefs can be powerful barriers to forgiveness. In this step, we encourage you to challenge these self-limiting narratives and replace them with more empowering and compassionate perspectives. By questioning the validity of negative thoughts, you create space for healing and personal growth.

Step 3: Letting Go of Hurtful Thoughts and Feelings

In order to reclaim your power and regain control over your life and relationships, it is crucial to release the grip of hurtful thoughts and emotions. This step involves actively working on letting go of the pain and resentment that may have dominated your existence. By freeing yourself from these burdens, you create space for new beginnings and healthier connections.

Forgiveness is a gift that you give yourself and your partner, if you have one. Forgiveness in relationships unfolds on two levels:

1. Within yourself

You transition from anger, resentment, and blame to a place of compassion and empathy.

2. In your behavior toward your partner

You demonstrate your transformed feelings through your actions and interactions.

It's important to note that these two levels can occur independently of each other. You may experience a shift in your internal feelings without explicitly sharing them with your partner. Alternatively, you may exhibit changed behavior towards your partner while still harboring lingering resentment within yourself.

For complete forgiveness to blossom, should you choose to pursue it, both levels must align. These shifts may not occur simultaneously, and setbacks are to be expected. There may be days when resentment resurfaces or moments when you find yourself reacting out of hurt. Remember, these are normal bumps along the road to forgiveness.

Step 1: Cultivate Empathy

Developing empathy towards an offender can be a powerful step in the forgiveness process.

Empathy is about understanding and connecting with another person's perspective, emotions, and experiences. It allows us to see things from their point of view and develop a deeper understanding of their motivations and circumstances.

However, empathy does not mean condoning or excusing the actions of the offender. It is important to distinguish between understanding someone's perspective and validating their harmful behavior. Forgiveness and empathy are separate processes. While empathy can contribute to the forgiveness journey by fostering understanding and compassion, it does not negate the need for accountability or the recognition of the harm caused.

This exercise helps you cultivate empathy by encouraging you to see the situation from your offender's perspective.

Take your time working through the exercise. If you get upset at any point, take a break and use the exercises in this workbook designed to help you calm down.

Begin by acknowledging your own emotions and the pain caused by the offense.

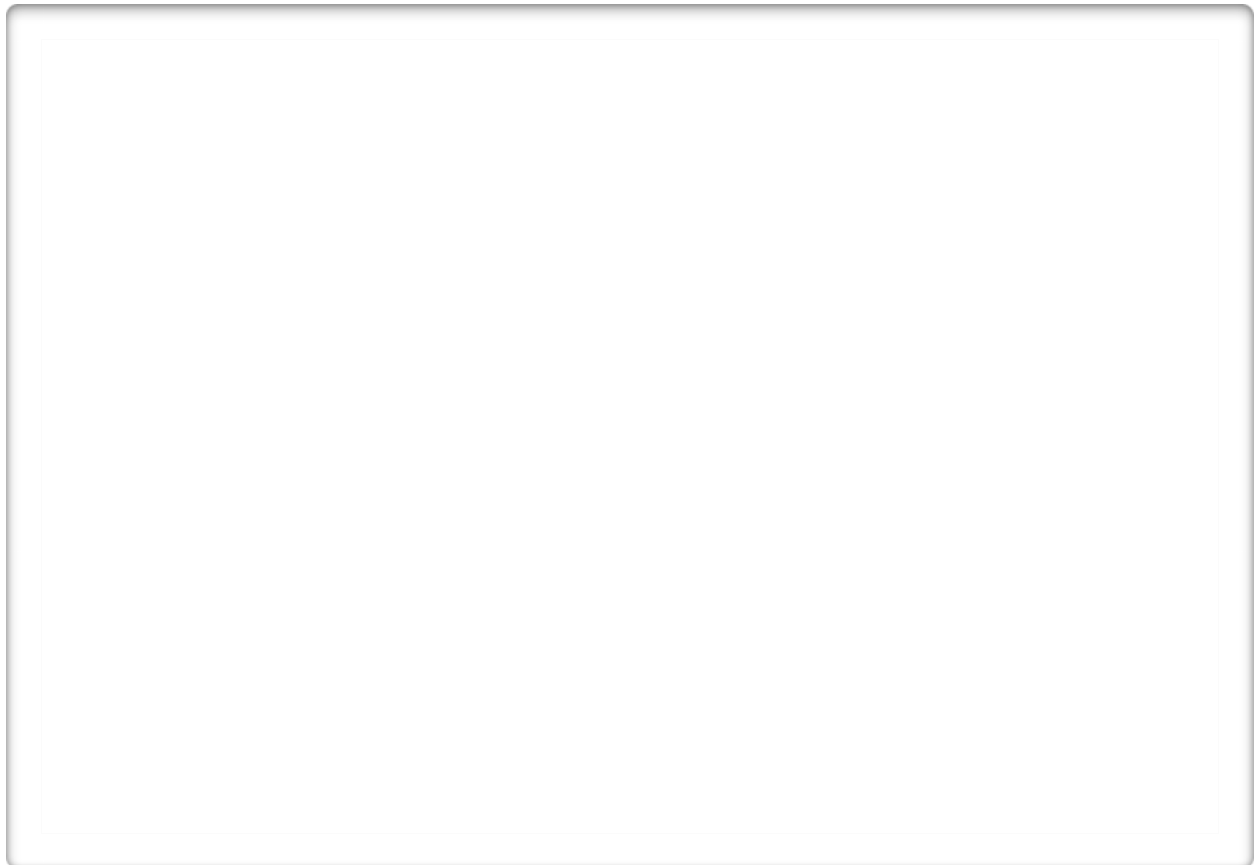
Allow yourself to feel these emotions without judgment or resistance. Take a moment to validate your own experience.

Now, shift your focus towards the offender. Try to imagine what might have led them to behave in the way they did. Consider their background, upbringing, life experiences, and any potential challenges they may have faced.

Reflect on the possibility that the offender might have been acting out of their own pain, fear, or insecurities. Consider the circumstances that may have influenced their actions and contributed to their behavior.

As you explore their perspective, try to put yourself in their shoes. Imagine how it might have felt to be in their position, dealing with their own struggles and limitations. Allow yourself to feel a sense of compassion and understanding towards them.

Write down your thoughts here:



Now, visualize a conversation between yourself and the offender.

In this imaginary conversation, express your thoughts and feelings calmly and assertively. Share how their actions have affected you, but also express your willingness to understand their perspective.

As you engage in this conversation, strive to maintain an open mind and a genuine desire to empathize. Listen attentively to their responses, seeking to understand their motivations and emotions.

Throughout the conversation, remind yourself that empathy does not mean condoning or excusing their actions. It simply means striving to understand their perspective and finding a path towards forgiveness and healing.

After the conversation, take a moment to reflect on your experience. Notice any shifts in your feelings towards the offender and any insights you may have gained. Allow yourself to process these emotions and thoughts.

Write down your thoughts here:



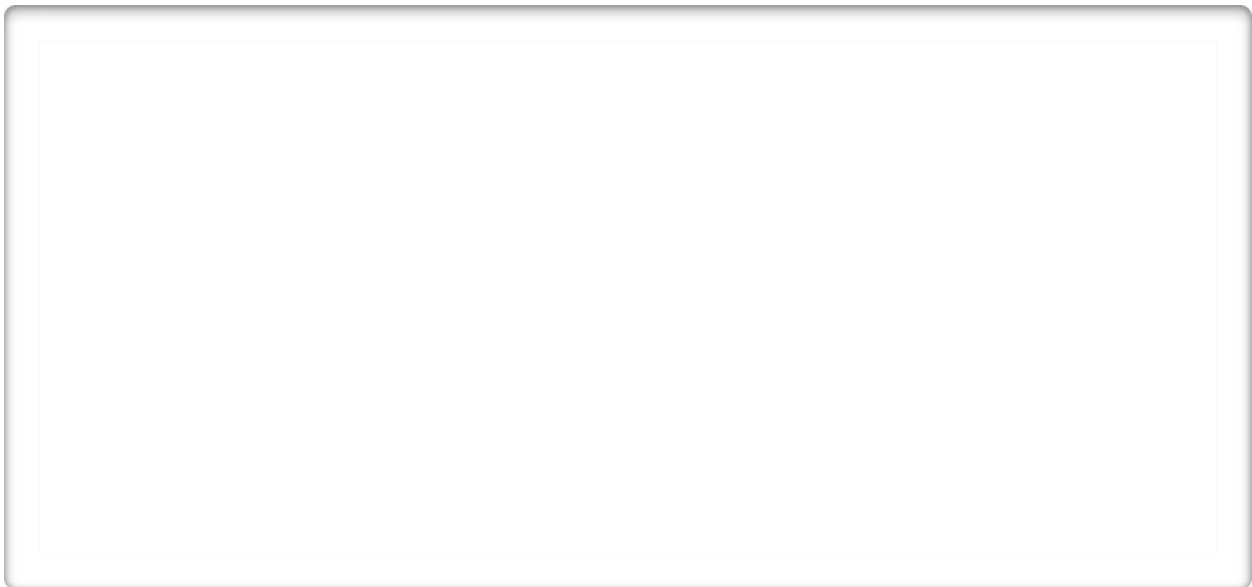
Remember, developing empathy and granting forgiveness is a gradual process that takes time and self-reflection. This exercise is just one step in that journey.

Step 2: Challenge Negative Thoughts and Beliefs

You are likely to have many negative thoughts and beliefs over what happened to you, and understandably so. We know from psychological research not only that thoughts have a powerful impact on our health and well-being, but also that our thinking patterns are sometimes irrational or biased.

Learning to identify negative thoughts and beliefs and reframing them in a more positive and realistic way will enable you to release the power those thoughts have over you and your life.

First, write down one or more thoughts and beliefs that hold you back or have a distressing impact on you:



You'll do this exercise for each thought individually. If you listed several thoughts or beliefs above, pick one for now and continue with this exercise.

Ask yourself: Is there evidence to support this thought?

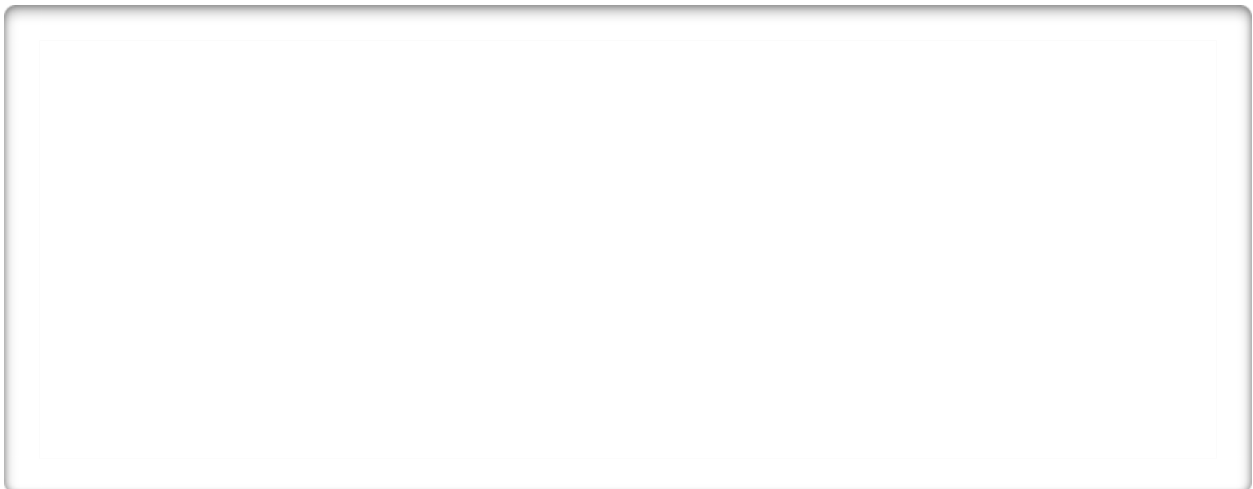
List all the evidence here.



Next, think about alternative explanations.

*Are there other possible interpretations or perspectives that could explain the situation?
Consider different angles and possibilities.*

Write down your thoughts here:



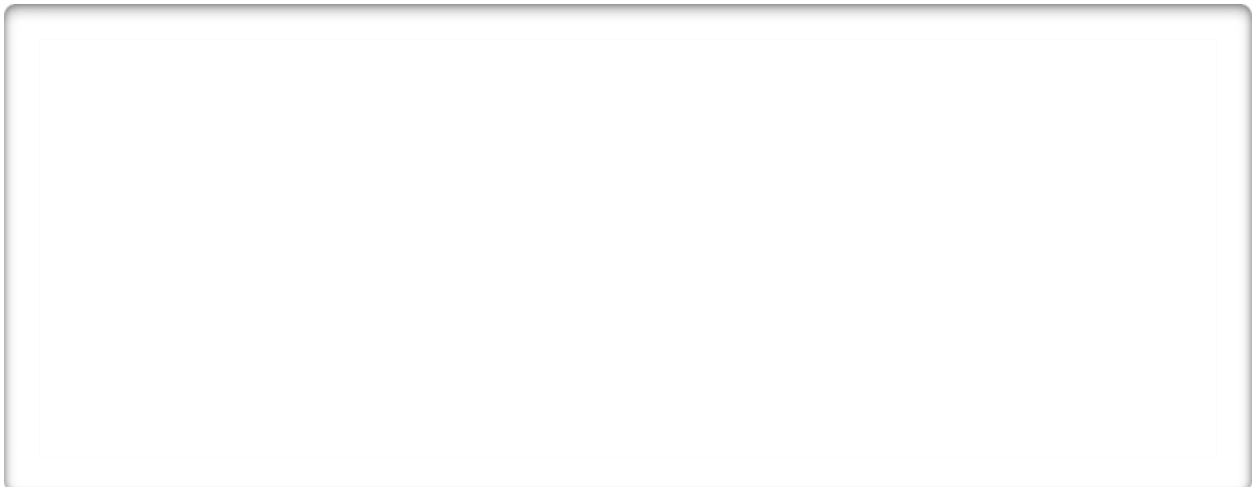
What would a good friend of yours or a family member say about this thought?

What would someone whom you trust and respect say? How would they challenge or question your thought or belief?



What is the worst-case scenario that is associated with this belief or thought?

How likely is it? Is this a realistic outcome, or are there other more probably outcomes?



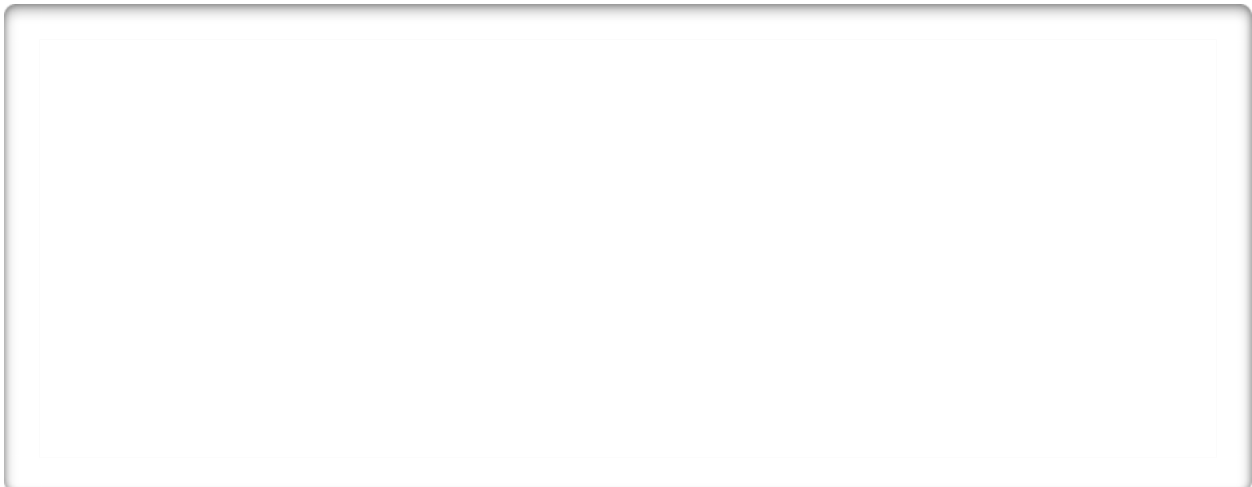
What is the effect of thinking this way?

What is the impact of holding on to this thought/belief? How does it make you feel? How does it affect your health, well-being, and behaviors?



What could you be thinking instead?

Can you replace the negative thought with a more realistic and more adaptive thought that promotes your well-being, rather than holding you back?



You're likely to harbor more than one negative thought or belief pattern. Repeat this questioning process for each negative belief and thought you would like to change.

Step 3: Letting Go

In this section, you'll learn some techniques to help you release negative thoughts and emotions. This process may be difficult, but with persistence, you'll develop the resilience to leave the past behind and forge a future full of empathy and understanding.

Option 1 - A Visualization Exercise

This exercise is designed to help you break free from distressing thoughts and mental loops. When you find yourself stuck in negative thinking, it's easy to become overwhelmed and anxious. Over time, these thought patterns can damage your well-being and relationships, raising your blood pressure, increasing stress levels, and making it harder to stay calm and kind in your interactions.

Practicing this visualization exercise regularly can help you find tranquility when needed and, over time, release negative feelings and thoughts entirely.

Here's what to do:

1. Find a quiet place where you can be undisturbed for a period of time. You can do this exercise for as long as you wish and as it's helpful, but if you're not sure I recommend you aim for 5 to 10 minutes. Feel free to set a timer.
2. Find a comfortable position — lie down or get comfortable on a chair; whatever works best for you. In order for you to be entirely relaxed, avoid to cross your arms or legs.
3. Close your eyes and take a few breaths to relax. Inhale deeply through your nose and exhale through your mouth.
4. Imagine that you are standing on a beautiful meadow in the sunshine. You are holding a bouquet of colorful, helium-filled balloons attached to strings in your hands.
5. Let your thoughts arise within you. As each thought or feeling that doesn't serve you well comes into your consciousness, place it into a balloon and release that balloon by letting go of the string you hold. Watch the balloon rise up into the sky

and float to the horizon, far away from you. You have released the thought or feeling; it cannot hurt you anymore.

6. If your thoughts wander elsewhere, gently lead them back to the meadow and the balloons. It's likely for some thoughts to repeatedly arise — just keep putting them into the balloons and releasing them.
7. Don't forget to breathe in and out deeply throughout the exercise.
8. Repeat the exercise as often you need it.

Option 2: Thank You, Mind Technique

In our daily lives, it's all too common for negative or irrational thoughts to enter our minds when we least expect them, making it challenging to step away and practice techniques to restore calm. Here is an easy, yet powerful technique that I love and that will empower you to take control of your emotions and thoughts in any situation.

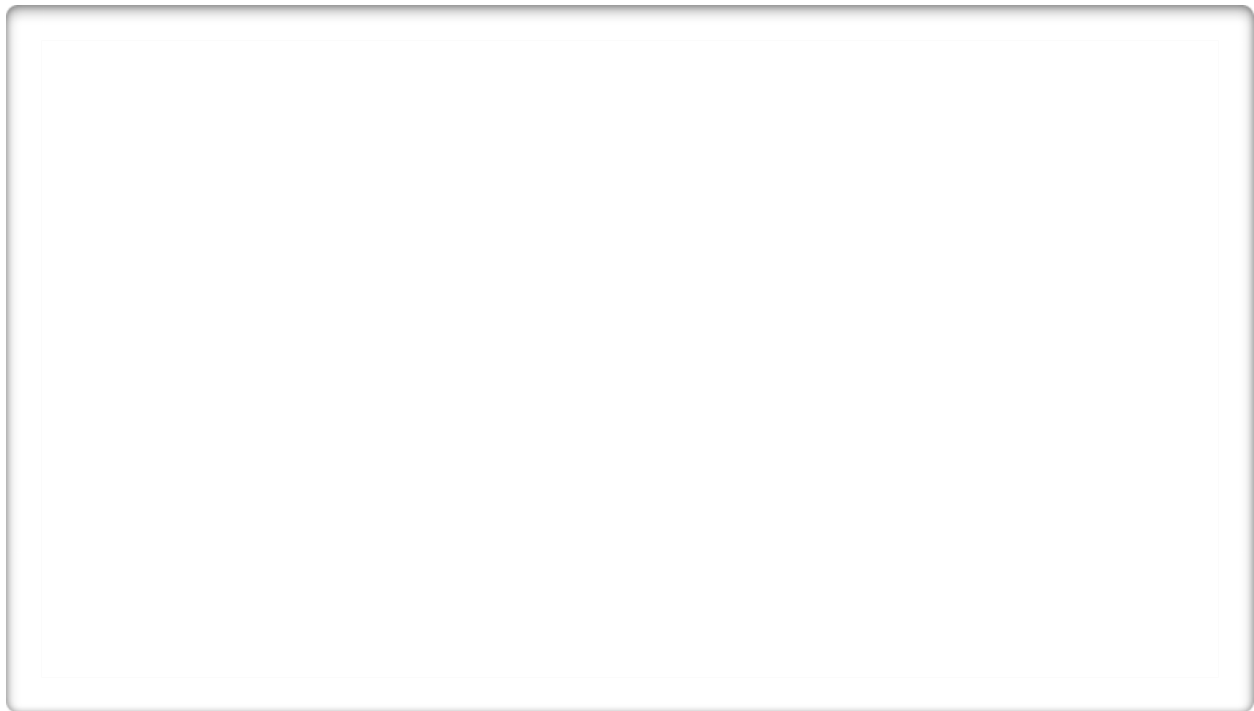
1. **Recognize the Thought:** When you catch yourself having a negative or irrational thought, pause for a moment and acknowledge it. Recognize that it is just a thought and not a reflection of reality. Remind yourself that thoughts are transient and can be changed.
2. **"Thank you, mind":** Silently say the phrase "Thank you, mind, for this thought," to acknowledge the thought. Alternatively, you can say "Thank you, mind, for this judgment," "Thank you, mind, for this fear," or whatever is most suitable in your situation. This phrase serves as a gentle reminder that your mind is doing its job by generating thoughts, but not all thoughts are helpful or true.
3. **Release and Let Go:** Let the thought go and move on.
4. Optional: **Replace with Positive Affirmation:** If you have a dysfunctional thought repeatedly, create a positive affirmation to replace the thought. Use this affirmation every time the thought comes up in your mind and after you have thanked your mind for bringing up that thought. For example, if your negative thought is "I am not worthy of being treated with respect," replace it with an affirmation like "I deserve respect and kindness from others."
5. **Redirect Your Focus:** Negative thought patterns are not worthy of your prolonged attention. Shift your attention to something positive or productive, or back to the conversation or work you were involved in. By redirecting your focus, you create space for more positive and empowering thoughts to emerge.

If you've worked your way through this entire workbook, you've come a long way! Congratulations!

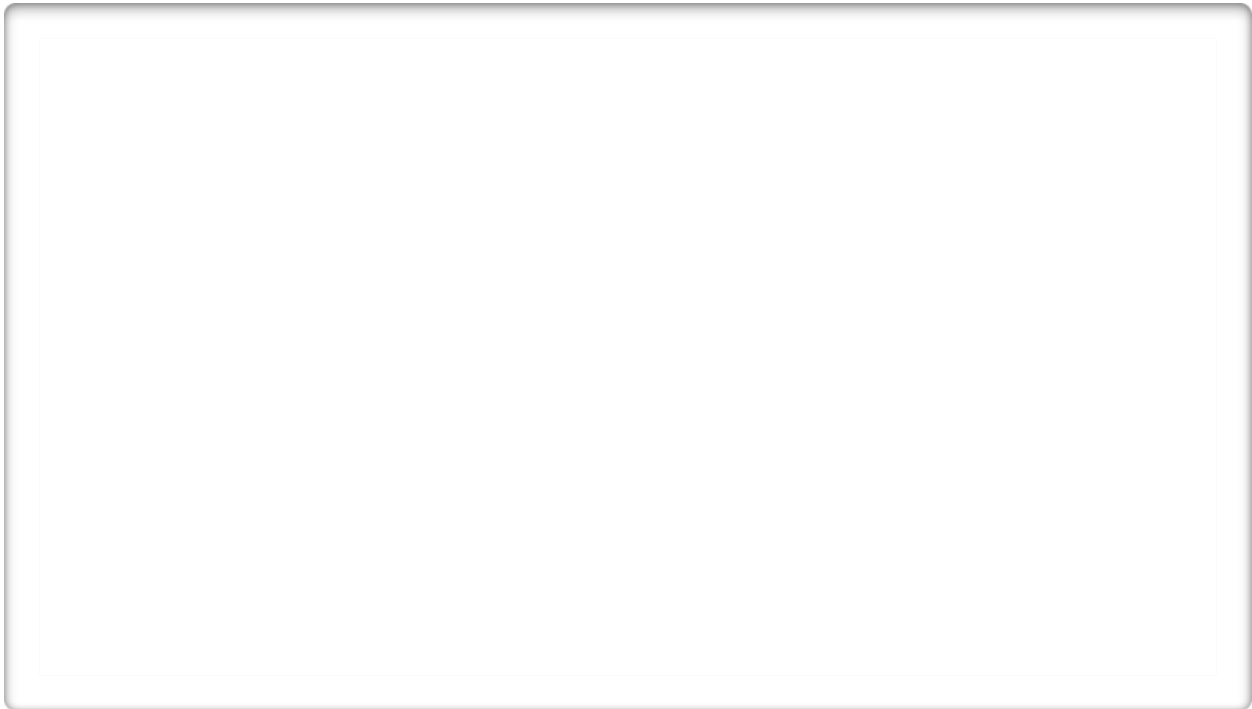
If you haven't yet completed all exercises, I encourage you to do so. Forgiving is a process that's slow and painful at times, but it is also a path that leads you to living a full life. It is well worth it.

As a concluding exercise, let's now reflect on what you've learned and how your story of what happened to you has changed. Reflect on the following questions:

What has the relationship in which you got hurt taught you?



Which changes have you observed in yourself over the past weeks since beginning this workbook?

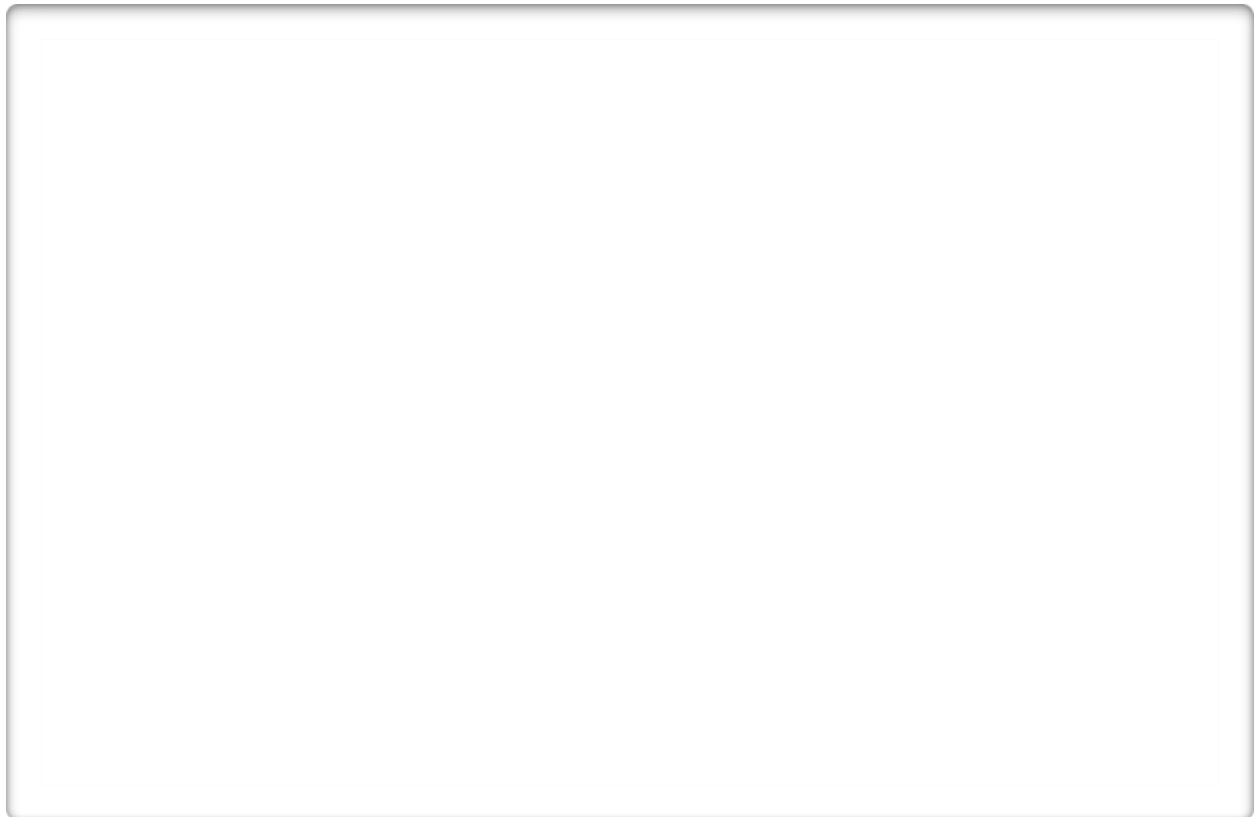


In my work, I often refer to all your ideas and preconceptions about love and relationships as your “love story.” If you’re not familiar with that concept, [you’re invited to learn more here](#). Your love story influences just about everything in your life: the kind of partner you’re looking for, how you want to feel for your partner, how you interpret your partner’s actions, how you yourself behave, how you react to conflict, what dreams and hopes you have for your relationship, and so on. Thriving relationships are those in which partners have stories that are compatible with each other.

Reflecting on your experiences, your path to forgiveness, and what you have learned from your past relationship(s), what might your new love story look like?

Consider the following prompts (not all of them might be important to you, and there may be others that are not listed here — follow your heart!):

- *Which traits does a partner need to have to make you happy?*
- *What roles do you envision for you and your partner?*
- *How do you want to spend your time together?*
- *How do you support each other?*
- *How would you like conflict to be handled in your relationship?*
- *What does great communication in a relationship look like to you?*
- *What can you give to your partner, and what are you not willing to give?*
- *What is non-negotiable in a thriving relationship?*



Now that you have reached the end of this workbook, I encourage you to assess your feelings, behaviors, and actions to see whether any lingering negative emotions may still be present. It's essential to recognize that forgiveness is a process that can't be rushed—it takes time, patience, and self-compassion. If you believe that there's more work to be done, don't hesitate to revisit the workbook, focusing on the areas where you feel stuck or uncertain.

Below, you will find a bonus section that teaches you two different techniques to help you calm down when you're stressed, upset, angry, or anxious. Be patient with yourself, and use these methods whenever the need arises.

I wish you peace and resilience on your continued journey.

Bonus: How to Deal with Your Emotions

How to calm down when you're stressed, upset, or angry

Take a moment to find a comfortable and quiet space where you can focus on calming your mind and body. This exercise is designed to help you calm down when you're feeling stressed or upset. Follow these instructions to practice slow, deep breathing:

1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable for you, or simply soften your gaze.
2. Begin by taking a gentle, deep breath in through your nose. As you inhale, count silently to yourself, reaching a count of 5. Allow your breath to fill your lungs completely, feeling your abdomen and chest expand.
3. Once you have reached the count of 5, hold your breath for a moment, maintaining a sense of stillness and presence.
4. Now, exhale slowly and steadily through your mouth, counting silently to yourself as you release the breath. Aim to exhale for the same count of 5, allowing the breath to leave your body in a controlled and relaxed manner.
5. As you continue this breathing pattern, let your thoughts come and go without judgment or attachment. If any thoughts arise, simply acknowledge them and let them pass, gently redirecting your focus back to your breath.
6. Direct your attention to the sensation of your breath entering and leaving your body. Notice the coolness of the air as you inhale and the warmth as you exhale. Allow your breath to be your anchor, grounding you in the present moment.
7. Repeat this slow, deep breathing technique for a few minutes or as long as you need to feel a sense of calm and relaxation. Feel free to adjust the count to a pace that feels comfortable for you, ensuring that each inhalation and exhalation are equal in length.
8. **If you feel angry:** As you breathe in, imagine that you're breathing in calming white light (or choose your favorite color). Breathe in the calming light and let it flow into even the most distant parts of your body. As you breathe out, imagine you're breathing out all your anger in the form of bright red light. Then repeat the cycle.

Remember, the purpose of this exercise is to bring your awareness to the present moment and create a sense of calm within yourself. Practice this technique whenever you feel overwhelmed, stressed, or in need of a moment of tranquility.

How to calm your anxiety

Option 1: Your Calming Place

This exercise is designed to help you find a sense of peace and tranquility when you're feeling anxious. Follow these instructions to practice this visualization technique:

1. Begin by finding a comfortable place to lie down. You may choose to use a yoga mat, a soft blanket, or simply lie on a comfortable surface. Make sure you have enough space to stretch out and fully relax.
2. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to center yourself. Inhale slowly through your nose, allowing your abdomen to rise as you fill your lungs with air. Exhale gently through your mouth, releasing any tension or stress with each breath.
3. Now, imagine a place that brings you a deep sense of peace and relaxation. It could be a serene beach, a lush mountain meadow, a tranquil forest, or any other location that resonates with you. Visualize this place in your mind, bringing it to life with vivid details.

What's your happy place? Write it down here:

4. As you imagine this peaceful place, engage your senses. Notice the colors, the sounds, and the scents that surround you. Feel the warmth of the sun on your skin or the cool breeze brushing against your face. Allow yourself to fully immerse in the experience, creating a vivid mental picture.
5. Continue to visualize this calming place. Take slow, deep breaths, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. With each breath, imagine that you are inhaling relaxation and exhaling any tension or anxiety.
6. Become aware of the weight of your body pressing against the floor or surface beneath you. Feel the support and grounding sensation as you connect with the earth. This physical sensation can help you anchor yourself in the present moment and release any racing thoughts or worries.

7. Stay in this visualization for as long as you need, allowing yourself to fully embrace the peaceful atmosphere you have created. Whenever your mind starts to wander or anxious thoughts arise, gently bring your focus back to the calming place you have visualized and the sensation of your breath.
8. When you are ready to conclude the exercise, take a few moments to gradually bring your awareness back to the present. Wiggle your fingers and toes, stretch your body gently, and open your eyes. Take a final deep breath, acknowledging the sense of calm and relaxation you have cultivated.

Remember, this visualization exercise is a tool you can use whenever you feel overwhelmed by anxiety. Practice it regularly to train your mind to find solace and peace, even in the midst of anxious moments.

Option 2: Sing Out Your Anxiety

Sometimes, it's hard to calm down and we have the need to engage in some kind of activity when we're feeling anxious. If this is you, try singing a song to cope with your anxiety. You will see it is hard to sing loudly and feel anxious at the same time.

Choose a song that resonates with you. It may be a song that expresses your feelings of loss, disappointment, or anger. It may be a song that give you new hope and encouragement, or brings you back to happier times. You can also create your own lyrics and sing out your thoughts and emotions. The choice is yours and there's no right and wrong choice.

You may find that you feel much better after singing a song or two.

My song of choice:

How did my feelings and thoughts change after singing?