

# The Transformative Power Of Forgiveness in Substance Use Disorder Recovery

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Forgiveness, an essential aspect of emotional healing and recovery, often remains overlooked and misunderstood. Many mistakenly equate forgiveness with forgetting, failing to recognize its transformative power.

The most profound definition of forgiveness I have come across is simple yet profound: "giving up the need to punish." This definition doesn't imply anything about the actual act of punishment or forgetting. It solely focuses on relinquishing the compulsion or fantasy of inflicting punishment.

Holding onto resentment, which consists of recycled feelings of hurt and anger, only harms us. You suffer the consequences if you mentally craft scenarios of how you would like to punish someone or fantasize about their eventual comeuppance.

Consider an example of lingering hurt and anger from an incident during high school. Over the years, you have added layers of resentment, repeatedly reliving the pain and blaming the person for subsequent painful experiences. This toxic resentment has grown, much like a snowball rolling downhill. However, the person who caused you pain in high school probably doesn't remember you. You are one carrying the burden of the resentment. Whose suffering is the resentment causing? Whose problem does it belong to? Holding onto old resentments deprives us of peace and joy in the present, keeping us anchored in the past.

In recovery, we aim to find peace with others. To achieve that, it is sometimes necessary to heal the pain from the past, and forgiveness becomes an integral part of the process. Forgiveness is not a favor we do for someone else; it is an act of self-liberation. If our reluctance to forgive stems from self-pity or blame, we must let go to embrace recovery. The cost of maintaining the resentment is too high to bear.

Forgiving does not mean granting others an open door to trample our boundaries and harm us again. It does not imply accepting the unacceptable. Forgiveness is not synonymous with forgetting or condoning the actions that caused us pain. Sometimes, our struggle to forgive stems from our expectations of receiving something from the person who hurt us—expectations that may be unrealistic or based on a fantasy. True forgiveness may involve letting go of these expectations and finding closure within ourselves.

Forgiveness in recovery is a powerful tool for personal growth and healing. It frees us from resentment, allowing us to move forward. Understanding the significance of forgiveness can transform our recovery journey, bringing us closer to inner peace and fulfillment.

Forgiveness is a challenging task. It requires courage, self-reflection, and a willingness to let go of the past. However, the benefits are immeasurable. When we release the burden of resentment, we create space for healing, growth, and the possibility of building healthier relationships.

One effective way to cultivate forgiveness is through self-compassion. Recognize that you, too, have made mistakes and have needed forgiveness. Embrace your humanity and extend that compassion to others. By practicing self-forgiveness, you develop the capacity to forgive others.

Another helpful strategy is reframing the way we perceive the situation. Instead of viewing forgiveness as a sign of weakness, we can recognize it as an act of strength and empowerment. By relinquishing our attachments to self-pity or blame, we create space for personal healing and growth. It allows us to move forward on our recovery journey and embrace a healthier and more fulfilling life.

Recognizing any hidden benefits of clinging to resentments is crucial in overcoming the challenges associated with forgiveness. By asking ourselves, "What is the payoff?" we can uncover the underlying reasons

that hinder our ability to let go. Once we identify these rewards, we can evaluate whether they genuinely serve our well-being and whether we would be better off without them.

Self-compassion plays a crucial role in our journey toward forgiveness. By recognizing our own fallibility and embracing our shared humanity, we are able to extend compassion to ourselves and, consequently, to others. By practicing self-forgiveness, we cultivate the capacity to forgive those who have caused us harm.

Forgiveness enables us to surpass the constraints of the past and wholeheartedly embrace a future brimming with hope and endless possibilities. By choosing forgiveness, we choose to heal, grow, and thrive. Remember that forgiveness is the act of giving up the need to punish, rather than forgetting or condoning. Resentments perpetuate personal suffering, robbing us of peace and joy in the present while forgiveness is an act of self-liberation.

