

Chapter 3

Discovering What Hurts: One Core Problem (Unforgiveness) and One Core Solution (Forgiveness)

“Before we can experience the pure and serene state of love, there is one priceless gift we must learn how to give—to ourselves and to others. . . . The gift I am speaking about is forgiveness. To heal the split between our dark side and our higher self, we must learn how to forgive ourselves for our imperfections, . . . for our judgmental minds.... We also must find the willingness to forgive those who have hurt us, lied to us, disappointed us, and betrayed us. . . . Ultimately, we have to . . . forgive the presence that we think of as God.”

—Debbie Ford, *Why Good People Do Bad Things*

*“Forgiveness takes away what stands between your brother and yourself.
It is the wish that you be joined with him and not apart*

. . .

The holiest place on earth is where an ancient hatred has become a present love.”

—*A Course in Miracles*

I met Ellen many years ago. I knew her and her husband and some of the personal, marital, and family struggles she has had over the years. She is a courageous and loving woman and was kind enough to share this story with me. It demonstrates the kind of healing transformation that can take place in family relationships when you are ready and willing to forgive. It also shows how forgiveness can bring about love and an open heart.

I never really understood my father; he was a distant, harsh man who ruled our home with an iron fist. With a houseful of women, he would complain about the fact that he had three daughters and no sons. My whole life I tried to please him. As a youngster, I was a tomboy—as close as he was going to get to having a son. He would often refer to me in masculine terms calling me boy, son, or Paco. When I approached puberty and decided I preferred dresses and dancing to climbing trees and playing soccer, our relationship—if you can call it that—ended.

Eventually, I married, had a baby boy, and I could see that his baby grandson brought him enormous pleasure. Unfortunately, two weeks after my son was born my father had a massive stroke. The doctors never understood how he survived, but I knew his determination to live would not let him go so easily. After he was released from the hospital, his left side was paralyzed, his speech was slurred, and he needed someone to care for him while my mother was at work.

Every morning my husband dropped our son and me at my parents’ home on his way to work. I would care for my father, bathe him, shave him, feed him. I even had to deal with bedpans and cleaning him afterward. I went there day after day, hoping, praying that just once he’d say, “thank you” or “good job”—something, anything positive. Instead, day after day I got, “You don’t know how to make oatmeal” or “I hate the way you bathe me.”

“You’re going to cut me with that razor”; “You’re stupid”; and “You can’t learn anything.”

Day after day I came home in tears. This went on for about two years until my mother’s union switched insurance companies. The new company covered a nurse’s aide for my dad for up to six hours a day. So now, I only had to cover two hours a day but nothing else changed. I still went there every day, and all I wanted to hear was that I was loved and appreciated for all I was doing and giving up, and every day I was disappointed, heartbroken, and tearful. After about ten years, my husband said to me, “Enough is enough; either you find a way not to be upset or stop taking care of your dad.”

I had a difficult decision and I prayed for guidance. Could I continue to care for my dad, because he was my dad and sacrificed to support us, without ever expecting him to change or say thank you? Could I give up my hope that we could have a different relationship and accept that the way he showed love was through his years of work? Could I forgive him for not being the dad I wanted? Could I just walk away from him and live with myself? I decided that I could not walk away—that in spite of everything I loved him. I chose to forgive him and love him, faults and all.

A funny thing happened, though. Within a year of this decision—suddenly my dad was saying, “No one takes care of me as good as you” and even he said, “I love you” to me regularly. A year later he died, but for a glorious year I had the father I always wanted, because I opened my heart first and forgave him.

One Core Problem, One Core Solution

As you know by now, at the core of my work is the belief that lurking underneath almost all of the other problems we have there is one core problem: unforgiveness.¹ In other words, if you are depressed or angry or anxious or having any number of other psychological, emotional, or interpersonal issues, a grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought is at the heart of it all, being used consciously or unconsciously by you against yourself or another person. A grievance or attack thought is any thought with the intent to harm, injure, hurt, threaten, offend, disparage, diminish, blame, judge critically, or judge harshly someone else or oneself.

Attack thoughts always separate us from our true selves and from others. Attack thoughts include phrases or tones of voice that say or imply: you are wrong, bad, incompetent, inadequate, sinful, not good enough, stupid, worse than, and foolish. Phrases that include always and never are usually attack thoughts as well, such as “you always drive too fast” or “you never remember to put away your clothes.” Attack thoughts against oneself include the same kinds of thoughts directed against oneself: “I am wrong, bad, incompetent, inadequate, sinful, not good enough, stupid, worse than, and foolish.” Shoulds include statements such as “you should do something differently” or “I should do something differently,” said or thought with a judgmental tone.

For that one core problem, there is also one core solution: forgiveness.² Forgiveness is the letting go of the grievance, judgment, should, and attack thought that you use (consciously or unconsciously) against another person or yourself. Forgiveness is a shift in perception and attitude. It is also about seeing the inner light or goodness in yourself and in other people. For some of you, this may be quite challenging to understand at first. I know it took me a while to see and understand that unforgiveness could be such a powerful force and that it was underneath so many other problems. This is why forgiveness is often said to be the key to happiness and peace. Forgiveness removes the blocks and barriers to the presence of love, peace, happiness, and light. Fortunately, however, forgiveness is inherent within the problem and can be learned.

The next set of exercises is designed to help you discover what grievances, judgments, and attack thoughts you hold against yourself, other people, groups, or God so that you can then begin to learn how to forgive yourself and others.

Exercise: Identifying Your Grievances and Attack Thoughts

1. In your notebook or journal, write down any grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought that you are holding against the people you live with. (If you don’t live with anyone, think about the person you are closest to.) It doesn’t matter how large or small the grievances, judgments, shoulds, or attack thoughts are or how strong or weak your feelings are toward this person or persons.

April’s Response: People you live with—Because I have a lot of unresolved feelings from my past, I take a lot of my emotions out on Brian because we live together. Most of the time I am upset or angry about something that he doesn’t have anything to do with, but I don’t know where to place those feelings.

2. Now write down any grievances, judgments, shoulds, or attack thoughts that you have against someone you work with, including your boss, supervisors, colleagues, clients, customers, employees, and supervisees. Again, it doesn't matter how large or small the grievances, judgments, shoulds, or attack thoughts are or how strong or weak your feelings are.

April's Response: For the most part, I enjoy my job. There are, however, many clients that come in [who] aggravate me. The ones I have the biggest problem with are those [who] walk in when we are about to close. It seems like the same three or four people that do this frequently, and I think it's rude. It's as if any time is less valuable than theirs. I feel it is disrespectful toward the employees.

3. Now write down any grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought that you are holding against your parents, siblings, in-laws, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. Again, it doesn't matter how small or large you consider the grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought to be or how strong or weak your feelings are.

April's Response: The time I was angry at my mom for leaving was when I was five. I felt like she should've been there a lot more throughout my life. She said things that hurt me and made me feel bad about the person I was. My uncle is also someone who made me feel bad. He said, "You're a worthless clone of your father." That's hard to hear, especially from a family member.

4. In your journal, write down any grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought that you are holding against yourself. It doesn't matter how large or small the grievances, judgments, shoulds, or attack thoughts are or how strong or weak your feelings are toward yourself.

April's Response: I am insecure about myself. I constantly wonder if I'm living up to the standards of other people. I tend to be hard on myself when things go wrong. I put myself down a lot. Sometimes I think I'm not good enough for anyone.

5. Now write down any grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought that you are holding against someone from another ethnic, religious, national, or international group. Again, it doesn't matter how small or large you consider the grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought to be or how strong or weak your feelings are.

6. Finally, write down any grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought that you are holding against God, nature, the Universe, or any Higher Power. Again, it doesn't matter how small or large you consider the grievance, judgment, should, or attack thought to be or how strong or weak your feelings are.

April's Response: I don't feel like this so much anymore, but when my dad died I kept thinking, "Why? Why would God do this to me?" I questioned my belief in God at one point.

Soon you will be learning some techniques to help you release these grievances, judgments, shoulds, and attack thoughts, and I will explain more about the role they play in your healing process. For now, we are just identifying the limiting and attacking thoughts that cause you emotional pain and distress and helping you begin to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. In other words, there is always a silver lining within these upsetting experiences that trigger unforgiving thoughts and feelings and another way of looking at them.