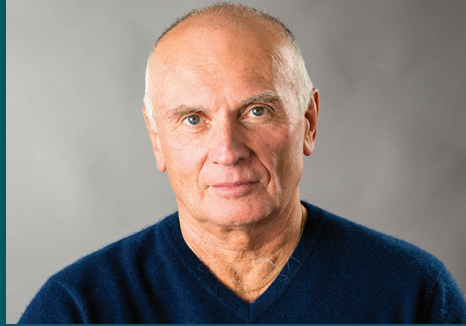


# The Art of Self-Forgiveness

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



We are taught that forgiveness is something we give to others and receive from others. Folks who are in some way offended, hurt or violated by us are allegedly in control of whether or not we are deserving of forgiveness. This leaves us virtually out of control regarding the role of forgiveness in our lives. For example, someone consumed by revenge may be a significant impediment to our experience of being forgiven.

The prefix for in the word forgive comes from the German meaning away. We can think of the word forgive as meaning away give or to give away our transgressions. As we do so, our essential personal worth is restored. It is curious to note that if we depend upon others for forgiveness, then we are dependent upon them in order to feel good about ourselves. It may be that such a dependency is fostered throughout childhood, placing the control of our personal value in the hands of others. The result is that forgiveness coming from ourselves becomes confusing and at best arduous. Let's look at some steps that can yield a budding ability for self-forgiveness.

## Steps To Self-Forgiveness

- **Making Self-forgiveness a Priority.** Forgiving ourselves will not happen magically. It will more likely take place because we make it an important task to attend to. I often hear, "I haven't forgiven myself for some situation." I typically respond, "I hear that you haven't forgiven yourself, and can you tell me what you are doing to yourself instead of forgiveness?" The common responses include stories describing themselves as depraved, inadequate, sinful and unworthy.
- **Identifying the Purpose of Ongoing Belittlement.** With only a little curiosity, it becomes clear that the purpose of withholding forgiveness and replacing it with on going self-repudiation is the belief that such harsh treatment will prevent the unacceptable behavior from being repeated. Of course, such cruelty does not evoke some profound shift in character. Continuing to prioritize self-forgiveness means being willing to interrupt self-deprecating stories we create.
- **Accepting and talking about feelings of remorse, regret, guilt and shame due to violating our own values.** This step suggests it is important to know our values and when there has been a breach to one of them. When people complain and object to our behavior, does not translate into we did something wrong. Wrong action is determined by our values and not by the disapproval of others. We can use the disapproval of others to check out whether we actually acted in opposition to one of our values.
- **Moving out of a fixation on self-incrimination.** It is important to process what happened in order to enlarge our vision of how we came to make the choice we did. Some questions that can be helpful include: How did I come to believe that the action

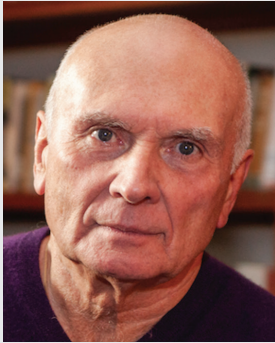
carried out was not a violation of my values? Did the action reflect the result of two competing values, with one being sacrificed? Were there intervening variables I was not aware of? Is there some understanding of my motivation that I can have in retrospect?

- ***Restitution and/or making amends.*** Is there some compensation to be offered to the injured party in the way of a service, money or the replacement of damaged property? Sometimes making an amends can be helpful in support of forgiving ourselves. An amends is an apology (expression of regret) accompanied by a commitment to refrain from the adverse behavior. An amends is not offered if it would create greater harm to either the injured party or the person making the amends.
- ***Accepting that being fully alive means making mistakes.*** This calls for a level of humility, allowing us to be more accepting of our limits and letting go of perfectionistic aspirations.
- ***Ask for help.*** It can be very important to turn to a friend; mentor, counselor or clergy person whom we trust can help guide us toward authentic self-forgiveness. It is vital that the helper not attempt to minimize what we did in order to have us feeling more cheerful. Nor should the helper be prone to shaming us. Helpers need to offer the kind of support that leads us to hold a larger understanding of what we did while assisting us in interrupting any perfectionism. When it is difficult for me to summon self-forgiveness, a colleague of mine often says, “Did you think that you were suppose to be larger or better?” Of course, the answer is “yes”. And then I’m starring

down the barrel of some insidious arrogance. Quite often, the resistance to forgive ourselves travels in tandem with an attachment to be exceptional. Nothing can be more useful in regard to helping us accept ourselves as ordinary human beings than making a mistake and committing to find an offering of self-forgiveness.

Being unskilled at self-forgiveness can leave us dependent upon others for our self-worth, risk-adverse, haunted by guilt and shame, trapped in self-loathing and condemned to superficial relationships where the hope is that making mistakes will be minimized. Ultimately, becoming more effective at self-forgiveness is simply a way to remain responsible for our self-worth. It is also a large welcome to our humanity as we release perfectionistic aspirations, attending to the task of inner reconciliation, and being an ordinary person.

Making peace with ourselves is not a self-absorbed activity. We typically live with more courage when we hold the faith that we will devotionally move toward self-forgiveness. A risk that might have unfavorable consequences is no longer paralyzing, as we can anticipate moving toward self-forgiveness. It is a freedom that can yield more depth and meaning in our relationships. When we are not defending a self-concept pummeled by guilt and self-incrimination, we become more generous with offering compassion to others. Forgiveness possesses a heart-opening quality that tempers resentment and vindictiveness, allowing us to be more receptive to seeking reconciliation with others. As we strive less for perfection, we discover a growing acceptance for the limits and shortcomings of others. There is an abiding honoring of the human condition reflected by our own lives and the lives of others.



**PAUL DUNION**, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).

