



Book Review

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FORGIVE FOR GOOD: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness by Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., (2002; HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., New York, NY; ISBN 0-06-251721-X).

Life is messy, and life is not fair. Life disappoints us, and people in our lives hurt us. Some of these disappointments and hurts are trivial (a friend cancelling a movie date) and some are significant (a parent being chronically neglectful or a business partner cheating us). Some individuals have made peace with the fact that life is unfair and are able to quickly bounce back from being disappointed or hurt, but others have not learned these skills. Dr. Frederic Luskin's book, *Forgive for Good*, teaches these skills. Dr. Luskin has a Ph.D. in counseling and health psychology and is the cofounder and director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, an interpersonal forgiveness training research study.

The following four questions are asked in the first chapter of *Forgive for Good*: "Do you think about a painful situation more than you think about the things in your life that are good?" "When you think about this painful situation, do you become either physically uncomfortable or emotionally upset?" "When you think about this situation, do you do so with the same old repetitive thoughts?" "Do you find yourself telling the story about what happened over and over in your mind?" Dr. Luskin reports that it is likely that we have formed a grievance if we answer yes to any one of these questions.

According to Dr. Luskin, a grievance emerges when something happens in our lives that we did not want to happen, and we cope with it by thinking about it too much. Emphasis is placed throughout the book on the following three-step process needed to form a grievance: taking something too personally (which causes us to "rent too much space in our mind" to our disappointment); blaming the offender for how we feel (which takes away our power); and creating a grievance story. Each of these three steps is explained thoroughly with many examples of each step.

Dr. Luskin then asks the following important question: "What is it that causes some situations and not others to become grievances?" This question is answered by describing the mistake made by those who form grievances. This simple mistake is that those who have grievances try to enforce rules which are not enforceable. An unenforceable rule is an expectation we have for other people or for the world that we do not have the power to make happen. Examples of such rules are: people should be kind; hard work and loyalty to a company will be rewarded; a spouse must be faithful; a business partner has to be honest; colleagues should be punctual; a friend must always be available at times of need; and a parent needs to treat all siblings equally. Unenforceable rules can also be as trivial as: the weather should always be wonderful during a vacation; people should always have twelve or less items in the express lane; and adolescents should keep their rooms clean. We can certainly state our expectations and boundaries and make choices about our relationships based on others' responses to our expectations and boundaries; however, we have no control over whether other people have our same expectations or whether they abide by the boundaries we set. When we try to change things which cannot be changed or try to influence people who do not want to be influenced, we cause our own distress.

This distress has significant consequences. Grievances take a heavy physical and mental toll. Dr. Luskin tells us that each and every time we think of our grievance, our body reacts in the same primitive way by releasing stress chemicals. These chemicals cause our heart to speed up, our blood pressure to rise, our

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liver to drop cholesterol into our bloodstream, our digestion to stop, our muscles to tense, our breathing to become more shallow, our senses to heighten, and our brain's electrical activity and its blood flow to go to the more primitive parts of our brain in order to cope with the problem at hand. Because our body does not know whether our upset occurred now or twenty years ago or whether we are thinking about our upset for the first time or the 600th time, our body reacts the same way every time.

We cannot change the past nor can we control others; however, we can control the way we feel in the present. Dr. Luskin defines this concept as forgiveness -- that is, forgiveness is the experience of peace that comes from understanding that we are responsible for how we feel in the present moment. Dr. Luskin emphasizes that forgiveness is not forgetting what happened to us, ignoring problems, denying that people hurt us, excusing poor behavior, repairing what occurred, or reconciling with the offender. He states that we can forgive and choose to return to the relationship or we can forgive and choose to never speak to that person ever again. Forgiveness is a choice we make that is only for us - it is not for the offender. Realizing that how we feel in the present is more important than holding onto a grievance from the past gives us the opportunity to regain power over our lives.

How do we control how we feel in the present? What we focus on in our minds affects how we feel, and we have control over that focus. Dr. Luskin likens our mind to a television screen. He encourages us not to focus on our grievances on this screen but to instead change the channel to something we can control - something which is positive and constructive. He teaches us cognitive-behavioral techniques to change the channel on our screen.

Dr. Luskin summarizes his nine-step program of forgiveness in the last chapter of his book. The following list is a paraphrased form of that summary:

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened, be able to articulate what about the situation is not okay, and tell only a couple of trusted people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do whatever you need to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you only - not anyone else.
3. Understand your goal . . . your goal is peace.
4. Get the correct perspective on what is actually happening -- your primary distress is coming from what you are suffering now, not what upset you two minutes ago or ten years ago.
5. At the moment you feel upset, practice the Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique (PERT) to soothe and refocus. (PERT is a simple cognitive-behavioral technique in chapter nine which includes relaxation training. Variations of this technique are offered, also.)
6. Give up expectations of others and of life over which you have no control.
7. Shift your energy away from that which has hurt you and towards getting your positive goals met.
8. Focus on the positives around you.
9. Amend your grievance story into a story of forgiveness.

In summary, *Forgive for Good* offers a secular, practical, wise, and step-by-step approach to forgiveness. Because the book is filled with wisdom and life experience, it is helpful to read the book slowly in order to fully absorb the wisdom and to integrate the book's concepts into one's life. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is book that is well worth reading.

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