



# e-quilibrium

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## Forgiveness

One of the songs from a 1989 Don Henley release is titled *The Heart of the Matter*. The lyrics describe moving on from a broken relationship. One line goes, "you keep carryin' that anger; it'll eat you up inside..." The heart of the matter, the writer has discovered, is forgiveness.

Chronic anger and hostility can "eat us up inside" by increasing one's susceptibility to heart disease. This is why behavioral scientists have become increasingly interested in the question of whether forgiveness has health benefits.

A challenge in studying forgiveness is that consensus about its definition is lacking. I define forgiveness as a choice that the bad feelings associated with an offensive event (and the offender) will no longer be held. It is of benefit to the one doing the forgiving, and in some circumstances may never even be communicated to the person(s) being forgiven. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. (To work at forgetting something can actually further solidify the memory.) Forgiveness also does not mean condoning the offensive behavior or letting the offender "off the hook." While the forgiving party may choose to remove the consequences to the offender (if that is an option), this is not inherent in forgiveness. I see reconciliation as distinct from forgiveness, although reconciliation may follow forgiveness.

From this standpoint, forgiveness means letting go of anger or resentment. One reason to choose to let go of these emotions is that they can be harmful to health and quality of life when held over time. Is forgiveness, then, good for health?

Research on this question is not extensive and much more is needed for a definitive answer. Kathleen Lawler, a University of Tennessee psychologist, has monitored research participants' blood pressure and heart rates when discussing an experience of being hurt by someone. She has found that those who are more forgiving regarding the experience have less increase in blood pressure and heart rate when discussing the experience. More recently she has found that more forgiving research participants report fewer physical symptoms, fewer medications used, less fatigue, and better sleep.

To be forgiving is widely regarded as a strength of character and is highly valued in most of the world's major religious and philosophical traditions. While the process of forgiving typically wouldn't be considered a fun thing to do, most would regard it as a good and satisfying thing to do... and often results in a sense of relief.

Forgiveness appears to enhance quality of life. With respect to health benefits, we can say that forgiveness is indeed a change of heart, and we may eventually know more certainly that it contributes to heart health.

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