

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

Forgive for the Health of It

Studies prove what Mom always said: Holding a grudge hurts you more than anyone else.

Dr. Gravesen wants patients to know about research showing that nursing grudges affects body and mind, while forgiveness speeds healing. Replacing resentment with compassion decreases odds for chronic pain and life-threatening maladies, such as heart disease. Forgiveness also boosts emotional well-being and lowers the risk of stress-related ailments.

Sound too good to be true? Conventional medicine tends to downplay how strongly emotions affect disease and pain. Yet doctors of chiropractic, such as Dr. Gravesen, argue that nothing could be further from the truth. A positive frame of mind is inseparable from physical and emotional health.

Be Forgiving for Your Blood Pressure

Heart disease tops the list of chronic, fatal diseases. The good news is that regular exercise, a smoke-free lifestyle, stress reduction, weight management and a diet low in saturated fat, cholesterol and sugar all reduce risks.

Now, analysis shows that forgiveness should be added to this heart-helping list.

Why are forgiving hearts so healthy? Individuals who tend to forgive have lower blood pressure and heart rates than those who hold grudges.

In one study, 108 college students (44



males and 64 females) recounted times of betrayal by a parent and by a friend or partner. In addition to overall lower blood pressure and heart rates, forgiving subjects' blood pressure fell quicker after recalling the stressful event than did unforgiving individuals' blood pressure (*J Behav Med* 2003;26:373-93).

In another experiment, 71 participants (35 females and 36 males) discussed memories of when they nursed grudges and then described a time when they granted forgiveness. Researchers compared the participants' heart responses during both stories with rates prior to either tale.

Unforgiving thoughts prompted heart rate and blood pressure jumps, which persisted into a "recovery period." However, when the volunteers recalled times of forgiveness, they appeared much more in control and experienced lower stress responses.

The researchers concluded that "chronic unforgiving responses may erode health whereas forgiving responses may enhance it." (*Psychol Sci* 2001;12:117-23.)

Reconcile for Rose-Colored Glasses

Searching for a way to see life through rose-colored glasses? Look no further: Forgiveness is a surefire way to boost happiness and emotional health.



Researchers examined six studies that focused on forgiveness. Being able to forgive predicted four essential aspects of psychological well-being: decreased anger, anxiety and depression and increased satisfaction with life.

People who tended to forgive were likely to be adaptable and positive, while grudge holders were apt to harbor revenge and hostility. Forgiving subjects were also more prone to enjoy long-lasting, satisfying friendships than unforgiving participants (*J Pers* 2005;73:313-60).

Yet the positive aspects of forgiveness on emotional health don't stop there. Being forgiving was linked to agreeableness, an outgoing personality and empathy in four studies including 179, 233, 80 and 66 college students. Unforgiveness correlated with anger, hostility, neuroticism, fear and vengeful thoughts (*J Pers* 2005;73:183-225).

Patch Things Up to End Pain

Evidence confirms what doctors of chiropractic like Dr. Gravesen have always recognized: People who foster negative emotions, such as grudges, tend to suffer from chronic pain conditions, including back pain.

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Researchers assessed how forgiveness influenced pain, anger and psychological distress in 61 patients with chronic low-back pain (CLBP). Patients who tended to forgive were less likely to suffer pain, anger and psychological distress than unforgiving individuals.

“These findings indicate that forgiveness can be reliably assessed in patients with persistent pain, and that a relationship appears to exist between forgiveness and important aspects of living with persistent pain.” (*J Pain* 2005;6:84-91.)

In another study of 58 CLBP sufferers, some patients practiced the loving-kindness Buddhist meditation technique. This technique focuses on replacing anger and resentment toward a person who inflicted anguish with compassion.

Compared with participants who were not taught to meditate, those learning to forgive reported superior coping abilities and significantly less intense pain and disability.

Researchers concluded that there is a “strong and consistent relationship between forgiveness and important aspects of living with persistent pain, including pain itself and measures of adjustment.” (*Conference on Forgiveness* October 2003.)

Stymie Substance Abuse With Forgiveness

Strong emotions, such as grudges and anger, are linked to substance abuse. Researchers are finding that forgiveness plays a central role in recovery.

For instance, 14 patients with substance dependence were enrolled in either therapy that focused on forgiveness or typical drug and alcohol treatment topics.

After meeting twice a week for three months, the forgiveness therapy participants had significantly less anger, depression, anxiety and drug relapses — and more self-esteem and forgiveness — than the traditional therapy cohort. Even during a four-month follow-up, the forgiveness group retained its success (*J Consult Clin Psychol* 2004;72:1114-21).

The Task of Coming to Terms

Keep in mind that forgiving is easier said than done, especially for those with fiery tempers or difficulty letting things go. However, overall, forgiveness may be most difficult for young adults, regardless of temperament.

A study that examined the health effects of forgiving determined that middle-aged and older adults are more apt to forgive than younger people. The study also documented that for those aged 45 and older, “forgiveness of others was more strongly related to self-reported mental and physical health.” (*J Adult Development* 2001;8:249-57.)

Wipe the Slate Clean From Within

Forgiving yourself or others from within is helpful, but probing for forgiveness may have less positive effects. Research shows that “proactive forgiveness,” which involves asking people for forgiveness for your wrongdoing may be anxiety producing and counterproductive.

“Furthermore, older adults with high levels of proactive forgiveness reported less satisfaction with their lives than other older adults. This is understandable, since asking forgiveness can be stressful.” (*J Adult Development* 2001;8:249-57.)

Moving on Makes Sense

We know that holding a grudge only punishes ourselves. Also, practically speaking, grudges never guarantee that offenders will be remorseful or behave considerately next time. Practice the techniques listed here to gain inner peace. If you still feel a cloud of anger looming, ask the doctor to recommend a counselor in the area. No doubt, your body and mind will thank you!

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Forgiveness Techniques

- ♥ Neutralize the hindering experience that caused the grudge. Most likely, the memory's pain is sharp and reappears often. Change or “reframe” how you remember it so that it does not carry the same “firepower.” Try to see the event or experience as separate from feelings, such as anger, hatred and betrayal. Slowly, you'll disconnect the experience from intense, painful emotions.
- ♥ Let go and accept people as they are. Forgiveness is an opportunity to re-evaluate or adjust expectations. It's a willingness to restore a connection, although the new relationship will probably have more boundaries. Certainly, you don't have to make yourself completely vulnerable to someone who has proved untrustworthy.
- ♥ Consider that you may have influenced or played a part in the situation. Even inwardly, acknowledging that we provoked or aggravated a confrontation is challenging.
- ♥ Walk in their shoes. We all confront situations in different ways based on our life experiences and beliefs. Realize that you may not know the offender's complete emotional background. It's human nature to fight for survival and satisfaction in every circumstance, which is what the offender was doing, albeit clumsily and cruelly.
- ♥ Know that understanding an offender's position, however inexcusable or foreign, is *not* the same as *approving* of his or her actions. Don't burden yourself with focusing on understanding *why* he or she acted that way; accept it, and move on.
- ♥ Realize how futile and unhealthy grudges are.
- ♥ Don't forget to forgive yourself. Many people are harder on themselves than on others.