

Dr. Fred Luskin: Director, Stanford Forgiveness Projects
Author of *Forgive for Good*, Harper San Francisco, 2003

Forgiveness FAQ's

Explain what you mean by forgiveness.

Forgiveness would simply be the ability to make peace with your own life and not have to continue arguing and objecting to the way your life unfolded. It means that difficult things happen and first you have to grieve them, then accept them, and finally move on. Forgiveness is the entirety of that process. It is different than condoning what happened, because you're not excusing unkind or atrocious acts.

Forgiveness is different from reconciling with someone who hurt you, because you don't have to "make nice" with anybody you do not choose to. And, finally forgiveness is different than justice because you can still pursue civil or criminal justice while offering forgiveness. Forgiveness is the inner quality of healing, making peace and a release of bitterness— a cleansing of one's own heart.

Is forgiveness possible at Ground Zero?

Because forgiveness is an *inner* experience, it is possible regarding anything. What happened at Ground Zero presents problems, depending on how you were affected. It's very different if you had a personal loss than if it was just an attack on American soil. If it's a personal loss, than it's like other personal losses where you're dealing with the horror of unmerited and undeserved pain. Remember forgiveness doesn't mean you condone violence – it's that you don't remain angry so that your distress clouds your judgment and leads you to become consumed with bitterness or thoughts of revenge. Forgiveness is an acknowledgement that we live in a dangerous world and have to be safe and need to protect ourselves. It also makes clear that we have to protect ourselves but can choose whether or not to become hate-filled. Ground Zero shows us that even we, as Americans, can suffer damage and attack; which is something that happens all over the world. Indeed, Ground Zero is a reminder of the horror that results when anger goes unchecked. Reflecting on forgiveness at Ground Zero acknowledges we understand what hostility leads to and an affirmation that we don't want to do that.

Why is forgiveness important?

At the Stanford University Forgiveness Projects, we completed research projects showing that forgiveness improves physical, emotional and relationship well being. We even did this with Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland who had lost family members in the violence there. Forgiveness is health-enhancing and a powerful example to the rest of the world - that you don't have to use your wounds to wound others. You must keep your judgment and mind clear so you can choose actions that lead to optimal results for yourself and the world. If you take a situation like Northern Ireland you see a repeating cycle of violence.... where one side does something hurtful and the other retaliates. The retaliation makes sense to the side committing it, but for the long-term - it makes no sense at all because it is simple part of an endless loop of suffering and horror. Forgiveness is a choice. It is openness to letting go and making peace, though you still want to protect yourself. Bottom line it is important to remember that forgiveness is a choice, not a have-to. Consider it as a possibility and ask yourself at all times whether this is the moment you let go of violence and resentment. And think through your choices: what kind of example do you want to offer to the world?

Do you actually want me to forgive terrorists?

There are three levels to forgiveness regarding the attack on 9/11. The first is that you choose to forgive life – It was life that is difficult and hurtful: In that way we do not have to deal with a specific person that caused us to suffer. A little harder and a little more direct is you can choose to forgive misguided people in general who think violence is a good solution to problems. Finally, you can choose to forgive a specific terrorist; you understand and empathize with human beings that choose to hurt others. You ask yourself, in a world where people commit unimaginable terror, can I be merciful or open-hearted? And if I can, what are my limits? So in this order you can choose to forgive life, misguided people in general, and finally the specific person who chooses the human response of violence. Forgiveness is a means through which we create the future – a future free of repaying violence for violence and pursuing our desire for revenge.