FORGIVENESS AND HEALTH
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An act of healing
At times, you're faced with choices due to a hurtful situation in which someone has wronged you. Beyond the hurt of the situation itself, harboring negative feelings and thoughts may influence your psychological and even physical health.

Research indicates that learning to forgive and move on is a better choice for overall health.

Some early evidence
Life can leave you with feelings of anger and frustration. Maybe it's a divorce, family discord or being overlooked for a work promotion.

Research into the effects of forgiveness on health is still relatively new. Although no study has shown how holding a grudge results in long-term health problems, there's evidence that it may contribute to:

Cardiovascular effects - In one study, college students were asked to focus on a personal grudge. Doing so elevated their blood pressure and heart rates. When the same students imagined they'd forgiven their offenders, their blood pressure and heart rates returned to normal.

Nervous system effects - In the same study, students experienced increased muscle tension and feelings of being less in control when they focused on a grudge.

Improvements in psychological, emotional and physical well-being also have been noted in studies where forgiveness is taught to different groups of people. These groups included women who were abused as children, elderly people who felt neglected and people whose partners had been unfaithful.

Another study found that people who were less forgiving reported a higher number of health problems compared with people in the study who were more forgiving. An association also has been observed between high levels of forgiveness and low risk of nicotine dependence and drug abuse or dependence.

Understanding forgiveness
It can be difficult to forgive, especially if you've been badly hurt. To understand forgiveness, it helps to know what forgiveness isn't. Forgiveness isn't sanctioning unkind actions or forgetting what happened. It isn't justifying or condemning one's actions or seeking justice.

To forgive, start by acknowledging the facts about an injury -- sugarcoating the situation won't help. It's important to acknowledge the loss you feel for what it is and recognize how you feel. Ultimately, you have to come to a point of being able to let go of the hurt knowing that there may be no change in the offending person and perhaps no justice for what happened.

Forgiveness isn't always paired with settling differences -- reconciliation. Reconciliation may or may not occur. You may not choose to seek it, or you may have no choice for other reasons, such as your offender being deceased. What's important is the internal effect forgiveness has on you.

In addition, recognize that you can forgive the person without forgiving the act. The act may have been terrible. Forgiving the person is a way to take that person's power away. By forgiving the person, you choose to no longer define yourself as a victim in relation to the person.

Finally, you may encounter the need to forgive yourself. Understand that if you insist on blaming yourself for being the victim -- for instance, believing you somehow prompted or deserved your offender's hurtful actions -- you thwart the full benefits of forgiving your offender and moving on with your life.

Finding your way
There are various methods to help guide you toward forgiving a past wrong. Among them, researchers at the International Forgiveness Institute in Madison, Wis., have developed a four-phase model for forgiveness. Briefly, the steps involve:

- Acknowledging your pain.
- Committing to forgiveness after recognizing change is needed in order to heal.
- Finding a new way to think about the person who hurt you and accepting that your experience was painful. For example, you may experience empathy and possibly compassion for that person through the use of meditation or prayer.
- Beginning to recognize the relief brought on by forgiveness