



REACH

Just as confession is important in relationships, so is forgiveness. The purpose of this sheet is to examine important elements involved in forgiveness. Consider a time when you forgave someone. How did you feel before and after you forgave them? Also, consider a time when you were forgiven of something. How did this make you feel? What did it mean to you? More than likely, you understand the importance of forgiveness, but maybe it is a difficult process with you. Talk to your partner about the importance of forgiveness and what it looks like in your relationship.

Forgiveness is:

1. Choosing to put the hurt behind you and not seek revenge or avoid the partner
2. Over time replacing the negative feelings of hurt with positive feelings towards the partner as the partner shows remorse and repentance. In intimate relationships, the hurt feelings would hopefully become positive loving feelings and the couple reconciles over the event.

Please note that forgiveness is specific to each couple and their relationships. This definition of forgiveness is likely reasonable for healthy relationships. In other relationships it may not be safe or healthy to reconcile and it may not be desirable to have positive loving feelings towards an offender. In that case, forgiveness would involve just letting go of bitterness or self-harming negative feelings, especially if the offender is not repentant or available.

Below are principles that will help you REACH for forgiveness in order to heal hurts in your relationship. Consider these the next time you want to forgive your partner.

R: Recall the Hurt – Remember the situation. Focus on the facts of what lead up to the event and what actually occurred.

E: Empathy is Understanding the Truth – As the event is being recalled, try to see it objectively first and then through the eyes of the offender. Consider what situational factors may have contributed to the partner being hurtful (e.g., stressed, rushed, not understanding your sensitivity to the issue). Could your partner have been acting out of his or her own suffering, pain, guilt, or anger learned through hurtful experiences in the past? Can you feel sorry or even compassion for your partner? Empathy can break a chain of hurts that may have started decades earlier in your experiences even before you were a couple.

A: Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness Offered to You Partner – Forgiveness is a gift offered, not earned. Some couples use a metaphorical or literal gift to represent the forgiveness they are giving to their partner. Even a piece of paper with “I forgive you” written on it can be a metaphorical gift that can help make the act of giving the gift memorable. Remember to say, “I forgive you”.

C: Commit to Forgive – Forgiveness is both a decision and a feeling. This means to forgive you make a decision to forgive *and* you have feelings of forgiveness. These may not occur at the same time. You might feel like you want to forgive, but have not yet decided to do so. You may also need to choose to forgive your partner, even before you feel like you have forgiven them. Doubts about forgiveness will return in the future, but this is normal. There are particular times when you will be more vulnerable to doubts, such as when you are stressed or unhappy about something in your relationship. You might have made the **decision** to forgive and **felt** forgiveness. You might use symbolic acts to help in your commitment like writing a certificate of forgiveness, writing down the hurt and burning the paper, writing a letter to the offender and sharing it with a good friend. You should make a decision what you can do to commit to forgiveness through an act of faith.

H: Hold onto forgiveness – It is hard to hold onto forgiveness. There are some tips we have to hold onto forgiveness. The primary thing is to understand the difference between decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness. First, you will likely feel unforgiving towards their spouse some day in the future. Predict it. This is normal. Consider what kinds of things could happen to cause you to feel hurt and angry again (e.g., a similar offense, being generally frustrated with spouse, having a bad day...). Remember that feeling the emotions of hurt or anger doesn't mean you didn't forgive. Try not to dwell on the negative emotions, as this will distract you from growing in a healthy way. Do things to distract yourself from thinking about the hurt and anger. Explore why emotions may have regressed: Is your partner unusually stressed in life? Is there a situation in life that reminds you of the offense/offenses? Is an anniversary of a major offense coming up? Understanding it can help them from getting bound by it. Finally, they can walk through the REACH steps of forgiveness again.

Pray together for your marriage at least twice this week.