

What Self-Forgiveness Is

An excerpt from *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*
by Thom Rutledge, LCSW

A common fear – and criticism of self-help psychology – is that self-forgiveness is a snazzy, politically correct, socially acceptable way of letting ourselves off the hook by avoiding accountability and personal responsibility. This is absolutely not true. In fact, the more powerful and accurate definition of forgiveness is quite the opposite; self-forgiveness is the natural starting place for anyone who wants to lead an ethical life as free from hypocrisy as is humanly possible.

Think of it this way: When I was a kid, my father owned a dry-cleaning store. As an adolescent, I drove his delivery truck, picking up and delivering dry cleaning all around the small town where I grew up. In essence, I drove my Dad's truck around town, working to meet the needs of other people, my dad's customers. Was my father selfish for taking excellent care of that truck? Was he being selfish to make sure its tank was full, that the oil was changed on schedule, and that the tires were aligned?

Of course not. My Dad's priority care of that truck was not about being selfish. It was about being smart. Without regular, quality maintenance, the delivery truck would eventually require much more time and attention, not to mention money, than he could afford. People are the same way.

Self-forgiveness is that regular maintenance that keeps us on the road. The self-forgiving person is not – as many believe, or at least fear – a selfish person. It is the person who remains stuck in self-doubt and self-condemnation who will lead the more selfish, less productive life. As a psychotherapist, I have learned this lesson well. The better I take care of myself, the more effective I will be with clients and workshop audiences. When I have a noisy, neglected engine rattling under my hood, I will be distracted and unfocused on the work at hand. When I “run out of gas” I won't be able to show up (mentally). Self-forgiveness keeps us from being stuck; it keeps us moving.

What I Believe

Let me tell you what I believe about forgiveness, and in particular, self-forgiveness. First, I believe that all growth moves from the inside out, and that our repetitious, and very human, attempts to resolve problems from the outside in are just what (on closer examination) they appear to be: backwards.

I believe that in years past if I were to love my neighbor as myself, my neighbor had better watch out.

I believe that self-compassion is our first nature and that excessive self-criticism and self-condemnation are a learned second nature. I believe that forgiveness – of ourselves and others – is not so much something we do, as it is our natural state when we are not holding on to old

resentments, pain, and guilt. I also believe that resentments and grudges I hold against myself are every bit as destructive as those I harbor for the fellow down the street.

I believe that living a life of self-compassion has nothing to do with being selfish, or in any way excluding others. I believe that the first step to giving is receiving; that when we are genuinely self-forgiving, the benefits automatically (or with minimal effort) spill over into the lives of others. When we practice genuine self-forgiveness, we will naturally live according to a positive value system that includes respect for – and a desire for – the well being of others.

I believe that in order to practice genuine self-forgiveness, we must accept full responsibility for who we are and what we do. Accountability is a requirement, and perfection is not even an option.

Finally, I believe that living a life of forgiveness, attending to daily life from the inside out, is the most energy efficient and most productive way to live. I believe that self-forgiveness is essentially inseparable from self-respect and self-responsibility.

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