

The 12 Steps to Self Forgiveness Handout

1. **Categorize the event:** What did I do? What did I fail to do? Categorizing the offense begins the forgiveness process. It allows you to break down what you did, look at it, get a little distance, and begin healing.
2. **Know how you feel:** Articulate the specific wrong you committed and the harm it caused. Tell a couple of trusted people about what you did to get support, care, and advice. Sharing reminds us that everyone makes mistakes. It is common that we think we're alone and unique in our suffering, but this only makes healing more difficult. Confessing what you've done also prevents you from slipping into denial, suppression, repression, and forgetting.
3. **Understand what you want:** You don't necessarily want to reconcile with the person you hurt, you just want to get rid of the shame, release the blame, and feel calm and whole at your center. Self forgiveness can bring peace.
4. **Recognize unrealistic expectations:** Most of us have a set of unconscious rules hovering in the back of our minds about how we expect ourselves to behave. But those rules, many of which we picked up in childhood are not always realistic. [See the exercise below on unenforceable rules.]
5. **Identify the hurt:** Realize that the hurt feelings, guilty thoughts, and tummy-tightening stress you feel whenever you think of your offense is what's actually making you feel bad—not what you did 2 minutes or 10 years ago. It's your reaction to it today that's causing a problem. Let's identify what it is so we can release it. Please share in a sentence or two what the offense is.
6. **Hit the stop button:** Replaying what you did over and over again in your head isn't going to help you or the person you hurt. It just makes you feel bad. So every time you catch yourself ruminating on your mistakes, stop, and refocus your attention on something more positive.
7. **Sorry!** When you can't forgive yourself because of something you've done to someone else, you can be at a loss as to what to do. But sometimes all it takes is a sincere apology to make things right. Apologies are most effective if made in person. But if that's not possible, consider writing a letter.
8. **Practice PERT:** PERT stands for Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique. It's a 45-second strategy to use whenever you start beating yourself up over past mistakes.
9. **Make it right:** To make amends, look for a way to be kind to those whom you have hurt. If you spent half the family's monthly food budget on a new coat, make it up to them by turning out the tastiest meals ever cooked on a shoestring. Didn't get to your son's championship soccer game until the second half? Make it right by volunteering to be next year's assistant coach. Even if the person you hurt is dead or otherwise absent from your life, you can still make things right by providing a kindness to someone else. What things will you do to make amends? Do good rather than feel bad. Not only will you forgive yourself, but doing so will turn your life around in ways that you can only imagine.
10. **Stop Self Condemnation:** Once you've made amends, it's time to stop telling yourself the old story in which you're the Wicked Witch of the West, or the evil villain who ties the heroine to the train tracks. Start telling yourself a new story: a heroic story in which, despite your human frailties, you do everything in your power to be a loving person. List three affirmations about your heroic story of self forgiveness:
11. **Put things in perspective:** Once a day, think of the kind and loving things you've done today alone: delivering meals on wheels to the shut-in or elderly, etc. Think about these, and realize that you are an amazing person!
12. **Give yourself a break!** Feeling bad about things you've done in the past can create a pretty painful present. These regrets and ruminations from the past don't come with an extended warranty UNLESS YOU GIVE THEM ONE! So while you're learning how to forgive yourself and move on, give your mind and body a break from all the shame and guilt by replacing them with gratitude.