Forgiveness, Entry #1 of 6

Recognizing our own humanness gives us the capacity to forgive others and not be as judgmental as we have been in the past (NA Step Working Guides, Step 9, “Spiritual Principles”).

By working Steps Four through Eight, we confront the person who’s kept our lives in turmoil: “Oh no, it’s me!” In this rigorous process, we face our disease and our humanity. We unpack and pick apart lifelong grudges and current resentments against people who hurt, judged, and rejected us. Often, we’re shocked to learn we had a significant part to play. Engaging fully in the recovery process gives us a more realistic awareness of our flaws and limitations. We see a connection between our acting-out and our very human need for safety, love, and acceptance. We learn that a lack of empathy for our own missteps has driven our judgments of others. Our capacity to forgive is inseparable from our capacity for empathy.

In the Ninth Step, we strive to make peace with our own humanness. We expose our imperfections to those we’ve hurt. In an attempt to right our past wrongs, we humbly apologize. We change our behavior so we won’t repeat past errors. We’re often—but certainly not always—forgiven for the harm we’ve caused. This process offers us a striking lesson in empathy.

Acknowledging and accepting our own imperfections is key to accepting imperfections in others. We practice forgiveness for ourselves for the times we’ve let self-centered fear guide our actions. Instead of judging others for similar impulses, we can choose to forgive them, actively seeking to accept them as they are.

Experiencing others’ judgment and rejection—both in everyday life and when our attempt at an amends is rebuffed—increases our capacity to feel empathy and to forgive others. Our own pain becomes a source of strength, and we can draw from the well of self-acceptance we’ve created through our experience with the Steps.

Today I will take a “balcony view” of my judgments of others. Instead of cataloging their flaws, I will acknowledge their humanness, because I’m also human and worthy of empathy.
Forgiveness, Entry #2 of 6

We forgive ourselves, we forgive others, and we find peace—regardless of what others may think or feel or tell us (Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Amends and Reconciliation”).

Many of us want to skip ahead to Step Nine and apologize to those we’ve hurt in hopes of receiving their forgiveness. We desperately want to shed some of our guilt and shame. We may be convinced that getting others to forgive us would provide a shortcut to feeling better about ourselves. We’re reminded that the Steps are in order for a reason and that making amends has more to do with changing our behavior than offering apologies. Despite the urge to find a shortcut and get an early payoff, we surrender to the wisdom of experience. We work our way through the first eight Steps before attempting to right the wrongs of our past.

The gift of time prepares us for the amends process. “I’d be lying if I told you that I wasn’t looking to be forgiven,” a member recalled. Despite this longing, we focus on clearing out our wreckage and amending our behavior. Some people may never forgive us, but we can forgive ourselves nevertheless. The road to self-forgiveness starts with our commitment to working the Twelve Steps. In doing so, we establish a new way to live. We focus on the things we can change, namely ourselves.

Over time, new, healthy behavior brings a sense of peace to our spirit. Forgiveness is not a finite process—the more we give, the more we seem to get. “As I forgive, I grow in love and compassion and I move forward on my spiritual journey,” one member shared. Our actions solidify our commitment to Narcotics Anonymous and to ourselves. We become less concerned about who acknowledges our growth or how our amends are received. We revel in the peace we’ve found within and offer up a little more forgiveness to ourselves and the world.

Today, I will allow the Steps to shape my choices and behavior. I will enjoy the peace I find in this new way of life and reach for more as I practice forgiveness with myself and others.
Forgiveness, Entry #3 of 6

Walking with the knowledge that someone has not forgiven us is hard, but through it we find levels of forgiveness and acceptance that we may not have known were possible (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Amends and Reconciliation”).

Over time in NA, we learn that we are worthy of forgiveness. That discovery comes, in part, as a result of making our Step Nine amends. Part of our preparation for this process is to understand why we are doing it. To make meaningful and lasting change in our lives, we must make peace with the consequences of our actions and the harm we’ve caused.

While being forgiven by those we’ve hurt is a blessing, finding self-acceptance cannot be conditional on another’s actions. We must reconcile with ourselves to heal from our past. Forgiving ourselves is not contingent on receiving forgiveness from those we’ve harmed.

Reconciliation may not always be possible. Though we may believe we deserve to be heard and forgiven, some will understandably stonewall our efforts. What then? It’s pretty hard to gain the courage to undertake this process—but then we have to be humble enough to accept the reaction, even if it’s a flat-out rejection? For those of us whose self-esteem entirely hinges on being liked by others, that rejection may be excruciating. We ask ourselves, “Am I even still worthy of forgiveness? How do I walk through this?”

No one is obligated to forgive us. We are powerless over other people’s willingness or readiness. In a situation like this one, we have one option for healing move forward. That may take time because rejection is painful. As hard as it is to accept, we have to find a way to live with that pain and the consequences of our actions.

Not being forgiven is its own beast—and its own lesson in practicing spiritual principles. This experience might give us pause the next time we want to rebuff someone else’s amends. We may be quicker to forgive because we know what it’s like to experience that wall and how much effort it takes to live with that and let it go.

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*Today, I will strive to accept my past and move on from it, though others may not. All I can do—today and every day—is to do better.*
Forgiveness, Entry #4 of 6

Forgiving is its own reward. We start to find peace within ourselves. When we are free of guilt, shame, and resentment, our minds can be still (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Love”).

Self-righteous indignation used to be its own reward. We were uplifted by our intolerance of other points of view. Mad rage was addictive. No one was going to stop us from reaping its choice benefits: isolating from others, a free pass to gossip, fortifying our side against the person who wronged us—and, of course, a thousand more reasons to get high. A member shared, “Why would I want to forgive when that adrenaline rush of righteous anger felt so damn good?”

But what do we really gain by being “right”? It’s a distraction from the real problem. All the hard work we put into staying angry at others could be used to improve ourselves. And like drugs, that initial rush of self-righteous indignation wears off—exposing the shame and guilt lurking below the surface. “I needed more, just to stay well,” the member continued. “A thousand hits of justified anger just ain’t enough.” We end up alone obsessing about our guilt, shame, and resentments, stoking a fire of fixation no one is tending to but us.

Forgiveness is also hard work, but its rewards are far more satisfying and long-lasting. Through the process of recovery, we can let go of reacting to every injustice we experience (or think we do). That’s a bit of relief right there. We become more content with minding our own business and less inclined to keep tabs on the behavior of others. We actively try to love them instead—or at least try to understand them. And a lot can be said for off-loading the resentments we’ve lugged around forever. There’s so much freedom in that. There’s lightness and even some ease in walking through life.

For many of us, forgiving others does get easier over time, not least because we have experienced its rewards. “I know what it’s like to stay in a deep, dark hole of anger and self-righteousness,” the member went on. “Rather than digging myself deeper, I call for help, I dig myself out…and wonder, Why you even down there again?”

Who in my life have I forgiven, or at least started to—and what has that been like? How might my life be different if I continue down this path?
Forgiveness, Entry #5 of 6

Sometimes the path to forgiving ourselves begins with forgiving another for their lack of forgiveness (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Amends and Reconciliation”).

At first glance, this quote may sound like a riddle, but our experience validates its wisdom. Hoping to be forgiven is only human. Despite advice to the contrary, we sometimes harbor expectations about how amends *should* be received. We have ideas about how and when we’ll be forgiven. We anticipate the relief it will bring...only to be disappointed at times.

Given the harm we’ve caused, it’s understandable that some people may not be quick to forgive us. It hurts nonetheless. The conventional wisdom that “expectations are just premature resentments” makes even more sense to us now. Regardless of how our amends were received, we do our best to clean up our side of the street and let go of any ill will.

We take ownership of the damage we’ve caused and earnestly make an effort to compensate for our wrongs and change our behavior. We release those expectations we had about receiving forgiveness, let go of any hard feelings we set ourselves up for, and—with time—find forgiveness for ourselves and those who were unable to forgive us. Letting all of that go frees up a lot of headspace and energy.

We’re not as attached to how our formal amends was or was not received; we’ve done the work to make things right whether or not others recognize it. Our actions lead us to a deeper level of self-acceptance—who we were then and who we are now. We can focus our energy on becoming the best version of ourselves by continuing to work the Twelve Steps.

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*Today, I will empathize with those who have yet to forgive me. I will contemplate forgiveness in my Eleventh Step practice and seek to forgive on a little deeper level. I will forgive others for not forgiving me.*
Forgiveness, Entry #6 of 6

Forgiveness is an action and a decision. We need a lot of forgiveness, and we also get to provide it. (*Living Clean*, Chapter 7, “Love”).

Working the Twelve Steps of NA teaches us to make decisions for ourselves and take deliberate actions in our lives. We no longer allow circumstances and our disease to dictate our every move. We choose to practice forgiveness and try not to worry too much about when and if our loved ones forgive us. (We’d been pretty rotten at times, after all.) We focus on matters that are in our control and do the work necessary to forgive ourselves and others.

NA service provides plenty of opportunities to apply this spiritual principle. We serve alongside fellow members—it’s almost inevitable that we’ll bump heads from time to time. For the most part, we manage to set aside our disagreements, uniting to support the addict who still suffers. But practicing unity does not neutralize the need for forgiveness. “Despite acting in unity, I was still holding a grudge,” a member shared. “It occurred to me that service might be more pleasant if I would forgive some of those I serve with.”

Many of us have taken a turn standing on the NA soapbox in defense of what we believed was best for the Fellowship. We can forgive others for being irritatingly passionate, because we’ve been that, too. Instead of keeping a record of each others’ worst moments, we can make a decision to focus on the good work they’re doing. We adjust our perspective to take the bigger picture into account.

None of us is *all* good or *all* bad. By practicing forgiveness, we allow ourselves and others to be human. Sure, we make mistakes, but our worst moments don’t need to define us. By practicing forgiveness, we can shift our focus and appreciate the strengths each of us brings to the table.

I choose to practice forgiveness today. I’ll revisit some old resentments, take positive action on any unresolved issues, and let go of any lingering bitterness. I will accept people as they are now.