

LET

IT

HOLD A GRUDGE AND YOU'LL
SLOWLY POISON YOURSELF
WITH TOXIC THOUGHTS.
INSTEAD, LEARN TO FORGIVE,
LOSE THE ANGER AND SET
YOURSELF FREE

GO!

I'M LOUNGING IN MY HAIRSTYLIST'S chair, draped in a silky kimono, sipping a mug of tea. "What do you think?" the stylist asks. I force my eyes open. Behind me in the mirror I see a woman in the waiting area. My heart starts to pound. Adrenaline pours through my veins. It's her: Marya, the woman who destroyed my marriage 15 years ago.

Even though I've been happily married to someone else for a decade I've held a grudge against Marya since the moment she crashed into my life. I fume about her by day and confront her in my nightmares. I still refuse to eat in restaurants where *they* shared cozy romantic dinners. I won't hike in the park where *they* went for romantic walks.

Marya's eyes catch mine in the mirror. Her face turns red. I think she's actually starting to sweat! Her gaze darts around then returns to me, as if I'm a train wreck she can't help watching.

Then I have an epiphany: She's the one who's squirming in her seat, trying desperately to disappear. This is her train wreck, not mine.

I never stopped blaming Marya for my divorce—even after I learned that her relationship with my ex lasted a mere 10 months. In fact, I'm sure I've spent far more time torturing myself with images of them than they actually spent in each other's company.

Now, looking at her reflection, my perception of the situation flips. In the

wake of my divorce I put myself back together and forgave my ex, at least enough to allow us to continue raising our kids in joint custody. Poor Marya had a harder job. She had to forgive herself, which she clearly hasn't done.

"*Hel-lo!* Earth to Meredith," the stylist says, scrunching a stray curl and declaring, "you're perfect now."

I pull my eyes away from Marya's to check out my new do. "It looks great," I say. Marya is still staring at me in the mirror, dabbing her face with a Kleenex, looking miserable. My anger melts. I've thought of her as the embodiment of evil but suddenly I realize she's human, just like me. I realize I forgive her.

"We're done here," I say to the stylist, to Marya, to myself. Holding my head high, I walk out of the salon, leaving more than my split ends behind.

Forgiving Marya replaced my cold fury with a lovely, warm feeling. I'm not sure how she feels but it turns out that that doesn't matter. Despite my fears, forgiving her isn't about making her feel better about what she did. "You can let go of a grudge you've held against someone, even if you never see or speak to the person again," according to Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., senior consultant in health promotion at Stanford University and author of *Forgive for Good*. "Forgiving takes place inside the person who has the change of heart, not the person who is forgiven." In other words, it's all about you. And that's fine with me.



New research shows that letting go of anger does more than give the soul a break. It's good for the body, too. People who tend to forgive others have lower rates of heart disease and are happier and more satisfied with their lives, according to 2008 studies by Loren Toussaint, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Luther

College in Decorah, Iowa.

Dr. Toussaint has also looked at differences between male and female forgiveness. Women are more magnanimous, he has found. But a lot of women hang on to past hurts, and those who do are three times more likely to be depressed. It's worse for men. Guys who can't forgive are seven times more likely to be depressed than those who can let go of grudges.

If holding on to anger is so bad for us, why do so many of us do it? "There's a common misconception about forgiveness," Dr. Toussaint says. "People think that pardoning someone's misbehavior means either condoning it, which makes you an accomplice, or giving in to it, which means you're a doormat. In reality, the ability to forgive means that you rise above the conflict as a way of taking care of yourself."

Dr. Luskin agrees. "In order to forgive you don't have to let go of your opinions about someone's attitudes or actions. You just have to let go of the anger, frustration or sadness that's eating away at you."



Sometimes forgiveness is a conscious decision. In other situations, it's unexpected. When her sister told her she could no longer be the one to care for their dying mother, writer Joyce Maynard, 55, of Mill Valley, California, was certain she'd never forgive the heartbreak it caused her. Her sister had been taking care of their mother but Maynard had flown in to help. "From the moment I arrived I was cutting flowers, baking pies, messing up the kitchen," Maynard says. "I was impetuous, imprudent—one day when I was helping my mom down the stairs to sit in the garden, she fell."

"She needs to see the flowers,"



Your anger
may be
justified—
but it's just
hurting you

Maynard protested, when her sister confronted her. "But you weren't being safe," her sister responded. The fight escalated to the point where Maynard's sister told her she could no longer stay in the house. For nearly two decades afterward the siblings barely spoke.

And then one day a few days before Maynard's birthday her daughter asked what time of day she had been born. "I had no idea," Maynard recalls. "And there was no one to ask." On her birthday a card arrived from her sister. "I will be thinking of you at 6:53 P.M.," she wrote.

In that moment, Maynard says, she realized her sister was the only person on earth who remembered the moment

of her birth and she didn't want to lose that. "I was moved by the fact that my sister reached out to me, and I tried to imagine I was her: a person who experiences life so differently from me, and always has." This moment of pure compassion allowed Maynard, finally, to forgive her sister and let go of the grudge.



It's normal for family interactions to provoke resentment. "We have idealized notions of our closest relationships," says Dr. Toussaint. "But the reality is often different. Your mother-in-law says

STYLING: ARISTEN PETUSOU; HAIR & MAKEUP: RENEE MAJOR FOR J. BENNETT REPRESENTS; SET DESIGNER: RUPERT HOWARD

something hurtful and it's all the more painful because your expectations are so high." The trick is to change your own thinking, whether it's getting your expectations more in line with reality, or making an effort to put yourself in the other person's shoes.

That's what happened to Julie Whitten, a retired teacher in Berkeley, California. As a teenager Whitten often clashed with her authoritarian father. But at age 27 Whitten, who is white, married an African-American man. Her father became furious, disowning her, threatening to have her committed to a mental hospital and refusing to meet Whitten's husband or, later, their sons. "I'd make gifts for my father and send him my kids' drawings," Whitten says. "He'd return my packages unopened."

As her children grew older, Whitten's anger grew, too. "I tried to get rid of the rage," she says. "I wrote down my resentments on little pieces of paper and burned them. I went up into the hills and let go of balloons, hoping to release my anger along

with them. Nothing worked."

Then one night more than 12 years ago, Whitten started crying and couldn't stop. She called a friend and told him she couldn't live with her rage for one more day. He sat with her at her kitchen table and listened to her grievances. "Halfway through my usual litany," Whitten recalls, "I surprised myself by running out of steam."

The next morning she brought out a picture of her father that she'd always kept hidden away. "For the first time," she remembers, "I looked at him and saw a man who'd never known anything other than prejudice. I was still upset by his rejection, but I did understand it."

Looking down at the photograph, Whitten had a change of heart—she realized that her father had done the best that he could. A day later her mother called and told her that her father had died. Her first calls were to her now-adult sons, who'd been barred from their grandparents' home all their lives and had never met their grandfather. Whitten said she'd understand if they didn't want to go to the funeral with her.

Both of them chose to go. "We're part of the family," said her older son.

When Whitten arrived at her family home, she had a surprise waiting for her. "My father had put me back into his will just before he died. It felt like his way of reaching out to me, just as I was letting go of my anger at him."

Whitten got over her grudge because she was able to see the other side of the story—the greatest challenge of forgiveness, according to Debbie Ford, author of *Why Good People Do Bad Things*. "Grudges are about being right: whatever transpired isn't fair or shouldn't have happened to me. But when you stop needing to be right all the time, you feel better. You free up your energy to focus positively on the future."

I think back on the years I spent obsessing about Marya—far more time than she spent living with my ex. I wonder why that was. Ford has a ready answer. "Letting go of grudges is a process, sometimes a slow one," she says. "But the relief that forgiveness brings makes it all worthwhile." ■

FORGIVENESS MADE EASY

➔ PRACTICE

Don't wait until someone triggers your resentment to figure out how to respond, says Dr. Luskin. Role-play the scene in your head while wishing the person well. Being prepared will allow you to handle the situation with calm and grace.

➔ TALK IT OUT

If you're already nursing a grudge, talk about it with a friend who can see both sides. If you unburden yourself to someone who's too sympathetic, they'll just take your side and you won't be able to find the insight that might lead to forgiveness.

➔ LOOK AT IT ANOTHER WAY

Sometimes the thing that made you angry turns out to be based on a misunderstanding. If you consider the possibility that the offender didn't set out to hurt you, the wrong may begin to look pretty insignificant.

➔ DITCH THE VICTIM IDENTITY

Obsessing about old offenses and nursing righteous anger can make you feel important, according to Debbie Ford. The danger is that this kind of negativity will take over your life and become the way you define yourself.

➔ REMEMBER IT'S FOR YOU

As much as it may feel like it, forgiving someone isn't about saying their wrong was okay. "It isn't a negotiation," says Dr. Toussaint. "It's a gift—both to the person who is forgiven and to the person who forgives."