

# SESSION 11

## SELF-FORGIVENESS

### Session Goals

In this session, group members will:

- Define what forgiveness is and what it means to forgive oneself
- Learn how to apply the four phases of forgiveness to oneself
- Discuss ways to express self-forgiveness

### Session Content

#### Setting the Agenda

- A. Explain that forgiveness is not “black-or-white” but rather a process.** Forgiveness is a choice that is more about the forgiver than the offender. It is about taking back power and control of one’s life. It is also about letting go of the strong emotions (like anger and shame) that have hindered one from moving forward. Survivors are not required to forgive their offender(s) to heal, but it may be worthwhile to grant themselves mercy for holding onto the pain, guilt, and shame of their past.
- B. Review session objectives. The goals of this session are to learn more about forgiveness as a process and how to extend it to one’s self.**

#### Opening Exercise (optional) - “The Miracle Question”

- A. Set up.** You will need blank sheets of paper and pencils/pens.
- B. Review instructions.** Before starting the activity, let group members know that what they write down will not be shared with the group. Ask group members to write down something painful that they have been holding onto for a while. Have them crumple up the paper and hold it in one hand. Next say, “If you had a chance to let go of what is in your hand and never feel that pain again, would you?” Likely group members will answer “yes.” For group members who say “no” or who are unsure, you may gently ask their reasons for continuing to hold onto that pain – What purpose does that serve? (If possible) Have group members toss the paper in the trash and say, “Now it’s gone. You’ve gotten rid of the pain. What are you going to do with yourself now?” **This exercise is intended to help group members identify important values or behaviors to strive toward as they continue through the healing process.**

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### What is Forgiveness?

- A. Discuss what forgiveness means.** Some group members may hold a simplistic view of forgiveness as a “black-or-white” concept. Others may feel obligated to forgive due to personal, cultural, and spiritual beliefs. When people feel forced to forgive, they may harbor greater feelings of resentment or be disingenuous about forgiving the wrongdoer. Some may see it as a choice. There are no right or wrong answers. This is an opportunity for group members to explore their feelings toward the idea of forgiveness.
- B. Review forgiveness as defined by Richard Enright (2001).** Main points are:
- Forgiveness is **not**:
    - » ***Forgetting what happened.*** The saying “forgive and forget” is misleading. Forgiveness doesn’t undo what happened. It also doesn’t mean that we need to deny or suppress how we feel about the offense (in this case, MST). Part of working through forgiveness is acknowledging that an injustice occurred. Without this recognition, emotional change cannot take place.
    - » ***Excusing what the offender did.*** Forgiveness is not saying that what the offender(s) did was okay. No one deserves for MST to happen to them.
    - » ***Wishing or seeking revenge.*** Revenge-seeking or fantasies of retaliation against offenders are common after MST. This is especially true for men who have experienced MST. But forgiveness is not about getting even. It is about mercy.
  - Forgiveness **is**:
    - » ***Deciding to overcome the pain caused by the offender(s).*** It takes courage to confront the emotional pain inflicted by someone else. Forgiveness begins with honoring those feelings of anger, resentment, and anything else that shows up as we come to terms with past wrongs.
    - » ***Letting go of anger, resentment, shame, and other strong emotions.*** We have a right to these feelings after we have been wronged. There comes a point, however, when holding onto them is harmful to us. When this happens, it is best to find effective ways to release our emotional pain.
    - » ***Giving compassion, whether or not it has been earned.*** We don’t have to forgive those individuals who have wronged us. But if we do, it is because we **want to, regardless** of whether they have earned it.
- C. Discuss what self-forgiveness is and why it may be needed.** Enright (2015; 2001) describes self-forgiveness as trying to love yourself after not treating yourself very

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well. One reason why this session focuses on self-forgiveness (as opposed to forgiving the offender) is that some group members may still be struggling with feelings of self-blame or shame for things they did (or didn't do) in response to MST. Building on earlier sessions, the purpose of this session is to help group members learn how to release their anger, resentment, hurt, shame, and self-blame and strive toward living a more meaningful life.

**Note.** For group members who may be interested in learning how to forgive their offenders, you may recommend Enright's (2001) *Forgiveness is a Choice* or his 2015 book entitled, *8 Keys to Forgiveness* (full citation can be found in reference section).

### How to Forgive Yourself

**A. Review Enright's (2001) four phases of forgiveness** (found on pages 61-64 of the patient workbook). The worksheet contains questions and commentary to further group members' understanding of each phase as it applies to them. Below, **Table 11.1** provides an overview of the phases that you may reference during the activity and discussion.

**Table 11.1. Detailed Description of the Four Phases of Forgiveness Applied to the Self**

<b>FORGIVENESS PHASE</b>	<b>DETAILED DESCRIPTION</b>
Uncovering Phase	The focus is on understanding the offense (in this case MST) and how it has impacted one's life. The emotional toll of an offense is fully recognized. Feelings of anger, hatred, and resentment typically surface as individuals consider all the ways in which the injustice has impacted their lives. Confronting these emotions opens space for healing to begin. Increased emotional distress is a common outcome.
Decision Phase	The focus shifts from anger to motivation to move forward. Individuals work on developing a deeper understanding of forgiveness while entertaining the idea of forgiving oneself (or the offender). Thoughts of revenge or retaliation have lessened.
Work Phase	Active attempts are made to forgive oneself (or the offender). The work may include paying greater attention to the influence of one's personal history or the context in which the offense occurred. Broadening one's self-perception (or views of the offender) may lead to feelings of understanding, compassion, or empathy that replace anger and resentment.
Deepening Phase	Emotional relief is a hallmark of this phase. Individuals may find a new purpose in life or recognize their personal growth, which may cause them to feel less burdened by the offense. They discover the healing powers behind showing mercy and compassion to themselves (and possibly their offenders).

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- B. The activity ends with discussing ways to express self-forgiveness.** This may be in the form of better self-care or expressions of self-compassion. If it is easier, group members may think of strategies they have used to show forgiveness to loved ones or friends.

### Closing Exercise - “Loving-Kindness Meditation”

- A. Briefly introduce the loving-kindness meditation.** Anger cannot co-exist with kindness and compassion. The loving-kindness meditation is a great exercise for increasing feelings of compassion for oneself and can be adapted to extend compassion toward the offender(s) (if group members are interested in doing so).
- B. Read the following script at a slow, steady pace.**

“To begin this practice, let yourself be in a relaxed and comfortable position. Sit with your feet flat on the floor and your spine straight. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths (pause). Breathe in (pause). And breathe out (pause). Again, breathe in (pause). And breathe out. Relax your whole body (long pause).

Now, check into your body and notice how you are feeling right now. Try to let whatever is here be here (pause). Breathe in (pause). And breathe out (pause).

Keeping your eyes closed, start thinking about someone close to you who loves you very much. It could be a family member, a close friend, a child, even a pet (pause). Pick someone that it is easy to feel love for. Let the person come to mind (pause). Have a sense of him or her being in front of you (pause). As you imagine the person, notice how you’re feeling inside. Maybe you feel some warmth, or there’s some heat to your face, a smile, a sense of happiness (long pause).

Next, imagine the person wishing you well, saying:

*I wish all the happiness to you (pause).*

*I wish that you are safe and protected from danger (pause).*

*I wish that you never have to suffer (pause).*

*I wish that you are always loved (pause).*

As you receive these words, let them sink in (pause). Next, check in with yourself and see how you’re feeling inside (long pause).

Now let this loving kindness expand out – spreading, touching anyone you want to touch right now, in all directions (pause). This may include the people in the room,

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other people you know or don't know, people who have hurt you. Just imagine expanding and touching (pause). If you want, you can silently repeat:

*May everyone be happy, peaceful, and at ease.*

*May we all experience great joy and feel loved.*

Take a few more deep breaths (long pause). And when you are ready, gently open your eyes.”

### Homework (Optional)

- Re-read the “How to Forgive Yourself” worksheet at least once.
- Practice “Loving Kindness Meditation” two to three times a week.