

Forgive for Love

*The Missing Ingredient for a
Healthy and Lasting Relationship*



Dr. Fred Luskin

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The Missing Factor

Dana and Greg came to see me soon after they ran into serious relationship problems. Their love for and commitment to each other was apparent, but it was also clear that the past was eating away at the present. When Dana and Greg first met, he was still dealing with the emotional turmoil of his recent divorce. Greg clung to Dana like a drowning person clings to a life preserver. Dana's previous relationship and subsequent divorce had occurred a few years earlier, and she, though needy, was no longer in crisis. During our time together, I helped Greg forgive his first wife, Gloria, so that he was better able to see Dana as a new and distinct person. And I helped Dana to understand Greg's neediness and also to forgive herself for choosing a partner who was in the middle of a difficult time in his life.

Dana also realized that she had work to do to forgive Greg for his insecurity and the difficulties that caused. Learning how to forgive helped to prevent Greg's and Dana's pasts from damaging their present. Forgiveness saved their relationship and gave them skills to understand that letting go of grudges and resentment would be a critical part of maintaining a loving and lasting relationship.

Greg and Dana are just one example of a couple for whom forgiveness has been essential for navigating the challenges that all

relationships face. Relationship issues may emerge when partners are at different developmental stages, or when they have different needs and expectations—for example, when one partner wants children and the other does not, or when one partner wants to move for a job and the other does not. Many couples struggle with caretaking for aged parents or with being overwhelmed by work. In our busy and hectic lives, it is difficult for many of us to find the energy and time to deal successfully even with life's normal struggles.

Luke was in his forties when he met thirtysomething Diane. He already had two kids from a first marriage, and she wanted two of their own. Luke loved and wanted Diane, but did not want more children. Diane wanted more children, and she also wanted Luke. They were both convinced that the other was insensitive because both heard only the other's rejection of their own needs. It took a lot of work, but eventually forgiveness allowed Luke and Diane to talk to each other and lovingly accept the limitations of entering a relationship with a person with different life desires and goals.

From relative interest in sex to dedication to work to relationships with parents and children, there are simply too many ways in which a relationship can become unbalanced. Considering how complex life can be, it is inevitable that we will disagree with our partners on things both important and not so important. The key is to understand the inevitability of disagreement and the need to forgive the inevitable and to move on with love. In this book, you will learn how to do this, and you will also see for yourself the immediate value of forgiveness in your relationship when you discover that it is an essential balm for hurt feelings.

Committed relationships are hard work, and they ask a lot of us. According to the triangle theory of romance, it takes passion,

friendship, and commitment to sustain a relationship. Relationships falter when they have two of these elements but lack the third. If you both love and like your partner but aren't committed, your relationship will end eventually. If you feel friendship with and commitment to your partner, you'll end up with a good friend, not a lover. If you have commitment and passion without friendship, you will end up with a stormy but passionate mess. In order for your relationship to work, you need to love your partner, like your partner, and be willing to stick it out through thick and thin.

As director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, I have probably taught more people to forgive in the United States than anyone else during the past decade. I have conducted the largest successful forgiveness research study to date, and my research has proven that forgiveness heals a wide range of emotional and psychological issues—from severe trauma such as the murder of a child to dealing with the loss of money in the stock market. I have taught forgiveness in corporate settings, in medical and law schools, at numerous churches and synagogues, and in a host of other religious and secular settings. Also, I have trained numerous therapists in my forgiveness methods and helped them learn to use my work in their practices.

In addition, I have worked with thousands of disappointed and angry couples and individuals who have been hurt in their relationships. Listening to countless stories of infidelity, alcohol abuse, mistreatment of children, disregard for feelings, and other causes of divorce and disagreement, I have seen firsthand how difficult it is to make relationships work. In fact, my dozen years of teaching and research on forgiveness have convinced me of just how hard it is to have a loving and lasting union. But more than that, this work has shown me how essential forgiveness is and why it needs to be at the center of our relationships.

Forgive for Love shows how to forgive the things people do to the ones they love. The skills taught in this book not only will help you come to terms with a grievance or disagreement in the past, but will also enable you to prevent problems from developing in your current relationship, no matter how good it is.

The tools discussed in this book are for people in a committed relationship. I often use the word “marriage,” but you do not need to be married to find these tools beneficial. They will also work in your relationship with a significant other, a life partner, or a lover. The book is primarily for people who have chosen a life partner or have been dating one person for an extended period of time and want their relationship to work. The principles can also be applied to other long-term relationships in which disagreement is inevitable, such as those with your parents, your children, or your longtime friends. However, even though most of the ideas in *Forgive for Love* can help you in any relationship, the book is not designed as a guide to casual dating.

Think about it. The centrality of commitment in relationships is expressed through the marriage vows, which ask us to love our partners through richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, and for better and for worse until death. That means that we promise to love them when they are not doing well, when they have failed, when life is not exactly turning out as hoped, or when we’re going through a financial reversal. What I see in the marriage vows is a basic prescription: if we want our relationships to last, we better be prepared to forgive. The vows make it clear that over the life of a marriage we will experience difficulty and pain and that it is our responsibility to stay connected to our partners. How could we possibly do this without forgiveness? What other form of healing would clean the slate and give us fresh eyes and an open heart?

Unfortunately, most examinations of successful relationships have neglected the subject of forgiveness. Until now, forgiveness has not been front and center as an aid to a sustainable marriage. *Forgive for Love* is the first book to explore forgiveness from both a scientific and a clinical perspective.

My entire professional career has led me to believe that forgiveness is central to a happy and functional relationship. I am licensed as a therapist to work with individuals, couples, and children and have earned two advanced degrees from prestigious universities. I have been supervised by excellent clinicians and first-rate therapists. About fifteen years ago, I got a master's degree in psychology and a license as a marriage and family counselor. Following that, I received a doctorate and a license as a clinical psychologist after numerous classes, much training, six thousand hours of clinical supervision, and a two-part licensing examination.

In all these years of study and experience, I was never once taught the importance of forgiveness in helping two people become a successful couple. Forgiveness was not one of the interventions I learned, nor was it a topic for supervision and clinical training. When I began the Stanford Forgiveness Project, there were only a handful of published studies that showed the positive effects of teaching people to forgive. My education and training left a void in my ability to help couples that I had to fill myself.

Hundreds of self-help books are available to guide couples as they navigate the changing phases of a marriage. There are books that teach couples how to improve their communication by learning to really talk and listen to each other. There are books that teach couples how to have better sex and books about managing conflict. Many of these volumes are helpful, and I have used a number of them myself to teach classes. Yet finding advice

about how to practice forgiveness is like looking for the oyster with the pearl hidden in it. There are good books out there on enriching your marriage, but they almost always lack explicit advice about the importance of forgiveness and specific steps for practicing forgiveness.

Too many of us simply don't know how valuable forgiveness is in a relationship, let alone how to forgive. Communicating better, improving our conflict resolution skills, and learning to have better sex are all great for our relationships. The problem is that even if we get better at all of these aspects of a relationship, we still disagree and occasionally mistreat each other. Forgiveness will always be necessary, because couples always have significant personality differences and conflicts with each other.

Forgive for Love is the first book that teaches you how to enfold forgiveness into the heart of your relationship. In this book, I show you that forgiveness is the missing piece in the difficult puzzle of creating a successful marriage.

John Gottman of the Gottman Institute, which focuses on researching and restoring relationships, conducted a scientific study of why some marriages succeed and others fail by interviewing and tracking hundreds of couples through the University of Washington. Before Gottman's work, we could only guess as to why some couples had successful marriages and others did not. He turned the study of marriage into a science. One of his most provocative findings was that approximately 70 percent of the issues that couples disagree about at the beginning of their relationship do not change over time.

What this means, for instance, is that if you have a stronger libido than your partner when you are dating, there is a good chance that you will still be more libidinous after fourteen years together. If you are a person who craves order and your partner is a mess, neither of you will have changed after three years of

being together. If you are more adventuresome than your partner early in the relationship, you are likely to be the one to suggest the exotic vacation on your fifteenth anniversary. Without forgiveness, these personality differences can turn into grudges between you and your partner that over time will erode the relationship.

I wrote *Forgive for Love* to be the essential missing link in the literature on successful relationships. *Forgive for Love* shows you how to use forgiveness to communicate better, manage conflict better, see the good in your partner, and allow yourself to make common mistakes. It shows you the critical importance of forgiving yourself, the value of modeling forgiveness for your children, and step-by-step instruction in how to do this.

People who learn to forgive have more successful relationships. Successful couples are able to figure out how to forgive each other for being themselves, and they do this because they know that it is nearly impossible to change other people. Since we are human beings, by definition we are imperfect. Unsuccessful couples do not learn how to forgive each other. They live with grudges that separate them until the relationship slowly disintegrates or quickly blows up. Successful couples learn how to make peace with the fact that they are both human beings with flaws, quirks, and annoying habits. Unsuccessful couples spend angry years in futile attempts to change each other and then fan the smoldering resentment that emerges.

The cost of bad marriages in the United States is staggering. Over 50 percent of marriages end in divorce. Forty-three percent of all first marriages end within the first ten years, and 60 percent of second and third marriages end in the first ten years. Thus, people who do not succeed at marriage the first time around are likely to be even less successful the second or third time around. These remarkable statistics show how hard it is to

create a good relationship that lasts. One survey showed that only 25 percent of spouses consider themselves “happy together.” Somewhere around 50 percent of children are raised by one parent at some point in their lives, and many of these children are being raised in poverty. Obviously there is a lot of room for improvement in how we conduct our marriages and relationships.

If couples only had to forgive each other for their differences, or for being flawed but human, that would be hard enough. Some of our flaws and human failings can be really annoying. Our partners may be guilty of sloppiness, chronic lateness, laziness, self-absorption, grumpiness, dressing badly, eating in a hurry, and so on. Relationship problems can be aggravated by differing natural rhythms, such as bedtimes and wake-up times, levels of physical activity, and frequency of sex. Couples can also be strained by issues associated with the relative importance of money, neatness, and the effort each partner puts into the relationship. And partners often bring different views of what’s “normal” to parenting, family relationships, politics, good grades, and other aspects of life.

The quest for forgiveness is even harder, however, when marriage partners bring bigger problems to the relationship than personality differences and individual quirks. Spouses may cheat, lie, have long-term affairs, steal money or possessions, or live in a fantasy world of their own creation. Others spend too much money on frivolous things or refuse to have sex. Some spouses abuse alcohol and drugs, are bad parents, or are indifferent to their partners. Whether they are selfish and mean or scared and lonely, such spouses can be difficult to deal with.

Over the course of almost any relationship, some problems will be caused by personality differences and some problems will be caused by selfish and mean behavior. It is in your best interest to learn to forgive all the obstacles that are thrown your way in

your primary relationship, whatever their source. To do this you must give yourself time to feel your pain and to process what transpired so that you can make a good decision as to what to do next. When forgiveness is on your menu, you can do this with a more open heart and a clearer mind.

Partners in any complex human relationship will often need to forgive themselves and each other. *Forgive for Love* shows you how to forgive your partner, both for being human and for being unkind. Here you will learn how to make peace with the person you chose and how to repair the damage when you are treated badly. The book fills a critical gap in our knowledge about how to make relationships last, and it will help you find peace and happiness with your partner and with yourself. Forgiveness is a fundamental and critical component of a healthy relationship. Turn the page and let's learn why and how to use it.

Forgive for Love Quiz

Please answer yes or no to the following questions.

1. Are there some things about your partner that regularly bug you? Yes No
2. Do you find yourself verbally expressing frustration with your partner even when they aren't present? Yes No
3. Have you made a promise to yourself to talk calmly with your partner and then found yourself talking more harshly than you intended? Yes No
4. When you are hurt by your partner do you talk more about what is wrong with them than about your hurt feelings? Yes No
5. When you think about something your partner did that upsets you does it remind you of other things they have done wrong? Yes No
6. Do you often feel that your partner just doesn't get it when you try to talk to them? Yes No

7. Do you find that time after time it is the same issues that continue to upset you about your partner? Yes No
8. Do you long for someone who does not have your partner's faults? Yes No
9. When you argue with your partner do you bring up their wrongs from the past? Yes No
10. When you talk about your relationship with other people is your partner often the villain? Yes No
11. Do you get annoyed at your partner because they do not listen well? Yes No
12. Do you often think that if only your partner would change, your relationship would be better? Yes No

The key:

If you answered yes to:

0-2: You are doing a good job of keeping resentment at bay and can successfully manage the normal disagreements of a relationship. You need this book only if you are in a new relationship to prepare for issues that have yet to surface. Or you need this book if you are going through a particularly good patch but have had some issues in the past. There is no bad time to learn the skills of forgiveness.

3-5: It is critical that you start practicing forgiveness right away. Most likely, you are aware of your relationship strengths and your problems are manageable. However, bitterness is emerging and without forgiveness as part of your recipe of responses long term damage can be done to your relationship.

6-12: Your relationship is in trouble. Either you are going through a really bad patch or you struggle with chronic negativity. Regardless, your relationship needs help. Learning to forgive is necessary to make sure the damage done to your relationship is contained and further damage is not done. The healing of the relationship can start with this book and lasting and loving relationship can still be yours.