

Practicing Compassionate Acceptance vs. Forgiveness

Objective:

To heal and strengthen yourself by learning to have compassion and accepting yourself, as you are and as you're not, as well as accepting others *as they are and as they are not*. In general, Love requires that kind of acceptance - whether you're a parent, an adult child, a friend, an intimate partner or a divorcing spouse.

We suggest that "forgiveness," in its traditional sense, is ineffective because it "tolerates" or suggests "condoning" ineffective and/or destructive behavior. *Why would anyone do that and just reinforce bad behavior?* "Forgiveness" in this sense is rarely what most religions or spiritual beliefs mean by "forgiveness." Instead, we suggest that compassionate acceptance is a more effective, practical expression - both for an individual and for a relationship. There's no "carte blanche" for ineffective behavior - yours or anyone else's. While the research is clear that "punishment" doesn't work in the long-run, there are always negative consequences for ineffective behavior. And, self-compassion/acceptance and other-compassion/acceptance require you to be more skilled in a number of ways that include growing your capacity for Love. This is explained more fully below.

Know:

All relationships experience painful hurt and misunderstanding. Often this is related to differences in our ability to trust, to know and communicate when we're vulnerable and to reach for our intimate, trusted others when we're distressed. Instead, we often distrust, make negative assumptions/judgments, defend against our own vulnerability, and then defend against reaching for the intimate other (e.g. get angry, protest, withdraw, withhold connection, continue to blame/judge harshly).

Relational offenses in intimate relationships can vary from minor (forgot to take out the trash, or late to a lunch date) to more serious (infidelity, addiction, coercive control or abuse). When someone does significant harm to you and/or your relationship - whether deliberate or unintentional/unconscious - generating compassion and acceptance can be challenging.

And, taking time to self-reflect, apologize effectively and take ownership of your own adverse impact, while *also* having compassion for the person you're close to, impacts your ability to heal and strengthen your relationship over time.

Caveat: Sometimes we can get focused on our own contributions or strive to have compassion in a way that aims to defend against our accepting certain realities about the other person or the state of our relationship. If we can locate "responsibility" in ourselves, sometimes this allows us to *imagine* we can somehow have control and "remedy" whatever's occurring in the relationship, all by ourselves. This control fantasy helps us avoid having to *accept "what's so"* - about ourselves, the other person and our relationship status. It's a subtle, fine line worthy of thoughtful consideration and reflection. Am I only taking responsibility for what's mine? Or am I *also* using this focus to avoid taking a look at what's happening for the other person and in our relationship?

Two people (friends, adult children & parents, couples) become Accepting and Compassionate, when they can:

- Prioritize *communicating* empathy for your friend/partner's experience/point of view - *before* making your own points.
- Communicate understanding of the other's ineffective behavior using reflective listening and "validation" strategies (see/request related handouts). These methods don't "forgive" or "condone" but instead offer effective ways to express compassionate understanding.
- Lean in with "curious questions" to understand, rather than just reacting reflexively or defensively, without thinking.
- Offer the benefit of the doubt - Avoid blaming/making negative judgments and assumptions (in your head or verbally), and avoid directing the anger, resentment, and sadness that such negative judgments generate in you, *at* the other.

- Hold a humble, “there but for the grace of God go I” attitude. Reflect on ways your behavior has been hurtful to others, and consider that compassion for the other is, in some ways, also compassion for yourself. We all do the best we can, and we can *all* do better.
- Review the short and long-term negative consequences *for you* of holding a grudge. That grudge (sustained negative judgments and related behaviors) *at the very least* stops you from self-reflecting and considering your own contributions to what’s ineffective/not working in the relationship. And negative judgments (grudges) reliably alienate you from others.
- Tolerate the vulnerability required to make a respectful request for specific, desired effective behavior, instead of complaining about or criticizing ineffective behaviors. Be able to accept the honest answer – sit with that answer before reacting. Decide how to respond with *both* compassionate acceptance for yourself, as well as the other.
- Know that when your behavior is “defensive” this is actually *aggressive*. You are relating to the other person *as if* they are an aggressor, whether they are or not. Often our defensiveness is a reaction to negative judgments and assumptions about the other person.
- Consider your *shared engagement in an ineffective pattern of relating* as “the problem” – rather than only you, only the other person, or the relationship as a whole. That ineffective pattern of relating may or may not be able to be remediated. And, viewing “the problem” this way helps to shift your thinking away from the negative judgments and blame that make things worse, and that restrict your ability to create and express Compassionate Acceptance.

Compassion and “Acceptance” as described here are not about condoning, forgetting, tolerating, minimizing or denying ineffective or destructive behavior – yours or anyone else’s! Also, Compassionate Acceptance may *not* involve any kind of reconciliation – repairing a relationship is *rarely* a “quick fix” process, especially if the offense was serious (e.g. abuse, infidelity, egregious lying or other important betrayals of trust) - it can take months, or even years. Consequently, pressuring another for a “quick fix” may not be realistic, and can pressure you both to come to short-lived, shallow and therefore ineffective resolutions.

Compassion and “Acceptance” as described here:

- Involve a deliberate decision to give up feeling *you have a “right”* to vengeance, resentment and negative judgments *at* a “blame-worthy offender” as a way to feel “justified” discharging your anger, bitterness, pain and other negative emotions *onto* another person. As my 3-year old described it: This is just a way to try to get the “bad feelings out of you” and into another. This is actually developmentally appropriate for children under the age of 4-5. They *do physically need* parents to help them “metabolize” and teach them to regulate big, negative feelings. For adults - attempts to discharge our negative feelings onto others, not only cause harm, but *cannot* relieve the internal “bad feelings,” except very briefly. We’re stuck with them and with the responsibility for knowing how to regulate them. This “dumping” strategy erodes trust and good will in any relationship.
- “Acceptance” here means simply accepting others *as they are and as they are not*, with genuine efforts to be *both* as objective *and* compassionate as possible. Skills and practice are needed to notice and challenge the impulse to negatively judge and assume. The alternative to negative judgments/assumptions is to describe events and behaviors as a video camera would - e.g. Instead of saying “He’s a rage-aholic!” you might say: “When I said I preferred something different from his stated preference he pounded the table, got red in the face and yelled XYZ.” Or, instead of “She’s a controlling bitch,” you might think: “She gets defensive and angry when I have a different idea, memory, preference that she does.”
- Involve remembering that *we don’t have a “right” to expect others to be other than they’ve shown us they can be, reliably*. We have *no right to expect* others to be *who we want them to be, just because we want them to be something* - we end up being unkind, demanding and critical.
- Require accepting that *others have as much “right” to their short-comings, trauma and pain, as we do to ours*. You must take responsibility for deciding whether you will to own, address and work on the short-comings you’re experiencing in yourself and/or from the other, and the ineffective relational pattern between you. As an adult, sometimes this may involve accepting a certain degree of distance (e.g. with an abusive older parent),

and becoming more skilled at limit-setting and other assertiveness skills, *alongside* compassionate acceptance (it's not an either/or proposition - it's both/and.)

- Remember, you have a “right” to feel however you feel. *And, a related responsibility for how you express your negative feelings.* Are you expressing these feelings in a way that helps the other person be more compassionate and move closer towards you? Or are you expressing your negative feelings in ways that drive others away?

Related Research:

- Trauma is typically a physiologically encoded (amygdala) experience that can impair our ability to regulate intense negative emotions and reactivity when triggered. At the same time, in a more general sense, “emotion regulation” is a skill that therapy modalities, such as DBT, specifically and successfully teach.
- Self/Other Compassion is healthy for you – mentally, emotionally, and physically.
- Compassionate Acceptance can reduce anger, blood pressure, heart rate, as well as anxiety and depressive symptoms.
- Compassionate Acceptance enhances ratings of happiness, hopefulness and relationship satisfaction.
- Similarly, those who demonstrate Compassionate Acceptance report higher levels of positive feelings towards others (which in turn draws others to them).
- Decreased levels of Compassionate Acceptance (for yourself and/or others) are associated with higher levels of physical stress, higher blood pressure and heart rates, anxiety and depressive symptoms, compromised immune systems (and related health concerns) as well as the increased likelihood of risky, impulsive and/or dangerous behaviors (e.g. substance/alcohol abuse, unprotected sex).

For Effective Apologies – see related handout to increase the likelihood of receptivity.

Some Exercises:

You might share a copy of this sheet with the person with whom you wish to grow your compassionate acceptance. Definitely *do it on your own first!*

- Carefully review and then share your thoughts, ensuring your answers are free of blame, and other subtle or obvious criticisms/negative judgments or assumptions.
- Prioritize communicating your understanding – how what the other person is saying/experiencing/doing “makes sense” to you, before you launch into any of your own priorities - follow and review all the guidelines above as you note your answers!
- *Always* ask, before offering unsolicited advice (it's disrespectful otherwise!): e.g. “I have some thoughts about that. Are you interested?” *Accept their answer* (no matter how brilliant or important you think your advice is!)

1. What kind of Compassionate Acceptance are you wanting **for yourself?** For **the relationship?** For **the other person?** Where do you see that you have *your own* work to do in these realms?

2. While you struggle to create and deepen your Compassionate Acceptance, what are some of the **feelings and behaviors you feel “stuck” with for yourself.** Add to these as needed!

___ **Negative Cognitive Rehearsals** - recurring negative judgments/thoughts that alienate you from yourself and the other, and also generate painful emotions (e.g. “There’s no point, s/he’ll never change.” “He’s an idiot!” “She’s just a committed whiner!”):

___ **Painful Emotions** – these are generated by negative cognitive rehearsals (e.g. shame, anger, hopelessness, despair):

___ **Defensive Behaviors** that push the other away, rather than bringing them in close when you want closeness (e.g. withdrawal, avoid intimacy/sex, hostile/aggressive behavior, conflict avoidance, “pleasing” impulse despite resentment, inability to tolerate the vulnerability needed to respectfully ask for the specific behavior you want and tolerate the answer):

___ **General Ineffective Approach** towards the other (This is similar and more specific than with Defensive Behaviors (e.g. distrust, unable to provide the benefit of the doubt, quick to judge & “discard” the other in your mind’s eye, give up before you even try to engage, go to bed early so asleep before partner gets home)

___ **Physical Harm** (e.g. physical impact of substance abuse, injuries from physical abuse)

___ **Practical Costs of not prioritizing and communicating Compassionate Acceptance** – time and money (e.g. increased childcare costs when angry at Grandparent [childcare can also be a valid expense if that person isn’t equipped to be loving and supportive of your children!], Legal consultations with family law attorneys, time spent worrying, doubting the viability of a relationship is time you’re not doing something else)

3. **Try to describe how these patterns might *realistically be different* in these arenas if you were able to prioritize and communicate Compassionate Acceptance.** For example, you’re always likely to have a negative judgment pop into your head, but you *could* catch it and redirect/remind yourself of other “truths” that value the person - what might those be? We’re not asking you to smear “frosting” on cow patties! The idea here is to begin to mentally “rehearse” alternatives that align with Compassionate Acceptance. If you can’t “envision” something, it’s hard to make that happen. We’re trying to help you envision what’s possible here.

___ **Valid Alternatives to Negative Cognitive Rehearsals** (e.g. *Alongside* the things I struggle to compassionately accept – not deny!/, what do I value/appreciate about this person? How does this person enrich/bring value to my life?):

___ **Valid Alternatives to Painful emotions** generated by negative cognitive rehearsals (e.g. What feelings do I feel with this person, when I’m present to what I appreciate/value about them? How can I stay aware of these feelings, *at the same time*, I compassionately accept the reality of their short-comings?)

___ **Valid Alternatives to Defensive behaviors** that can bring the person in close to you when you’re distressed Assuming it’s safe! If some is violent/aggressive it’s not safe to bring them close! In that instance, the “valid alternative to defensive behaviors may be to act on a “safety plan” where you have a hidden copy of your car keys, and a storage unit with essentials packed for you and your children. A “valid” alternative to being aggressive (as a defense) might be to make a respectful request for specific, desired behavior and share what that would mean to you (e.g. I’m really feeling shaky. If you could just hold me for a minute or two it would help calm me):

___ **Valid Alternative to “Usual” General Ineffective Approach** towards the other (e.g. If you routinely get mad and attack the person when you’re hurt, you might try tolerating your vulnerability enough to say something like, “You know, what you just said hurt, and I’m not sure why. I guess I just want you to care that I’m hurt.):

___ **Valid Alternative to Physical Harm** (e.g. Create a specific plan(s) to get out of harm’s way safely in various likely circumstances, and in ways that aren’t likely to provoke more violent threats/behaviors):

___ **Valid Alternative to Usual Practical Costs** (e.g. How might I spend my time/money differently, if I were skilled at creating Compassionate Acceptance towards myself as well as this person?):

4. This next set of questions requires *considerable humility* on your part. It can be extremely arrogant to “assume” and then share those assumptions as if they were facts. This is a “put yourself in their POSSIBLE shoes” exercise to grow your compassion. Be tentative in your hypotheses!

What do you imagine *might* have been *especially challenging* for the other person when s/he/they was growing up in their household?

How might this impact their current ineffective behaviors as an adult?

Can you see how current ineffective behaviors may have been adaptive responses to challenging circumstances earlier in this person’s life (even if they’re not effective behaviors now)?

5. What in this person’s life is *currently challenging*? What are their struggles?

What are their hopes and dreams?

On a scale of 1-10, how reliably and effectively do you imagine that you prioritize and effectively communicate Compassion & Acceptance of this person in these areas (current challenges/struggles as well as their hopes/dreams)?

6. Name 5 specific things you're willing to start doing *now* to grow your own capacity for Compassionate Acceptance - for yourself, and another 5 for this person.

5 Specific Ways You'll Focus Efforts on Self-Compassion & Acceptance:

5 Specific Ways You'll Focus Efforts on Compassion & Acceptance of this person:

7. Identify at least 4 specific "structures" will you put in place to keep these Compassionate Acceptance Efforts in mind in an ongoing, committed way (e.g how will you calendar reminders? How often will you calendar/refer to these? Do you need alarms on your phone? When during the day will you reflect on these? Will you create a daily list you'll review at given times during the day?). **Our minds go on auto-pilot unless we re-direct ourselves in disciplined, systematic ways. It's not realistic to hope for real change without this kind of "structure" to help us redirect our neurology and build alternative neural pathways. Effective therapy does this, and when we're on our own, we can't without cues to remind us to take our minds and hearts in a different direction.**

Post-Exercise Reflections to Solidify Your Learning

1. What are 5 things that come to mind that you learned from engaging this exercise. Don't review the handout – just sit with your experience, and see what pops up! This "rehearsal" also lays down new neural pathways. This isn't about "getting the right answers" or "doing the exercise correctly." You're reinforcing *yourself* by just reflecting on what opened up for you, what you noticed. (Another self-reflection skill!)
2. What are 5 ways you noticed yourself "resisting" the exercises and growing your Compassionate Acceptance towards yourself/others. (We ALL experience these!)
3. What are you tempted to assume/hang onto that will likely *discourage* you in the future?
4. Would it be wise/helpful to share and discuss habitual sources of discouragement with a trusted friend? Therapist? Who? How will you think through and discriminate *valid* (reality-based) from *invalid* (blanket,

reflexive negative judgments) ways of discouraging yourself? (e.g. You are not physically safe with someone who is sporadically violent, and substance abuse is not likely to be healed in the absence of effective treatment - these are valid sources of discouragement, and it's challenging to get your head around *accepting* these facts *and* have compassion. At the same time you have compassionate acceptance of that person, you don't want to *discourage yourself* from securing and having self-acceptance and compassion for your limits – like a plan for your own/your children's safety, establishing realistic expectations and clarifying what you will/won't do *for yourself*, out of self-compassion and acceptance!)

5. Any other thoughts/feelings you wish to ponder?

Important Note: This isn't a "one-time" exercise sheet. You can re-read, and redo all the answers and become aware of completely different, new things each time. Give yourself time to sit and reflect on your answers each time. Doing "more" "faster" won't get you the results you're after. Expect yourself to need to plow through it multiple times before gaining a sense of mastery. Compassionate Acceptance requires "both/and" ways of thinking. No human (including you!) is ALL good or ALL bad. Effective relationships require us to see/value a person *at the same time* we're aware of their short comings, and compassionately accept these. This is a skill acquired with deliberate practice. We believe that beyond most our usual goals, we humans benefit most from our lives when we focus on learning to Love ourselves/others wisely and well, regardless of our circumstances. Enjoy the ride!