

# SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

## WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this to benefit from the remaining sessions.

## SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are Attending, Appreciating, and Acting with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called "Appreciative Attending," generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take Action to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

In our last session, we discussed compassion for others. Now that we've begun to cultivate compassion for our suffering and the suffering of others, we can move to forgiveness, which naturally follows compassion. The next three sessions will be on self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. We'll start with self-forgiveness, because **self-forgiveness is so critical for healing our love wounds and enabling us to live a life of love**. Many of us may find it easier to forgive others, but because of our wounding, we may be much harder on ourselves.

## SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

### What is Self-Forgiveness?

Self-forgiveness is the easing of anger, resentment, hatred, and judgment we have towards ourselves. **It is acknowledging that we are flawed and have made poor choices that have caused harm, but then choosing to treat ourselves with compassion and understanding rather than to condemn ourselves.** Self-compassion and understanding allow us to take accountability for our actions so that we can grow and make positive changes in our behavior.

It's important to be clear that self-forgiveness is not a release from personal responsibility. We are still responsible for our actions. Self-forgiveness does not mean we are not at fault for what we've done or that we don't have to endure the just consequences of our actions; self-forgiveness doesn't let us off the hook.

Also be clear that self-forgiveness is not just forgetting and moving on. We can't learn from the past if we forget the past.

Self-forgiveness is a form of emotional forgiveness. With emotional forgiveness, there is an easing of painful self-condemnation. We become less ruminative over past mistakes and misdeeds and stop beating ourselves up. Self-forgiveness arises in part out of the realization that we cannot change the past, that we need to instead learn from the past and move on.

**Forgiveness and self-forgiveness are intertwined.** If we cannot forgive ourselves for our mistakes and imperfections, it can be more difficult to forgive others for theirs. It also goes the other way: if we cannot forgive others and forgive the reality of evil, then we can't forgive ourselves and the seeds of evil that exist within us.

## SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

If you feel shame or guilt over abuse or trauma you've experienced, then self-forgiveness is not the issue. We are sometimes vulnerable to taking responsibility for other people's harmful behavior, especially if we feel we should've been able to predict and avoid a harmful situation. We are not responsible for other people's harmful behavior; they are. In these situations, the issue is more one of forgiveness of those who abused or hurt us. If we knowingly put ourselves in harm's way, then we can work to forgive ourselves for doing so, but we still need to hold others accountable for their harmful behavior.

### **Benefits of self-forgiveness**

Self-forgiveness is good for our mental health and well-being.(1) Conversely, self-condemnation induces guilt and shame, which can impair our ability to cope and take care of ourselves. In turn, this can increase depression, anxiety, and addiction.(2) In fact, some studies have shown that people who are more forgiving have lower rates of depression, anxiety, and substance use.(3)

You have been gifted one precious opportunity to live this one life as best as possible. Self-forgiveness is essential for you to do this. **Self-forgiveness liberates us from the pain of relentlessly beating ourselves up.** By letting go of the past and moving on, self-forgiveness with accountability and full empathy for the harm we've caused others enables us to better ourselves and our behavior.

Self-forgiveness **allows us to reconnect with our innate lovability.** This is because **self-forgiveness involves separating what we've done from who we are.** Who we are is an awe-mazing miracle of creation, no matter how imperfect or flawed we are.

## SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

Self-forgiveness helps us to awaken to this fundamental truth. In this way, self-forgiveness is the most important factor in healing our shame. With self-forgiveness, we can see ourselves more clearly—both the “good” and the “bad.”

When we can forgive ourselves, we are better able to look at ourselves honestly and realistically to see all the ways we have or are harming ourselves and others. In this way, self-forgiveness helps us to take accountability for our actions.

Self-forgiveness **can even improve your physical health**, which makes sense since the mind-body system is one system in which the mind and body both affect each other. Forgiveness—including self-forgiveness—can improve cholesterol levels, ease physical pain, lower blood pressure, and reduce the risk of a heart attack.(4)

**Self-forgiveness liberates us from the shackles of self-condemnation that prevent us from being able to fully love and be loved.** Self-forgiveness is essential for having healthy relationships. When we can forgive ourselves, we don't let shame trigger us to avoid others we have harmed or fail to make amends when we inevitably step on each other's toes. This is borne out by evidence that both parties in a relationship feel better about the relationship when they can forgive themselves.(5)

### **Barriers to Self-Forgiveness**

Self-hatred or self-loathing—symptoms of a Love Wound—are barriers to self-forgiveness.(6) These manifest as shame, or the feeling that we are basically bad, unlovable, broken, and unworthy.

## SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

There may be a normal and healthy aspect to shame in that it can shut us down when we violate social boundaries. It can cause us to realize we are limited, flawed human beings, just like everyone else. In general, however, **shame is extremely unhealthy and blocks the capacity to forgive ourselves. It results in many problems that reinforce and perpetuate shame.** These include:

- Self-criticism
- Self-blame
- Self-neglect
- Self-harm with addictions, promiscuity, or self-injurious behaviors
- Self-sabotaging behaviors in relationships and jobs
- Rage
- Rebellious and rule-breaking
- Perfectionism
- Abusive behavior
- Victim behavior

You can see how all these shame-induced behaviors would cause further harm, making self-forgiveness even more difficult. The more shame you feel, the less motivation you'll feel to make positive changes, and the more you'll behave in harmful ways, creating more and more actions that require self-forgiveness. **The good news is that the more you forgive yourself, the more motivated you'll be to change. The bad news is that if you don't forgive yourself, your shame will compel you to continue to harm yourself and others.**

## SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

As noted above, perfectionism is a symptom of shame. If you were raised by critical or unforgiving parents, you may feel mistakes and flaws are unforgivable and that you must always look good and be good. And when you're not, your shame prevents self-forgiveness.

While shame is very real and powerful, healing from a Love Wound requires we see that the message of shame that we are "bad" is not true. We need to closely examine self-hatred and the belief we may have that we somehow "deserve" self-condemnation. Through the eyes of love, no one deserves condemnation, even the sickest, most destructive, and most evil among us. There is a kind of negative arrogance or grandiosity if we think we are so "special" in our badness that we don't deserve forgiveness when others do.

The more neglect and trauma we've experienced, the deeper will be our Love Wound, and the deeper our Love Wound, the more difficult we'll find it to forgive ourselves.

**Another barrier to self-forgiveness is getting stuck in negative ruminations about past mistakes and misdeeds.**(7) This can send us into a tailspin of relentless self-condemnation. I've heard it suggested that we look at the past, but don't stare. The point is to learn, let go, and move on.

Another obstacle to self-forgiveness is the idea that self-forgiveness is letting ourselves off the hook. In fact, the opposite is true, as **self-forgiveness enables us to take accountability for our actions.**

## SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

To truly forgive ourselves and move on, we need to be ready to change our behavior. **If we're not ready to change our behavior, self-forgiveness will not be possible, because true self-forgiveness involves taking accountability for our behavior and being willing to make changes.** If we're caught in an addiction, for example, our shame can perpetuate the addiction, blocking the decision to ask for help and choose recovery. Until we choose the path of love, self-forgiveness will be very difficult due to ongoing shame about our behavior.

### In Our Next Session

In our next session, we'll discuss several practices for cultivating self-forgiveness.

**In the meantime, between now and then, I encourage you to do the following:**

1. Continue your daily presence practice—both a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and your practice of stillness in motion through the day.
2. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer as in the dedication to love prayer we have been using at the end of our sessions. Add to this an intention for this next week to forgive yourself for your mistakes and misdeeds because you now know this is the loving thing to do.
3. Inquire deeply into your experience with a kind, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of judgments as they arise.

## SESSION 14: Self-Forgiveness Part 1

4. Reflect on self-forgiveness in your life. What do you need to forgive yourself for?
5. Reflect on the benefits of self-forgiveness. How would being more self-forgiving enhance your life?
6. What are the barriers to self-forgiveness in your life? Is there shame? Do you feel perhaps that you don't deserve self-forgiveness? Do you get stuck in negative ruminations about the past? Do you feel self-forgiveness lets you off the hook?
7. Review some of the negative consequences of shame. Do you experience any of these negative consequences, such self-sabotage, anger, perfectionism, or victim behavior?

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