

SESSION 15: Self-Forgiveness Part 2

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 self-forgiveness. We talked about what self-forgiveness is, the benefits of self-forgiveness, and some of the barriers to self-forgiveness. I hope you've been able to reflect on these over the past week and are now ready to do the work of forgiving yourself.

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Cultivating Self-Forgiveness

Forgiving yourself may be the hardest thing you do in your life. This can be especially true if you've been abused and have then gone on to abuse others. Some people feel like monsters for the ways they've harmed others.

Attend to your pain. A key step to self-forgiveness is acknowledging the painful feelings that arise around the ways we have hurt ourselves or others. This requires the practice of awareness. Attend to feelings of guilt, regret, remorse, and shame. You can't fully forgive yourself until you've deeply attended to and processed these feelings. **Avoiding pain perpetuates pain**, whereas the healing of pain is in the feeling of pain.

Accept Responsibility. The first step towards self-forgiveness is to take responsibility for your actions. How did you harm others or fail to protect yourself? This can be a painful step. We may have attempted to avoid the pain of taking accountability for our actions by making excuses, rationalizing, or justifying our actions. Through our practice of attending, we look deeply into our actions, inquiring kindly as to how we have harmed ourselves and others. Having a kind attitude in our inquiry helps us to face up and accept what we have done and to bear the pain of remorse. Then we can fully acknowledge what we did.

We can't fully accept responsibility for that of which we are unaware. Sometimes we're not aware of the impact we have on others. This is where the love practices of connecting and empathy are very important, so that we can know as much as possible the impact we have on others. Once we are aware of how we affect others, we can then take full responsibility for our actions, while also balancing this with an awareness that we aren't responsible for how others react to our actions.

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As you do this accountability work, be on the alert for the arising of negative judgements of yourself. These might include thoughts such as “I’m such a horrible person.” Let these judgments fall away. Gently remind yourself that it isn’t your place to judge the goodness or badness of the Universe, including yourself or anyone else.

As part of accepting responsibility it is very helpful to tell another person “the exact nature of your wrongs.” Pick someone wise, loving, and nonjudgmental. We call these people “enlightened witnesses.”

This practice is profoundly healing. **When we bear our souls and reveal our secrets, we experience a tremendous release of shame when our witness does not judge us, but instead accepts us despite all the “horrible” things we’ve done.** Your witness may share similar misdeeds they have done, creating a shared bond of common humanity that will leave you realizing you’re not the only flawed person on the planet.

The next step is to admit to the person you’ve harmed what you’ve done, if possible. The person you harmed will be more likely to forgive you if you admit to them how you’ve harmed them. This act replaces the feeling of shame with a feeling of self-respect that promotes self-forgiveness; you can feel good that you did the right thing to begin to make things right.

Express Remorse and Apologize. It’s normal to feel guilt and remorse over harm we’ve caused ourselves or others. Guilt and remorse can motivate us to act more skillfully going forward. If you feel shame, or experience the feeling you are bad, hold this experience in the light of your kind awareness and see it clearly for what it is—a **symptom of the Love Wound**. Counter the feeling of shame with your still, loving presence and let it gradually fall away.

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If you can, express remorse to others for the harm you've caused them. Give others a heartfelt apology. Tell them what you did wrong and why you regret it. Acknowledge the pain you've caused and describe what you plan to do differently in the future to ensure it's unlikely to happen again.

This is profoundly healing. The people you've harmed need to hear that you know what you did, that you own your behavior, and that you feel regret or remorse.

Getting up the courage to apologize and then apologizing is a great way to earn our self-forgiveness in our eyes. By doing the right and decent thing, we build our self-respect; there is a saying that we boost our self-esteem by doing esteemable things. Apologizing is one of those things.

Even if the person you injured doesn't forgive you, you'll feel a sense of release that you've expressed to them your genuine remorse. I've heard the advice that we go to a person we've harmed three times to apologize and ask for forgiveness. If they don't forgive us after the third time, we can have a clear conscience that we've done what we can.

Repair the damage (if possible). We'll talk more about the process of repair in a later session. **Cultivate self-forgiveness by making amends and restitution for the harm you've caused.** Make up for damage done wherever possible. It'll be easier to forgive yourself when you know you've done what you can to make up for the harm you've caused. It's good to apologize if it's called for. Look for ways you can make it up to the people you've hurt if possible.

If you do what you can, you'll relieve yourself of the burden of wondering if you could've done more.

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Learn, change, and grow. Learn from transgressions—both those you’ve done to others and those done to you. Attend deeply into the causes of harmful behavior to cultivate your understanding. Process what you did with wise others. In general, **we harm ourselves and others out of a combination of pain, ignorance, selfishness, and lack of skill in managing our pain.** Really investigate the sequence of events with a compassionate lens. You want to develop a deep understanding and awareness of what happened, why you acted as you did, and what you need to do differently going forward.

Once you have clarity, change your behavior. Living more skillfully will help you forgive yourself and will reduce—but not eliminate—the need for self-forgiveness going forward.

If you take this approach to self-forgiveness, you can leverage your harmful behaviors as opportunities for personal growth in your wisdom, compassion, and capacity to love. This can transform the trauma of our harmful actions into a gift that will benefit ourselves and others going forward.

Cultivate compassion and kindness. Self-compassion paves the way for self-forgiveness.(1) **Self-compassion is the antidote** to the shame that blocks self-forgiveness. Seek to deeply understand the roots of your own suffering and alienation from love that led you to harm yourself or others. Cultivate self-compassion as we’ve discussed in previous sessions. As your self-compassion flowers, it will naturally help to give rise to self-forgiveness.

Along with this, be kind to yourself unconditionally. Remind yourself that you are no less deserving of kindness than anyone else.

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Imagine yourself as a child. You didn't choose your genes, character, parents, or environment growing up. See that there are powerful causes and conditions beyond your control that influence you to act as you do. Have compassion for yourself and all of humanity.

Practice humility. Let go of the need to be perfect and for Life to go your way. Life is about Life, not just about you. If you can't forgive yourself, you likely struggle with a mix of self-hatred and grandiosity, especially if you're a survivor of trauma and/or neglect. Let go of the grandiose need to be perfect, holy, or superior. Better to just **nurture an authentic wish to be decent.** Your humility will not only help you forgive others, but it will help you forgive yourself for being an imperfect human.

See all that Life brings you not as reward or punishment, but as an opportunity for growth, liberation, and a deepening of your humility. Accept that you're broken, crooked, and flawed, just like others. You have good intentions along with selfish intentions, just like others. Recognize our common humanity. We're all "bozos on the bus" doing our best to get by.

See our common humanity. Closely related to humility is seeing our common humanity. See that **we're all fallible.** See that everyone makes wrong choices and mistakes. See that the differences between us are only matters of degree due to factors such as our genes and parents that are not of our choosing.

See that we have all wounded and been wounded. Know that you are not alone. This will help you to have compassion for yourself and to forgive yourself.

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See how interconnected we are. This is also part of our common humanity. How we think and act is interwoven with other people and events. None of us arrives at where we are in our lives by ourselves. The harm we cause does not just happen in a vacuum.

Practice self-understanding. See that your selfish, hurtful, and addictive behaviors stem from pain. If you're a survivor, recognize that your experience of neglect and abuse can condition you to be neglectful and abusive. Note that your neglect and trauma caused emotional brain damage. This emotional damage can include difficulties feeling compassion towards others, taking things too personally, and overreacting.

Abuse and neglect can also cause us to harm others by needing others to behave according to our expectations and then judging, controlling, and manipulating others to get what we want.

Look within and see if you've reacted negatively to other people's weaknesses and vulnerabilities because of the trauma of your own weakness and vulnerability when you were young. Your hatred of this vulnerability may have caused you to lash out at your children or others who are vulnerable.

See how your trauma may have caused you to be out of control at times when in a lot of pain and to perpetuate the cycle of abuse that you experienced and learned when you were young.

If you've been caught up in addiction, see with compassion that this was an attempt to manage pain in the best way you knew how.

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We respond to adversity by adapting as best we know how with the resources we have and with the awareness we have at the time. Look compassionately upon yourself with an understanding that you did the best you could at the time given your conditions and your conditioning.

We all have a selfish and self-centered dark side that we didn't choose. Notice your fear-based and power-concerned ego and have compassion for yourself as you deal with **the challenge of managing your ego**.

While you hold yourself accountable for your unskillful behavior, see that there were egoic forces at play that you didn't fully understand. These are all products of your conditioning. You don't choose your thoughts, feelings, and impulses, so don't take your mind personally. You didn't consciously choose to make the mistakes you did, and even if you did, you were compelled by powerful forces likely colored by past neglect, abuse, and others traumas as well as the force of the ego. See that outside circumstances not necessarily of your choosing contributed to forming your way of seeing, being, and doing in the world. These circumstances include your genetics, how your parents treated you, where you were born, your other family members, family trauma, how your parents treated each other, and circumstances such as poverty, crime, mental illness, and cultural background.

When we see that we are a product of hundreds of factors, we begin to not take our personal failings quite so personally. **We all live in and are the product of an intricate web of interdependent life forces, causes, and conditions.** We're all playing the hand we were dealt the best we can.

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With understanding of your suffering and conditioning, you'll feel self-compassion, which will lead to self-forgiveness. Understanding will also activate the powerfully healing and corrective power of awareness so that you'll be less likely to make the same mistakes again.

Live with integrity. To cultivate self-forgiveness, resolve to **learn from your mistakes** and change your ways. Devote yourself to the life practice of doing the next right thing. Your esteemable acts will gradually build your self-esteem.

Practice Appreciation. Remind yourself of your sacred nature and see the sacredness in all things and all people. When self-hatred arises, greet it with kindness. Let love be your moment-by-moment touchstone to guide all your actions. As you put out love, the Universe will generously resonate with you, and you'll find yourself immersed in an abundance of love. Let this love heal your shame and self-condemnation.

If relevant, ask your creator or higher power for forgiveness. Because our guilt and shame can be overwhelming when we really face the truth of how we have hurt others, you may find it helpful to ask for forgiveness from something greater than you.

It may help to pray to your higher power for help with self-forgiveness or to pray directly to your higher power for forgiveness. In the Catholic tradition, making an apology to God through confession is a time-honored way of facilitating self-forgiveness.

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Live with an intention to love. If you repeatedly set an intention to love yourself and others, this will gradually shape your behavior and enhance your sense of your innate goodness and worth. **Loving yourself and others cultivates the conditions for self-forgiveness.** The other side of the intention to love is the intention not to harm. Keep it fresh in your mind the pain you've caused yourself and others. Remember this truth. Let this pain motivate you to make a vow to not continue to harm yourself or others in the same ways again.

Practice forgiveness meditations. Like compassion meditations, meditations on forgiveness can rewire the brain for forgiveness. You can add a forgiveness component to your morning meditation. You will benefit from repetition.

Self-forgiveness isn't a one-time event. Like all the love practices, it is a skill that takes time and practice. As with all the other practices, don't get discouraged if self-forgiveness doesn't come immediately and fully, or if you find yourself slipping back into self-condemnation.

Over time, you'll reap the fruits of self-forgiveness. You'll be **more relaxed, open, and happy. Your relationships will improve.** Self-forgiveness will ease the pain of self-condemnation and help enable you to love fully and savor the simple moments that make up this gift of life.

If you've learned from your errors and mishaps and don't wish to repeat them, you can let go of the guilt and shame. **May you forgive yourself, let it go and move on with greater awareness and skill.**

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OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll extend our practice of forgiveness to the forgiveness of others.

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.
4. Set aside some time to review this lesson and to practice some of the self-forgiveness practices.
5. Practice the forgiveness meditation.

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Please take some time after our session today to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!

(1)Zhang JW, Chen S, Tomova Shakur TK. From me to you: Self-compassion predicts acceptance of own and others' imperfections. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull.* 2020;46(2):228-242. doi:10.1177/0146167219853846