



Community-Wide

Forgiveness

Activity Book

**FORGIVENESS RITUALS,
GROUP ACTIVITIES, AND
CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES**



What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness a choice to replace ill will with goodwill to those who have wronged us.

- Forgiveness is a choice and cannot be forced.
- Forgiveness means desiring the flourishing of the offender, but without necessarily forgetting or forgoing justice.
- Forgiveness is compatible with justice, accountability, and truth.
- Forgiveness is a kind of letting go.
- Forgiveness requires a two-fold movement:
 - 1) a decision to forgive, and
 - 2.) replacing negative emotions towards the offender with more positive emotions.

Why should we forgive?

Our research shows that forgiveness is good for individual and communal mental health:

- Forgiving those who have harmed us leads to flourishing because it allows us to let go of negative feelings that can undermine our health and wellbeing.
- Forgiveness lowers depression and anxiety.
- Forgiveness can, over time, help free one from rumination and hurt.
-

(See See Long, K. N. G., Worthington, E. L., VanderWeele, T. J., O'Connor, L. E., Chen, Y., & Hook, J. N. (2020). Forgiveness of others and subsequent health and well-being in mid-life: A longitudinal study on female nurses. BMC Psychology, 8, 104. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-020-00470-w>)





How to use this guide:

In these pages, you will find ideas for activities to support forgiveness among both adults and children. Please adapt as needed for your community; these ideas are an offering and a starting place, not the final say.

Forgiveness is a choice. These activities are opt-in activities that communities can invite people into when they feel ready. No one should feel pressure to forgive.

We have found that using one to three activities can make a big impact for communities.

Instruct program participants to start with working to forgive a small, manageable hurt, not the biggest one they have ever suffered. We learn to be a more forgiving person by forgiving one hurt at a time. Forgiveness is a muscle. By building up a forgiveness muscle, one can gradually forgive more significant hurts, but we don't recommend this book for hurts arising from severe trauma. Once individuals in a community have each strengthened their forgiveness muscle, the community may decide to come together to address hurts as a community.

Discussing forgiveness can bring up complex and difficult feelings; any activity should be adapted to the particular needs of your community and adjusted as needed. We recommend not directly asking participants to share their hurts aloud and always giving individuals an option to pass on activities.

These activities are not mental health counseling and they are not replacements for professional mental health support. We recommend that you share resources of local counselors and/or religious and spiritual leaders.



Community Activities:

GRATITUDE AND FORGIVENESS TREE (15 - 30 MINUTES):

SUMMARY:

A tree can provide a point for reflection on forgiveness, gratitude, and hope, and can be visited as often as desired. It's intended to help people reflect on grievance with an eye to gratitude.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Either a real tree or an image of a tree (collage, printed out and taped up, etc.)
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Tape, thread, or pushpins to attach notes to the tree

INSTRUCTIONS:

Opening

- If you're facilitating a group, start with a check-in circle if you feel it would be beneficial.
- Explain that together you will be focusing on cultivating gratitude, hope, and forgiveness.

Creating the tree

- Distribute the paper and pens or pencils.
- Ask participants to write notes in response to these prompts: "I hope forgiveness will ____", "When I've been forgiven by others, I felt ____", "I'm grateful for forgiveness because____." You can also create your own prompts, or brainstorm some together with the group.
- You can also encourage people to write down religious or inspirational quotes that encourage them to be grateful and to forgive.

Closing

- If this activity is done as a group, open a circle for participants to share, if they want to.
- Encourage participants to return to the tree for reflection and inspiration.

FORGIVENESS INSPIRATION WALL (45 - 60 MINUTES):

SUMMARY:

A Forgiveness Inspirational Wall is a way to raise a community's awareness of forgiveness. Pre-populate a wall or corkboard with inspiring stories of forgiveness (especially local ones), along with images and quotes. Make paper and pens available so community members can add their own contributions to the wall.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Wall or corkboard
- Construction paper
- Pens / Markers
- Tape or pushpins
- Printer (optional)
- Newspaper & magazine cut-outs (optional)

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Identify inspiring local stories of forgiveness; print them out or write them, and post them on the board. Include images that help tell the story.
- Post quotes about forgiveness. Possible quotes include:
 - * "Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die." - Malachy McCourt (actor, writer, and politician)
 - * "Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future." - Paul Boese
 - * "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again." - Maya Angelou (poet and author)
 - * "Life is an adventure in forgiveness." - Norman Cousins (journalist and author)
 - * "Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were." - Cherie Carter-Scott (author and coach)
 - * "Forgiveness does not mean you forget what someone has done, contrary to the saying 'Forgive and forget.' Not reacting with negativity, or giving in to the negative emotions, does not mean you do not respond to the acts or that you allow yourself to be harmed again. Forgiveness does not mean that you do not seek justice or that the perpetrator is not punished." - HH the 14th Dalai Lama (religious leader and author)
 - * Perhaps post stories of forgiveness heroes, like Jesus, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, Malala Yousafzai, Rose Mapendo, and others.
- Encourage community members to add their own contributions.

LABYRINTH: WALKING TOWARDS FORGIVENESS (25-30 MINUTES)

SUMMARY:

A labyrinth offers the opportunity to meditate while walking.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- A labyrinth in a quiet place
- A place to sit
- Optional: journal and pen

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preparation (10 minutes)

- If you're facilitating a group, start with a check-in circle if you feel it would be beneficial.
- Spend a few minutes in silent reflection, prayer, or meditation before you walk the labyrinth. Seek to let go of the stress and demands of your daily life and calm your mind.
- If you're facilitating a group, lead a short discussion about labyrinths. You can share that some see them as metaphors for the journey to God or the divine: the path is long and winding, but leads towards the center, a still place of peace and unity with the divine. Others see it as a reflection of the twists and turns of life's journey and a reflection on transformation along the path, or as a pilgrimage to the Spirit. Walking out, we bring God, the divine, insight, or peace with us into the demands of daily life.

Walking the Labyrinth (10 minutes)

- Stand at the labyrinth's entrance and bring to mind your feelings around forgiveness.
- Slowly walk the path towards the center. As you walk, think of a hurt you've suffered. Think of how holding onto your anger, resentment, or ill-will towards them is impacting you. Is it holding you back from peace? Is it clouding your mind? Affecting other parts of your life? Is it serving you?
- When you reach the center, reflect on whether you are ready to forgive.
- When you're ready, walk the path back out, thinking about your forgiveness journey. Reflect on where you are in forgiveness and where you want to be.

Closing (5-10 minutes)

- Spend some time journaling, if you wish.
- If this activity is done as a group, open a circle for participants to share, if they want to.
- Offer a closing reflection, blessing, or poem.

BURNING PAPER TO LET GO (15-30 MINUTES):

SUMMARY:

Write down the hurtful incident and your feelings about it, then burn the paper as a symbolic act of letting go.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Small pieces of paper
- Pen or pencil
- Matches or lighter
- Candle
- Fire-safe container
- Bowl of water nearby (just in case)

INSTRUCTIONS:

Opening (5-10 minutes)

- If you're facilitating a group, start with a check-in circle if you feel it would be beneficial.
- Spend a few minutes in silent reflection, prayer, or meditation. Seek to let go of the stress and demands of your daily life and calm your mind.

Reflection and writing: (5 minutes)

- Distribute the small pieces of paper and pens or pencils. Explain that each person will be invited to ritually burn their piece of paper.
- Ask participants to consider the hurt, person, or situation, they are struggling to forgive. Ask them to describe it on the paper.

Burning and release: (2 minutes)

- Use the matches to light your candle.
- Invite participants to approach the candle when they are ready and light their paper on fire.
- Place the burned paper in the fire-safe container.
- Ask participants to reflect on what it was like to watch the paper burn.

Closing: (2 - 10 minutes)

- Offer the group an opportunity to share.
- Optional: close with a check-out circle, asking participants to share one or two words about how they're feeling, or pass. If you wish, end with a blessing, poem, or reflection.
- Optional: give each participant a leaf or flower to take home as a symbol of renewal and new growth.

STONE (10-20 MINUTES):

SUMMARY:

Write on a stone and leave it somewhere meaningful (nature, altar, temple, or elsewhere)

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Small pieces of paper
- Pen or pencil
- Matches or lighter
- Candle
- Fire-safe container
- Bowl of water nearby (just in case)

INSTRUCTIONS:

Opening (5-10 minutes)

- If you're facilitating a group, start with a check-in circle if you feel it would be beneficial.
- Spend a few minutes in silent reflection, prayer, or meditation. Seek to let go of the stress and demands of your daily life and calm your mind.

Reflection and writing: (5 minutes)

- Distribute small stones.
- Ask participants to consider the hurt, person, or situation, they are struggling to forgive. Ask them to write a word on the stone that represents their struggle.

Release: (2 minutes)

- Invite participants to leave the stone in a meaningful place. This could be outside in nature, at an altar, in a temple, or elsewhere.
- Give participants time to reflect on how it feels to walk away from the stone.

Closing: (2 - 10 minutes)

- Offer the group an opportunity to share.
- Optional: close with a check-out circle, asking participants to share one or two words about how they're feeling, or pass. If you wish, end with a blessing, poem, or reflection.
- Optional: give each participant a leaf or flower to take home as a symbol of renewal and new growth.

CONTEMPLATING A SENTENCE ABOUT FORGIVENESS (5 - 15 MINUTES)

SUMMARY:

Meditating on a meaningful sentence allows participants to grapple with the many dimensions of an idea.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Places to sit

INSTRUCTIONS:

Opening

- If you're facilitating a group, start with a check-in circle if you feel it would be beneficial.
- Spend a few minutes in silent reflection, prayer, or meditation. Seek to let go of the stress and demands of your daily life and calm your mind.

Ritual

- You could use the phrase "Forgiveness is a gift."
Religious communities might use the phrase "God is love."
- Each time you repeat it aloud you will change the emphasis, like this:
- "**F**orgiveness is a gift"
- "Forgiveness **i**s a gift"
- "Forgiveness is **a** gift"
- Take your time as you recite each line.
Once you have recited all three emphases, we encourage you to keep your eyes closed and slowly repeat the sentence a few more times.

Closing

- If you wish, facilitate a closing circle, offering people the chance to share their thoughts or how they feel.
- You might ask participants to respond to these questions: What thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations did you experience as you recited this sentence? As you alternated between the three emphases, which emphasis affected you the most? Why do you think this was the case?
- Share a closing blessing, poem, or reflection.

PLANTING A SEED OF FORGIVENESS (10-30 MINUTES)

SUMMARY:

Growing in forgiveness takes time and energy. This activity invites participants to care for a growing seed just as they tend to their personal forgiveness growth.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Seeds
- Either a patch of soil in a garden or small flower pots and soil
- Water and cup or watering can

INSTRUCTIONS:

Opening

- If you're facilitating a group, start with a check-in circle if you feel it would be beneficial.
- Spend a few minutes in silent reflection, prayer, or meditation. Seek to let go of the stress and demands of your daily life and calm your mind.

Planting

- Hold the seed in your hand
- Recall the hurt you suffered
- If you intend to forgiveness, bring to mind your intention to let go of your hurt and any resentment or unforgiveness
- Imagine the peace you will feel when you are free of your unforgiveness
- Plant the seed, keeping in mind your intention to forgive
- Cover the seed with soil, resolving to hold onto forgiveness
- Water the seed, visualizing yourself watering new growth of mercy and forgiveness

Closing

- If you chose to plant in small flower pots, invite everyone to take theirs home and care for it
- If you wish, facilitate a closing circle, offering people the chance to share their thoughts or how they feel
- Share a closing blessing, reflection, or poem

Children's Activities:

NOTE:

Discussing forgiveness with children can bring up complex and difficult feelings. Any children's activity should emphasize that forgiveness is a choice. Specific activities should be adapted to the particular needs of your community and the age of the children.

FORGIVENESS AND GRATITUDE TREE

SUMMARY:

Pre-populate a wall or corkboard with inspiring, age-appropriate stories of forgiveness (especially local ones), images, quotes, and heroes. Leave paper and pens so kids can add their own contributions to the wall.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Either a real tree or an image of a tree (collage, printed out and taped up, etc.)
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Tape, thread, or pushpins to attach notes to the tree

INSTRUCTIONS:

Opening

- Start with a check-in circle. Explain that together you will be focusing on cultivating gratitude, hope, and forgiveness. Explore what these terms mean, and receive some time to answer kid's questions and help them explore the concepts together.

Forgiveness Discussion:

- Introduce the idea of forgiveness.
- Ask questions: What is forgiveness? What is forgiveness not? Weave in that forgiveness is different from reconciliation.
- For religious communities, include examples of forgiveness from your sacred texts and teachings

Creating the tree

- Distribute the paper and pens or pencils.
- Ask the kids to write notes in response to these prompts: "I hope forgiveness will ____", "When I've been forgiven by others, I felt ____", "I'm grateful for forgiveness because____." You can also create your own prompts, or brainstorm some together with the group.

Closing

- If this activity is done as a group, open a circle for participants to share, if they want to.
- Encourage kids to return to the tree for reflection and inspiration.



PLAYTIME STORY OR PLAY ABOUT FORGIVENESS (YOUNGER KIDS):

SUMMARY:

Acting out a story about forgiveness with stuffed animals, puppets, or toys

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- Stuffed animals, puppets, or toys

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Acting out a story with stuffed animals, puppets, or their favorite toys
- Read the story; ask them to act it out; ask follow-up questions.

STORY OPTION:

- Can I Tell You About Forgiveness by Liz Gulliford (children's book):
 - Tell the story of Joseph forgiving his friend Billy, who betrayed his trust by sharing a secret.
 - How did people in the story feel before forgiveness? How did they feel after?
 - Can you imagine forgiving or being forgiven in your own life?

Other Ideas for Adults:

- **Guest speakers giving lectures or chapel talks**
 - * Reach out to Human Flourishing Program to see if one of our forgiveness experts can speak to your group.
- **Movie nights to watch and discuss forgiveness-themed movies**
 - * Some ideas include: *Les Miserables*, *The Unforgiven*, *You've Got Mail*
 - * Watch movies that raise issues about the limits of forgiveness: *Schindler's List*, *Hotel Rwanda*
 - * Watch documentaries: *Icyizere: Hope* (directed by Patrick Mureithi); *The Big Question* (Paulist Productions); *The Power of Forgiving* (Journey Films)
- **Host a forgiveness evening with a speaker, Q&A, and time for small group or one-on-one discussion at tables.**
- **Host a discussion on the question, "What is forgiveness?"**
 - * Some definitions of forgiveness include:
 - * The Human Flourishing Program uses this definition: Forgiveness is replacing ill will with goodwill to those who have wronged us.
 - * Forgiveness is the refusal to retaliate against those who have wronged us, argues Professor Matthew Ichihashi Potts.
 - * "Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness." (Source: "What Is Forgiveness?" in the Greater Good Magazine.)
- **Some helpful books include:**
 - * *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu,
 - * *A Just Forgiveness: Responsible Healing Without Excusing Injustice* by Everett Worthington, and
 - * *Forgiveness: An Alternate Account* by Matthew Ichihashi Potts.



- **Establish a “Forgiveness Rock Garden.”**

An area on campus is designated the Forgiveness Rock Garden, and the letters “F-O-R-G-I-V-E” are outlined in paint. People are challenged to view a grudge they are holding as a heavy weight, like a rock. When they forgive, they take a rock to the Forgiveness Rock Garden as a symbolic act of forgiveness. They might place the rock in one of the letters.

- **Read and discuss Simon Wiesenthal’s book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*.**

- **Host debates or dialogues involving clergy of different religions and/or people from different professional or business employment sites.**

- **For schools or universities, professors and teachers are encouraged to assign their classes projects related to forgiveness** (e.g., journaling, watch forgiveness-related films, read forgiveness-related books or journal articles, participate in forgiveness discussion groups)

- **Email blasts to community**

- **Forgiveness books reviewed in community newsletters and local papers**

- **A website is established to post forgiveness stories. (The site would have to be monitored and moderated.)**

- **Poster competition.** Top posters can be chosen to decorate community space for two weeks.

- **Contests.** Essay contests, song-writing contests, play writing contests, art contests, video contests, etc. Winners might receive some prize and might be allowed to perform or demonstrate their project.

