

How to Forgive When You Don't Think You Can



By Emily Felt | [Tiny Buddha](#)

“The truth is, unless you let go, unless you forgive yourself, unless you forgive the situation, unless you realize that the situation is over, you cannot move forward.” ~Steve Maraboli

Have you ever had a relationship, friendship, or marriage that ended so badly it took years, a decade, or even longer to heal? Have you ever wished you could forgive someone but just didn't think it was possible?

Fifteen years ago I was twenty-six and in a relationship with a man that was destructive. After an intense romance in his home country, I made the poor decision that he should come to live with me in San Francisco—a decision that, in hindsight, was immature.

Three months and one visa sponsorship later, we were living

together and immediately fell into the challenges of modern day multicultural relationships.

Aside from the fact that my boyfriend was jealous, obsessive, and immature—a trait I hadn't seen clearly in the beginning—he couldn't work legally, we didn't have a common fluent language between us, and he was far away from his family for the first time in his life.

The worst and most difficult part, however, were our cultural differences. My boyfriend was jealous, obsessive, and controlling, whereas I was a young, driven, independent woman.

He would become despondent, accusatory, suspicious, and sometimes even fly into a jealous rage whenever I left the house.

Our relationship became [emotionally abusive](#), yet I was scared to leave. He was financially dependent on me, he couldn't work and didn't have anywhere else to go, and he didn't have any family in the United States.

I was riddled with guilt and felt horrible, because I had brought him to the US and felt responsible for him.

After a year of struggle, he moved out and I settled into numbness, not wanting to begin to unearth the emotions that needed to be processed in order to recover. I was emotionally scarred and suffered years of nightmares.

Time passed and I pushed the hatred in my heart deeply out of awareness. We never spoke, until a few years ago.

I had just been through a traumatic family experience, and had begun a Metta, or loving-kindness, practice as a means of understanding the circumstances taking place in my life. Surprisingly, the practice enabled me to find forgiveness in my heart for my ex-boyfriend.

Metta is a traditional Buddhist tool for [cultivating loving-](#)

[kindness](#). In the practice, we sit as if in meditation and let the energy of love into our hearts.

We repeat a mantra in which we hold in mind a life without danger, with mental and physical happiness and ease of well-being.

We start by imagining happiness and compassion for ourselves, and then, progressively, we extend love out into the world, to a benefactor, a friend, a neutral person, a difficult person, groups of people, and finally to all beings.

I sat in the Metta practice for ten minutes daily, and I picked my ex-boyfriend as my "[difficult person](#)."

At first I had difficulty when I held him in mind and wished him a life of happiness and well-being, as I didn't really feel he deserved that. However, over time it became easier and my resistance subsided.

One day, after about a month of the practice, I was sitting at my computer and on a whim decided to look him up on Facebook. I looked at some pictures of him rock climbing, and a smile came to my lips.

I saw some images he had posted, of cliffs, mountains, and people bouldering, and by and by I came across a girl, a baby a few months old, words of congratulations, a graduation, and more congratulations.

Lots of memories came flooding back, and this time I didn't block them out. I remembered our tears, his pain at losing me, the very different places we had been at in our lives during the time we were together, how naive and young we both had been.

I came to the realization that I had as much to [forgive myself](#) for during that time as I did him. The tears brought about relief and then happiness, as I found myself truly happy for

all of the good things that had come to him after we parted, evidenced by what I saw on Facebook.

Then some good memories came to me; I had blocked them out over years of resentment and the inability to see anything good in him.

I remembered what he had given me, how he had opened my eyes to a new culture, helped me explore a new country, revived my love of the outdoors, and supported me during my foibles with Spanish.

An image flashed through my mind of a day we finished a pitch on a long climb in Yosemite, and I remembered that day with true and genuine fondness.

This experience moved me and was the final step in my full healing from the wounds of many years before.

Letting go of my negativity and resentment toward him brought about a lightness. He no longer appears in my dreams; I am able to look at everything that happened as a learning experience.

The Metta practice served as a tool for me to discover the compassion in my heart, for him but mostly for myself, enabling the pain to surface, be processed, and dissolve.

How can we use the healing power of loving-kindness in our daily lives? Especially when we don't feel ready to forgive, when the effects of abuse go too deep, or when we simply don't feel the other person deserves to be forgiven?

Like the Metta Practice, there are tools we can use to overcome our own blocks to forgiveness, even when our minds and hearts aren't ready.

Here are some tips to remember:

We are the primary beneficiaries of the practice.

Despite the fact that during the Metta practice we focus on others, we are always the primary beneficiaries of our efforts.

We can forgive someone and it doesn't require getting in touch with that person or making them aware of what we are doing in any way. Just as when we hold hatred in our hearts we are the ones who suffer from it, when we find love in our hearts we benefit.

It is best to start by cultivating love and compassion for someone we already love.

Often the easiest place to start is not with ourselves but with someone for whom we already feel great love—a child, a dear friend, someone we admire or who has helped us in our lives.

Even if we never extend our practice beyond this point, we already reap the rewards of the process itself. We are the ones who feel the great energy in the heart when we focus on our true desire for another to be happy and free from physical and mental pain.

We must forgive ourselves for not being willing to forgive.

Some human experiences are simply so destructive, some [abuse](#) so acute that we may not have the energy to process it. In this case, we can still benefit from forgiving ourselves for whatever negativity we hold toward ourselves for not being able to forgive or fully let go of the pain of our experience.

Choosing to keep debilitating resentment and pain out of our awareness so that we can function in the world can also be a positive choice, if we stop feeling guilty about it.

We can always choose to go at our own pace.

We are always in charge of our own pace of change. We might not feel like forgiving now, and this doesn't mean that we can't choose it in the future. In the same vein, we can let go of our fear of forgiving by remembering we can always go back and harbor some resentment if we want to.

We do not deserve to suffer.

One of the illusions that we must let go of is that if we stop suffering, our aggressor will somehow benefit or be better off for it. This couldn't be further from the truth. We hurt ourselves, when we deserve our own compassion. Even when a person doesn't deserve to be forgiven, we certainly do not deserve to continue to suffer emotionally over them.

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