

## Forgiveness – a choice or a feeling?



**Forgiveness can be tough – none of us would deny this – but it's essential for any marriage to develop, grow and last. In their new book, *The Highway Code for Marriage*, Hilary and Michael Perrott give useful insights and practical suggestions into how choosing to forgive can make such a difference in a marriage.**

A man told his friend, "Whenever my wife and I have an argument she becomes hysterical." "You mean hysterical," the friend replied. "No, I mean historical. She reminds me of everything I ever did!"

Little everyday injuries are so trivial we hardly notice that we forgive or are forgiven. He treads on her toe and says, "Oh, sorry!" and she replies, "That's all right." It was not deliberate. It hurt for only a few seconds. It is never referred to again and they both forget about it. Unthinkingly, she lets out a sharp word. He feels a momentary prick of pain, but he realises she is under pressure and makes no comment. He does not think about it, and after a few days there is no hurt and, in the end, no memory.

But what happens when there is a really big hurt? Every time you think about it you smoulder inside. It may have been a single act or the collective weight of a hundred small grievances. The anger does not go away. It grows into a long-term resentment that you have been treated this way. You feel you have been let down, embarrassed, deceived, betrayed. Your anger may be red-faced and loud-voiced or it may be as cold and hard as ice. There is a wall of bitterness between you. How can you forgive? Anyway, what is forgiveness?

### What forgiveness is not

- **Condoning.** Forgiving them does not mean you approve of what they did.
- **Forgetting.** Forgive and forget? If the offence is small, yes, you will probably forget all about it. But if it is big, you may never forget, even if you forgive.
- **Denying.** For some, the pain is too great to take on board and so they deny that it happened at all, not only to others but to themselves.
- **Pretending.** You will not admit to anyone that you are hurting and you claim everything is fine, but the fact that you are not shouting or screaming does not mean that you are not angry.
- **Losing.** The person who forgives is not necessarily the loser. Forgiving may be winning.

### What forgiveness is

- **Choosing, not feeling.** If you have been badly hurt, forgiving may be the last thing you feel like doing. Fortunately, forgiveness has very little to do with feelings and everything to do with choice. Just as you choose to talk when you would rather be silent, to be kind when to do so would be an effort, to be unselfish when the opposite is much more attractive, so to forgive is more a matter of choosing than feeling.
- **Choosing not to dwell on the hurt.** You cannot help the thought coming into your mind. Bang, it is there. Uninvited and unwelcome. But you are responsible for what you allow your mind to dwell on. The more you rehearse the hurtful words or deeds, the more indelible they become in your mind.
- **Choosing not to talk about it.** If you talk about it, you think about it. If you think about it, you feel it. If you feel it, it will hurt you. Each time you remind your wife how she hurt you, you hurt her – and yourself.
- **Choosing not to retaliate.** Justice may say, "An eye for an eye" – "If you do that to me, I'll do it to you." Forgiveness says, "I could, but I won't."
- **Choosing to let it go.** Some people find it particularly hard to let go of past hurt, but in the end it is a choice. One wife wrote, "I used to replay the video tapes of what he said and did over and over in my mind. Then one day I let it all go and I was free."
- **Choosing to go on choosing.** One husband, when he forgave his wife for her unfaithfulness, said, "I felt all the pain go away." But later he began to replay the tapes in his mind and all the pain came back again. He unforgave! Forgiving is not a one-off act, it is an ongoing attitude.

### A final note

Forgiveness is for the forgiver as much as for the forgiven. Refusing to forgive is like shooting oneself in the foot. Forgiveness brings peace to a marriage and creates the attitude necessary to make a new beginning. It allows a couple to move on together.

You have a straight choice: pain or peace. Hold on to the hurt and it corrodes everything. Replay it in

your mind, over and over, and the pain will grow and perhaps become hate. Let the hurt go and, though it may take time, the pain will go. It's forgive or fester.

A wife and husband who are going to be best friends and enjoy a really deep companionship will learn that a good marriage is made up of two people who are not only *givers* of themselves but also *forgivers* of each other.

Adapted from '**The Highway Code for Marriage**', by Hilary and Michael Perrot, published by CWR.