

# Forgiveness and Compassion

W. David Hoisington, Ph.D.

August, 2007 published on [www.CompassionSpace.com](http://www.CompassionSpace.com)

People have sent emails about difficulties with forgiveness. These difficulties are deeply felt by many and yes they do get in the way of compassion. I have written about "radiant compassion", a compassion that without need of deed brings about change, and illuminates the need for people to change. But it also can bring about attack - and I have been the recipient of that from many people, including family.

I have questioned, "Why do they attack me? I am a good person trying to do the best I can to help others?" Some of the attacks have been quite harsh, and I have felt injured by them. "How could they say such terrible things?" It is that "up in your face pain" that gets in the way of seeing with the eye of compassion. The view gets restricted, but not just for compassion toward others – it also restricts the view toward ourselves and our own health and well being. This then becomes a cycle that we can easily get stuck in for years. "I haven't talked to him (her) for years because of that incident" is not an uncommon thing to hear.

I am certainly not going to claim myself to be some all forgiving person. I recently had a student falsely accuse me of sexual misconduct. I had to go through a sort of "inquisition" and all the work, research, student compassion training, I was doing became questionable. For me, it was as if I became questionable, as if I was a "demon" of some kind. I was upset, angry, and very hurt. There was the potential that my "life" as I knew it could end. My first response was certainly not one of compassion. I was in too much pain to even have a small window of compassion to look out through. Yet I will share with you how I came to forgiveness of her, as a person, but still not condoning her behavior.

What I will share here is the process I went through. I cannot describe any universal path to forgiveness, for I don't think there is one. We all struggle with it in our own deeply personal way, and finding the way through forgiveness back to compassion is as personal as it gets. So what follows are just my thoughts on some steps.

Step 1 – Is it True? Is what the person said true? If they did something upsetting then was it triggered by something you did? This requires you to put the pain a side for a moment and honestly look at your own responsibilities. In the case of the female student I clearly did not do anything that could be considered misconduct – but she perceived that I did. What could I have done differently that might have changed the outcome? I spent quite a bit of time looking at myself, and also bouncing my perceptions off of others. I finally arrived at the decision that I could have changed my approach with her (I confronted her about her poor compassion and that she was at risk for failing my course), but that still did not warrant her attack on me. So the simple answer is that it wasn't true and I think I understood my responsibility in regards to what happened.

## Forgiveness and compassion

Step 2 – What Were They Thinking? Why would the person come up with such an attack? What were they thinking at the time? What was their point of view? In the instance of the student, who I had confronted on having a lack of compassion, her identity was wrapped around becoming a helper and “saving” people from the pain she had endured (in this case at the hands of men). She needed a way to, as they say in the East, “save face”. Failure in the class was not an option for her. The only course of action then..... This does not excuse her actions, but it does help to put them in perspective. Sometimes we may need input from others to gain this perspective on the other person, but we need to clear the pain out of our ears so we can hear the other person’s perspective better.

Step 3 – Forgive the Person. We all make mistakes, say things from emotion, act to protect and we may even justify our actions for years. This doesn’t necessarily make us bad people. I think we often don’t take the time to do steps 1 and 2 with the depth that is needed to get to step 3. When we are taking those first steps of forgiveness we forgive the person (not the action they did), because we have good information that comes from our work on steps 1 and 2. We know that the person was in a certain mood, dealing with a habitual way of responding, upset at the time, sick ..... the list goes on. The point is that we have come to a point where we understand the others person’s point of view at the time. We forgive them because we know that point of view to be a part of us. As with the student, she was protecting her “life” (career). She saw she was under attack. I think we can all relate to that and there is the point of forgiveness. I am not saying that her actions were proper. I am saying I understand HER. I forgive HER – the person.

Step 4 – Stop Labeling the Action. Right after the student accused me I placed lots of labels on the action. It was mean, cruel, dangerous, painful. I attached the “How could they do that?” and “Why are they being so hurtful toward me?” labels. These are just examples of labels we can attach to the action of another and these labels keep the past action “up in our face” and block our view of compassion. It is possible to replay these labels over, and over, and over. This is when we get stuck for years. Instead of rewinding the labeling tape, turn it off and replace it with a conscious, mindful review of steps 1 through 3.

Step 5 – Know that Forgiveness is Healthy. It takes a lot of emotional energy to carry those action labels around inside, to have the event “up in your face”, for years and years. This is particularly so if it is a family member, because there is also a part of us that wishes for a reconciled reunion – for a return to peace and love. Forgiveness is good for your health and well being. It is good for the other person’s health and well being. It is worth the time and effort. What if you were to be on your death bed tomorrow – what would you do?

Step 6 – Open the Door to Healing. When friends or family are involved in the process of forgiveness then someone has to take that first step in trying to open the door. When steps 1 – 5 are done wisely it is easier to open the door. It might get slammed back in your face, but it is easier. When the door does get slammed it is very likely the memories will be back “up in our face”. Just go through all the steps again. Get healthy and try again to open the door between. I have often started the “open door” process with something simple like, “I haven’t heard for you in a long time. I’d love to hear from you.”

Step 7 – Ask For Forgiveness. This is perhaps the most difficult step because you are asking for forgiveness for yourself first, for all the pain and suffering you have caused yourself by holding that door tightly closed for so long. This is done with gentleness and compassion. Then second you are asking for forgiveness for the other person, and this is done from a deep sense of sacred compassion for their personal well being. Anything that the other person has to live with that creates suffering in their lives, which could possibly be connected to the action you shared, needs our blessing of forgiveness. And this is a sacred process (in however you might define it) of asking forgiveness for the parts of who we are that contribute to suffering (in ourselves and in others). It is done with the deepest, most sacred, compassion we can muster. Remember that leaving a wave of suffering in the pond of humanity is a terrible way to live, and an even worse way to face our death.

Forgiveness is not meant to give power to any actions that enable suffering to continue. Forgiveness does not condone any thoughts that contribute to suffering. The process of forgiveness is linked to the process of compassion and the relief of suffering. This includes ourselves. We are to use the light of compassion to illuminate the causes of suffering, not to enable them. Forgiveness is linked to how we learn to "sit with suffering" (discussed in more detail elsewhere) but this doesn't mean we should act to promote suffering just to sit in it.

For some, struggling with forgiveness, they may need to revisit the steps many times. This is natural, for some wounds are deep and take time to heal. The patterned response of "not forgiving" we have carried to protect these deep wounds often will not fade away over night. Living with our own pain, not casting it out on to others, not letting it spill out into the world spreading more suffering, is a cornerstone of forgiveness and its link to compassion.

I hope that this helps people who are struggling with finding forgiveness and compassion in the wake of painful actions that seem to get "up in your face". I have questioned, "Why do they attack me? I am a good person trying to do the best I can to help others?" Some of the attacks have been quite harsh, and I have felt injured by them. "How could they say such terrible things?" It is that "up in your face pain" that gets in the way of seeing with the eye of compassion. The view gets restricted, but not just for compassion toward others – it also restricts the view toward ourselves and our own health and well being. This then becomes a cycle that we can easily get stuck in for years. "I haven't talked to him (her) for years because of that incident" is not an uncommon thing to hear.