Health Benefits of Forgiveness

Can you remember the last time you held a grudge? Perhaps someone betrayed your confidence, wronged you, or said or did something hurtful. Do you recall harbouring feelings of bitterness, hostility, or resentment? Chances are these feelings are still fresh in your memory.

Unresolved anger and resentment are major sources of stress, and the driving force behind a host of physical and mental illnesses. Recent studies in public health confirm that hostility and resentment tear down the immune system and increase the risk of heart attack, cancer and diabetes. This is not hard to believe when one considers the amount of energy that is expended when one obsessively replays hurtful events and past wrongdoings.

When we are betrayed it is natural and expected that we would feel hurt and angry. However when resentment takes over, the only person who suffers long term is the victim of the original event. This is why holding a grudge is often described as a one-way street. Resentful ruminations release biochemical reactions in the body that increase muscle tension, heart rate and blood pressure, strengthen negative thought patterns, and trigger anxiety and depression. Consider the well-known quote by Nelson Mandela: "*Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for it to kill your enemy*". People become so focused on the past wrongdoing that present experiences become tainted, and they lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others. While hurt feelings are natural, resentments are rarely logical or productive.

If resentment tears down the immune system, forgiveness strengthens it. Forgiveness is incomprehensible to some, as it is often confused with condoning a hurtful act. Forgiveness is simply the decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. Grudges provide a false sense of power, and the illusion of protection against future betrayals. By forgiving you are not denying the other person's responsibility for hurting you nor are you justifying the wrong. It is possible to forgive the person without excusing the act. Separating the two can bring a kind of peace that helps you go on with life. It can lead to healthier relationships, less anxiety and stress, lower blood pressure, fewer symptoms of depression, lowered risk of alcohol and substance abuse, and greater overall spiritual and psychological well being.

To forgive, start by making a commitment to letting go. Cultivate empathy and understanding by looking at the bigger picture and telling the story from other points of view. Maybe the 'enemy' was not actually just out to hurt you, and perhaps they were influenced by other factors. Ask yourself if you have ever made a similar mistake. Consider what you have learned from this unfortunate event, and look for any positives that have come of it. Give yourself time to heal and re-direct your energy to things you have control over. Your body and mind will thank you for it.