

Self-Forgiveness Letter

Coping

Exercise

30 min

Client

No

The process of self-forgiveness includes a series of changes in motivation. These changes reflect a desire to disengage in self-punishment and act more benevolently toward ourselves [1]. Self-forgiveness occurs when an individual accepts responsibility for past transgressions [2] and expresses a willingness to move forward without ruminating over wrongdoings that cannot be changed [3]. We all behave in ways that cause harm or upset to ourselves and others; however, living with the reality of those actions can be damaging to psychological wellbeing [4]. Failure to forgive the self can create feelings of shame, guilt, and self-resentment [4]; diminish our sense of self-worth and self-respect; and lead to rumination about past transgressions [1].

While initial research into forgiveness focused primarily on forgiving others, current research has examined the myriad benefits of forgiving the self. For instance, practicing self-forgiveness reduces rumination, dissipates negative emotions, and improves relationships, self-perception, and self-worth [5]. Further, forgiving the self bolsters confidence, reduces procrastination, and improves the health and wellbeing of people attempting to stop harmful self-directed behaviors [5].

A four-stage therapeutic model of self-forgiveness [6] suggests four essential steps to self-forgiveness: a) accepting **responsibility** for the transgression and its consequences; b) expressing **remorse**, which is characterized by feelings like guilt and regret; c) **restoration**, attempting to make amends for mistakes; and d) **renewal**, finding ways to learn from the experience and work toward compassion, acceptance, and respect for oneself [6]. This exercise will help clients use the four Rs of self-forgiveness to draft a letter that will allow them to understand and learn from past wrongdoings and uncover opportunities for personal growth. In doing so, clients can experience a motivational change away from self-punishment and toward acceptance and self-forgiveness.



Author

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Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients forgive themselves using the four Rs of self-forgiveness: responsibility, remorse, restoration, and renewal. To do so, clients will draft a letter of self-forgiveness that will allow them to learn from past transgressions and uncover opportunities for personal growth.



Advice

- Self-forgiveness is a process that takes time and commitment. Clients should be aware that self-forgiveness will not happen overnight and will require practice. As such, this is not a one-time-only exercise and should be carried out regularly.
- This exercise involves self-reflection, and clients should ensure they find a quiet place and allow ample time to complete their self-forgiveness letter without rushing or interruptions.
- Clients may express resistance to the idea of self-forgiveness. Some may see the suffering brought about by self-judgment and shame as something they 'deserve.' Others might view self-forgiveness as condoning their mistakes, behavior, or choices. However, thinking in this way creates barriers to personal growth and does nothing to prevent the same transgression from happening again. This exercise is not about *condoning* past transgressions; it is about accepting what has happened and moving on with life having learned from past mistakes that have caused harm.
- This exercise is likely to bring up feelings that are unpleasant and perhaps painful as clients recall a past transgression. This is to be expected and completely normal. Accepting responsibility and enduring discomfort will serve as a springboard for both self-forgiveness and personal growth.



References

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2. Jacinto, G. A., & Edwards, B. L. (2011). Therapeutic stages of forgiveness and self-forgiveness. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 21*, 423-437.
3. Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Wisco, B. E., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). Rethinking rumination. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 3*, 400-424.
4. Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. L. (2003). *Shame and guilt*. Guilford Press.
5. Wohl, M. J. A., & McLaughlin, K. J. (2014). Self-forgiveness: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 8*, 422-435.
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Self-Forgiveness Letter

Often, when we think about forgiveness, we think about forgiving others who have wronged us in some way. But what about forgiving ourselves? After all, each of us has, at some point, behaved in ways that we later regret. For many people, self-forgiveness does not come naturally, and it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking, “I don’t deserve forgiveness,” “I deserve to feel this guilt,” or “I’m just a bad person.” However, by withholding self-forgiveness, you will continue to suffer.

Self-forgiveness is not about forgetting, condoning, or excusing your actions; nor is it about avoiding feelings of guilt and remorse. It is about resolving feelings of guilt and shame by accepting responsibility for your actions, apologizing, and learning from your mistakes. Whether it is a minor mistake or one that has a big impact, forgiving yourself will help you move forward and avoid making the same mistake again.

This exercise will help you write a letter of forgiveness to yourself using the four Rs of self-forgiveness.

Responsibility – recognizing your wrongdoing and taking responsibility

Remorse – acknowledging how you feel and expressing remorse

Restoration – rectifying your mistake to the extent possible

Renewal – releasing past hurt and moving forward

Step 1: Identifying a past event

To begin, take a moment to bring to mind a past event you regret due to your own actions or behavior. Briefly describe this event below:

Step 2: Taking responsibility

Now that this is clear in your mind, the next step is to accept responsibility for engaging in actions that you now regret. Accepting responsibility opens the door to self-forgiveness by showing that you recognize your wrongdoing and acknowledging that you could have done things differently.

As you complete this step, keep in mind that while it is important to accept responsibility for your actions, you should avoid unnecessary self-criticism or making excuses to justify your actions. Using the space below, write down the actions you take responsibility for.



I take responsibility for...

Step 3: Expressing remorse

Taking responsibility for your actions can bring up a mix of negative emotions; this is completely normal. Facing up to these emotions and expressing remorse are important steps on the path toward forgiving yourself.

Expressing remorse – directed at yourself or others – will help reduce these negative feelings so that you can forgive yourself and move forward.

Now, take some time to reflect upon and express the remorse you feel about your past actions using the space below. Remember, while this may bring up some uncomfortable feelings, it is an important part of the self-forgiveness process and will help you avoid repeating the behavior in the future.

Because of this wrongdoing, I feel...

Step 4: Restoration through rectifying mistakes

One way to move past your guilt is to take action so that you can make amends and rectify your mistakes. In this step, you will think of how you might make amends for your actions and rectify your mistakes to the extent possible.

Now, take some time to consider possible ways that you can make amends and write these in the space below.



I can try to make amends by...

Step 5: Renewal through releasing past hurt

Forgiving yourself includes finding ways to learn from the experience so that you can let go of past pain and grow as a person. Understanding why you did something and learning from your mistakes pave the way for self-forgiveness.

It is important to note that renewal is not about forgetting the offense, but about setting aside self-punishment, letting go of self-blame, and finding ways to move forward.

Using the space below, write down what you have learned from this experience. Then take some time to think about what steps you can take to avoid repeating this experience in the future and what you might choose to do instead.

This experience has taught me...

I can avoid repeating this in the future by...



Step 6: Reflection

- How has this exercise changed the way you think about self-forgiveness?
- How did it feel to complete this exercise?
- What did you find most challenging about this exercise? How did you overcome this?
- What part of this exercise did you find most rewarding?
- How do you feel about the experience now, after completing this exercise?