

Forgiving Step by Step: Training Notes

How to teach the worksheet “Forgiving Step by Step”

This worksheet is designed for both believers and non-believers (that is the reason why we didn't put any Bible references). Its focus is to explain how forgiveness works and how to fully forgive so that no part of the hurt remains. We don't argue why we should forgive, but actually, by reading the content, many people become motivated to forgive. Most people benefit from the theory, but of course the aim is that people apply it and experience the power and freedom of it.

Possible application scenarios:

- With an individual who has already expressed that they want to get free from wounds (we recommend that you first read the worksheet with them, at least until the five steps of forgiving, so that they really understand what they need to do)
- In small groups and house churches (first you do the worksheet and ideally you can then lead one person through the process with having the others observe the process)
- Bigger training events in churches (make sure you bring enough helpers for leading people through the process)
- With groups of non-believers as a means of outreach

The more the group knows each other and trusts each other, the easier it is for people to open up and share about where they have been hurt. That means it's always a good idea to do the workshop with existing groups.

What forgiveness is not

As space is limited and we wanted to focus on the positive explanation of forgiveness, we didn't include this in the worksheet. But it may be very important that you clarify misunderstandings about what forgiveness is, and is not, that hinder people from forgiving.

- Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation and restoration of the relationship may not be possible, for example, because the other person doesn't want to or is already out of your life. Forgiveness is always possible. (Reconciliation is essentially two or more people mutually asking forgiveness and forgiving each other)
- Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgetting is impossible, but after forgiving the pain of the memory is gone.
- Forgiving does not mean you need to trust the person the same way as before. It may be very wise to institute safe boundaries after forgiving (see the guitar illustration story).
- Forgiveness does not mean sweeping things under the rug.
- Forgiving is not saying “it's no big deal”.
- Forgiving doesn't mean being weak.
- Forgiving doesn't necessarily mean that you don't take legal steps.

Illustration story: Lending your guitar

Imagine you have a nice guitar and I come to you and ask, “May I borrow your guitar for a day?” You answer, “Sure, but please be careful with it.” The next day I return the guitar but it has big scratches on it now, and I say, “Yeah that happens as I have kids. But it still sounds the same”. You're angry and sad. But finally you decide to forgive me because staying angry is not helpful.

The next week I come again, asking “Could I borrow your guitar again?”

It is your guitar and you have the freedom to give it to me or not. You have forgiven me, but as you learned that I'm not careful with your guitar, you probably will decide not to lend it to me again!

Teaching the worksheet most effectively

- Give everyone a copy of the worksheet. You could give them two copies along with the challenge that they should think and pray about who they could share/do this with. If people have another mother tongue, give them a worksheet in their language as well if possible.
- Let the participants read it out loud passage by passage. Stop after every (or every second) passage to ask for questions and maybe add some hints and illustrations.
- Keep an eye on the time and make sure that you leave enough time to do the final “examining yourself” part.
- People will learn the content the best if they can experience the process themselves or if they can at least observe you leading someone else through the steps of forgiving. This requires more experience though, especially when it comes to leading someone through the process in front of a whole group watching. Only do this if you’re comfortable with it and know what you’re doing! Ask your trainer to prepare you.

Good hints and illustrations: Step by Step through the worksheet

After the first passage (the introduction)

It’s a good idea to give a small example after the first passage. For example:

“You shared a personal secret with a good friend. But he gossiped and shared it with others. You’re really angry.”

The first (wrong) reaction: You feel like “you can’t trust anyone anymore” and stop sharing any deep things with others. You build a wall of mistrust around yourself as a protection but actually you’re hurting yourself even more as you isolate yourself.

The second (wrong) reaction: You want to pay him back, let him suffer and experience how bad it really was what he did. You try to seek revenge but by doing this, you end up constantly thinking about this issue and are not free at all. Also, you end up piling sin on yourself.

After the second passage (“What is forgiveness?”):

Ask for questions and clarify all misunderstandings. You may want to share some of the points of the passage “What forgiveness is not” (see above). Especially the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation is usually new and helpful.

After the third passage (“Steps of forgiving”)

Definitely stop after this passage and ask the question: “Which of these five step is hardest for you?” Let everyone answer the question. This helps a lot to make people really think about what this all would mean for them personally.

It is also a good idea to give a small example and you could go back to the little illustration from the beginning:

1. I shared something private with my friend and he told it others without asking me.
2. I’m really angry. And actually it was also embarrassing and I feel ashamed because now others know about it.
3. It was wrong of him to gossip and tell it to others without asking me.
4. I start to pray: “God, I come to you as the judge and I bring the charges against my friend: He gossiped and shared my secret with others without asking me. I’m really angry now and also feel ashamed.”
5. Now I pray: “Okay God, I hand this whole case over into your hands and let go of it. I won’t judge him anymore. I forgive my friend.”

After the fourth passage (“Bringing charges of injustice to God”)

Most believers have never talked with God like this and it might sound strange for them. You can use the following points:

If I asked you, “Do you believe that God is a judge?” most would agree. But if I ask you, “What does that mean in your life?” you probably wouldn’t have much of an answer besides “Well, one day after I die I’ll stand in front of him and he’ll judge me?!” That is correct, but the fact that God is

a judge means even more! This here is the practical application: We have the right to bring charges of injustice to God and interact with Him in His role of the judge. If we've never done that, it probably means that we haven't fully understood this aspect of God.

After the fifth passage ("More hints")

Possible explanations about these hints:

Using the support of a helper: The problem here is that many people are not good helpers.

Three common responses of a bad helper:

1. You tell them what happened and what you did and they start to judge you: "What?! You did this?! That was a stupid idea!"
→ Well thanks, but I won't continue to share any more with you.
2. You share e.g. about how you're hurt by your ex-girlfriend. They start to share their own, similar story about how they were hurt by their ex-girlfriend, maybe even making a remark "Yeah you know, that's always the case with girls."
→ Well, that's not helpful for me at all. It makes things even worse.
3. They pour out compassion: "That's so hard, what you've experienced. I'm so sad, that must have been traumatizing. Come, let me hug you. That was sooo bad."
→ Well, some compassion is good, but that alone doesn't help to become free from the hurt.

A good helper uses active listening, doesn't judge but gently helps you to go through these steps and connect you with God so you can be free (see worksheet "The Role of the Helper").

Our own sin: You may share a personal story how that point looked like in your life.

Sticking to forgiveness: It's a very good idea to share something like the "graduation" illustration story:

You're finishing school and the graduation is coming up. You tell your parents about it and invite them. Your father says "Sure, we'll come!"

On the graduation day everyone is dressed up and all the people come: All your friends and all their parents. But who doesn't show up? Your father. You're really sad and upset. Later you decide that you want to be free from these feelings and forgive your father by going through the steps of forgiveness.

But later, you realize that this was actually a common pattern for your father: He would promise something and then wouldn't keep it. When you really needed him, he was busy. Now you have forgiven him for not coming to the graduation, but there's more similar situations. To become free from these hurts, you need to go through the steps of forgiving again and forgive him the other times he sinned against you with this sinful pattern.

After the last part ("Examining yourself")

Clarify any questions and then go into prayer. A good idea is that you pray out loud and then have two minutes of silence where everyone can ask God these questions. If possible, let people make personal notes on who they need to forgive.

When the two minutes are over, kindly ask that everyone would share (as much as they want) what God has shown them. Many people will have a list of people they need to forgive. Help them to get started by asking them who they would like to start with. We recommend starting with a smaller issue. The more they learn how to forgive, and have experience doing it, the easier it will get.

If you plan to lead someone through the forgiveness process in front of the others, make sure you listen carefully and pray to find out who you could and should lead through (check the following important criteria: Is that person hearing clearly from God? Is the whole thing already fairly clearly defined and not a big hurt? Does nobody know the offender?)