How to Let Go of a Grudge

By Dr. Travis Bradberry

Think about the last time someone really did you wrong. Maybe a family member forgot your birthday, or your boss passed you up for a promotion. Now, take a moment to notice what you’re feeling. Does thinking about the event make your heart beat faster or your breathing become shallow? Does it leave a bad taste in your mouth? If so, you’re holding a grudge, which can be bad for your health.

Here Comes a Grudge

The negative emotions that come with holding on to a grudge are actually a stress response. Just thinking about the event sends your body into fight or flight mode. When a threat is imminent, this reaction is essential to your survival. When a threat is ancient history, holding on to that stress wrecks havoc on your body and can have devastating health consequences over time. Holding on to a grudge means you’re holding on to stress, and researchers at Emory University have shown that holding on to stress contributes to high blood pressure and heart disease. Learning to let go of a grudge will not only make you feel better now but can also improve your health over time. There are six steps to letting go. Follow them closely and watch your grudges disappear.

Step 1. Take control.

You need to take control of your life and decide that you are ready to let go of the grudge. This means no more waiting for the other person to apologize or somehow make it right. When you’re waiting for someone else to act, you’re giving him or her control over you. Letting go of the grudge is about your own health and well-being. It’s essential you do it on your own terms.

Step 2. Make it for YOU.

The process of forgiveness and letting go is for you, not the person you’re forgiving. Forgiving can be hard to do when the person you’re forgiving doesn’t deserve it. You’re choosing to let go for your own health and happiness, and the other person doesn’t need to know that you’ve forgiven him or her. You’re not letting the person off the hook or inviting him or her to repeat the offense—you’re just letting the past be the past.

Step 3. Step into his or her shoes.

Take a moment to think about the situation from the other person’s perspective. This will help you understand why he or she acted that way. Sometimes, you’ll discover extraneous circumstances that make the other person’s actions easier to take. Other times, you’ll find zero justification for his or her actions, and that’s okay. Either way, you’ll improve your perspective and possibly develop some empathy to assist you in letting go.
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**Step 4. Acknowledge your feelings.**

You cannot let go of a grudge until you acknowledge how bad the offense made and makes you feel. If you ignore or deny your feelings, you won’t process them, and they will resurface when you least expect it. The more honest you are with yourself about exactly what you felt and feel, the easier it is to prevent these feelings from having a hold on you.

**Step 5. Don’t do it alone.**

This simple step is the most difficult one for many people. When you’ve been wronged, it can be embarrassing to reveal to another person exactly what happened and admit how sore you are about it. The simple act of talking it out with a friend is a great way to acknowledge your feelings (thus taking away their power). It’s also a great way to get some new insight into your situation. You aren’t the only person who has been treated poorly by others, nor are you alone in being bitter or hurt about it. This happens to everyone, and you’ll be surprised how quickly a good friend will admit he or she has experienced the same thing.

**Step 6. Verbally forgive.**

You don’t have to say it to the person (there are many instances when doing so is a bad idea), but you must say it out loud. Literally verbalize your forgiveness, and the fact that you are letting the wrongdoing go. Just as writing something down makes it easier to remember even if you never revisit what you wrote, verbalizing your forgiveness is an action (not just a thought), which makes it “real” to your brain. This may sound hokey, but try it. You’ll see how powerful this final step is.

Grudges can be tough, especially when it’s hard to justify the other person’s actions or your own inability to let it go. Since even a small grudge can be detrimental to your health, do yourself a favor and give these six steps a try.

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