

Introduction

Picture the crowded screen in front of a harried air traffic controller. Picture the chaos in the room and the jumble of planes on the screen. Now imagine that your unresolved grievances are the planes on that screen that have been circling for days and weeks on end. Most of the other planes have landed, but your unresolved grievances continue to take up precious air space, draining resources that may be needed in an emergency. Having them on the screen forces you to work harder and increases the chance for accidents. The grievance planes become a source of stress and burnout is often the result.

HOW DID THE PLANES GET UP THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

You took something too personally.

You continued to blame the person who hurt you for how bad you felt.

You created a grievance story.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

- Forgiveness is the peace you learn to feel when you allow these circling planes to land.
- Forgiveness is for you and not the offender.
- Forgiveness is taking back your power.
- Forgiveness is taking responsibility for how you feel.
- Forgiveness is about your healing and not about the people who hurt you.
- Forgiveness is a trainable skill just like learning to throw a baseball.

- Forgiveness helps you get control over your feelings.
 - Forgiveness can improve your mental and physical health.
 - Forgiveness is becoming a hero instead of a victim.
 - Forgiveness is a choice.
 - Everyone can learn to forgive.
- WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT**
- Forgiveness is not condoning unkindness.
 - Forgiveness is not forgetting that something painful happened.
 - Forgiveness is not excusing poor behavior.
 - Forgiveness does not have to be an otherworldly or religious experience.
 - Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing your hurt.
 - Forgiveness does not mean reconciling with the offender.
 - Forgiveness does not mean you give up having feelings.

I do not suggest that forgiveness means we give up our right to be angry when we have been hurt or mistreated. My forgiveness research shows that people retain their ability to be angry but simply use that ability more wisely. I am not suggesting that forgiveness means we condone the hurtful things that people have done to us. I have seen that forgiveness helps people control their emotions so they maintain good judgment. They do not waste precious energy trapped in anger and hurt over things they can do nothing about. Forgiveness acknowledges we can't change the past. Forgiveness allows us not to stay stuck in the past. Forgiveness allows us to land our planes and then make any repairs that may be necessary. Forgiveness gives us a well deserved break.

Some of you may have doubts that forgiveness will help you as much as I claim. You may think that by forgiving you are somehow letting the other person get away with their actions. Or that forgiveness means reconciling with someone who hurt you. You might be still searching to understand why someone was so cruel to you, and you don't believe learning to forgive is going to help you find the reason. Or you have suffered for a long time and are just plain suspicious of anything that sounds like a cure. If this is you in any way, you are not alone. I confront it every time I teach a new class.

Recently, I had a man in my forgiveness seminar who voiced the concerns that many were feeling. Jeremy attended because his boss at work had lied to him and he was anxious to know how to deal with that betrayal. His boss had lied repeatedly about something important, and two months ago Jeremy finally discovered the truth. He was so furious as he talked that it seemed as if he just uncovered the lie the day before. He questioned me immediately about the value of forgiveness.

Jeremy had the following concerns.

1. If I forgive my boss, am I condoning his lying?
2. How can I trust my boss again?
3. Should I confront my boss?
4. How do I stop obsessing over this?

I told Jeremy what I will tell all of you. Just because someone hurt you does not mean you have to suffer indefinitely. Jeremy's boss lied, and that is clearly wrong. In order to forgive, you have to know that lying is wrong. Forgiveness does not mean condoning lying. Forgiveness helps Jeremy become able to answer the question of what he can do about his lying boss. Forgiveness shows Jeremy that he can still enjoy his life, his family, and his friends and not invite this lying boss along everywhere he goes.

I asked Jeremy if his boss was really worth the ruining of so many days in the last eight weeks. Jeremy said he was not. I responded that the solution, then, is to learn a new skill so that he does not ruin the next two months. That skill is forgiveness.

I told Jeremy that he might not be able to trust his boss again and that he may never respect him again. He might choose to remain at work with a boss he does not respect, or he might get a new job. He might choose to confront his boss, or he might not. Clearly, Jeremy had some hard choices to make. I finally told him that as long as he was trapped in his anger, he would not be able to clear his mind enough to make the best possible decisions. As long as he was angry and hurt, the decisions he was contemplating were more about his lying boss than they were about his own well-being. Learning to forgive allows Jeremy and us to make the best possible life decisions. And whether Jeremy was calm or miserable, he still had to decide what to do about working for a boss who lies.

I added one more point. Sometimes there are lying bosses in our life, and we wish we could just go back in time and pretend it never happened. Unfortunately, there are no "do overs." We can't change the past. I asked Jeremy if being upset for two months changed what happened. I asked him if being upset for another two months would change what happened. Jeremy, of course, knew the answers. So I asked him to take a couple of slow deep breaths to calm down and then create a story that has him surviving his boss's actions and being happy in his life. As he invented the story, I saw him relax and noticed that his breathing became more normal. Finally, I told him that forgiveness is the first and most important step in living out his new story.

Sarah's story is another example of how learning to forgive helps us move away from the past so that we can live in the present and future. Sarah married Jim after they had gone on only a few dates. Most of her friends and family cautioned her to wait, but she knew better. Unfortunately, it took only a few months before Sarah found herself mistreated and with an empty checking account.

Notices of overdue bills starting showing up at the same time that Jim began staying out late every night. Soon Sarah found herself carrying a new life at the very moment her own was collapsing. She crashed when she discovered Jim's secret. Almost all the money from their business was feeding his cocaine and alcohol addictions. When their son was born, Jim disappeared for a week. One day he called from another state to say he would not be home for a while.

After this phone call, Sarah lost it. Her life deteriorated to the point that her parents had to come and take her to live with them. When Jim eventually returned from his wanderings he began stalking her and even threatened her life. She was scared, vulnerable, and, despite the help of her parents, dependent on welfare.

Slowly she began to rebuild her life. She started graduate school and became a hospital-based nurse. She moved into an apartment with a close friend. In addition, she took my forgiveness class at Stanford University called "Forgive for Good." Through this class Sarah let go of her resentment toward Jim and put her time and energy into rebuilding her life and caring for her child.

While forgiveness may feel like a trivial matter in light of her

crushing problems, Sarah believes that learning to forgive—not forget—Jim for his awful behavior made her reawakening possible. Sarah found that forgiveness allowed her to feel less anger. She did not give up her ability to get angry, only her sense of being trapped by an excessive amount of anger. Sarah found that as her obsession with Jim lessened, she was able to make better life choices. She was thinking more of herself and less of him. Sarah also found that learning how to forgive gave her greater appreciation for her child, for the help her parents gave her, and for her friends and her fresh start. Sarah also vowed to teach her son how to forgive so that he would not have to suffer in the same way.

Like Sarah, many of us have a story to tell about how we were mistreated by someone to whom we were close. Unfortunately, too many of us have parents who were unable to provide the care, guidance, or love we needed. Or we have spouses who lied to us or had affairs. Or we had friends who disappointed us. Many of us have been victims of random acts of cruelty.

When these things happen it is normal to feel hurt and angry, even for a long time. However, hurt and anger are meant to be fleeting emotions, not permanent fixtures. Too many of us never get over the bad things that happened, towing grudges from the past that hinder our lives, harm our health, and shorten our horizons.

I was one of them. I almost did not get over the unexpected abandonment that happened to me and led to my interest in forgiveness. Many years ago my longtime best friend, Sam, met a woman destined to become his wife. For whatever reason, this woman did not like me, and so shortly and unexpectedly Sam cut himself off. When I would ask him what happened, the only thing he would tell me was that I had been unkind to his new partner. At that time, I had spent only a minimal amount of time with her.

It got worse. Sometime later I found out that Sam was to be married. You can imagine my dismay as I discovered I was not invited to the wedding. If that was not bad enough, I found out about Sam's wedding through a mutual friend. Sam neither called nor wrote to tell me he was getting married. I was deeply hurt and confused, and the abandonment pained me for years.

One reason the loss of this friendship hurt so much was that I am an only child. I grew up without brothers and sisters and considered my close friends to be a part of my family. I never expected this could happen, and I was ill prepared to deal with my loss. I needed to learn how to Forgive for Good. It took me years to learn how to get over my hurt, and now I can teach you how to get over yours.

While this may seem minor compared to an unfaithful spouse, it too was devastating. Sam and I had been like brothers, and this abandonment left me hurt for years. My confidence in my ability to attract and keep friends was shattered; my sense of trust was broken. My wife told me that I sounded bitter and that I judged everybody's motives. Aching with bitterness, resentment, and sadness, I decided this had to end. I knew I had to forgive Sam if I were to get my life back. And so *Forgive for Good* was born.

In developing it I learned that much of my suffering and that of the people I worked with is unnecessary. No matter the hurt, to forgive brings an almost divine peace. But if you are anything like I was, you have no idea how to bring forgiveness into your own life. You need these tools as badly as I did.

I can attest firsthand to the power of forgiveness. Through working through my forgiveness methods and making strong decisions along the way, I have again become good friends with Sam. I feel lucky that he is in my life. When we get together I appreciate his company, and the confidence I feel when I see him reminds me of the healing power of forgiveness. Through forgiveness, you too can gain the confidence to bounce back when life is tough.

I define forgiveness as the experience of peace and understanding that can be felt in the present moment. You forgive by challenging the rigid rules you have for other people's behavior and by focusing your attention on the good things in your life as opposed to the bad. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting or denying that painful things occurred. Forgiveness is the powerful assertion that bad things will not ruin your today even though they may have spoiled your past.

One of the central messages of my forgiveness training is that only three core components underlie the creation of any long-standing hurt and grievance:

- The exaggerated taking of personal offense
- The blaming of the offender for how you feel
- The creation of a grievance story

Careful feeding and dedicated nurturing of these grievance components can keep a hurt alive forever. That is exactly what we do when we refuse to forgive. Debbie is a case in point. The grievance story she was telling about her ex-husband kept her stuck and in the hurts of the past. The facts did not change: Debbie's husband cheated on her. She would confront him when she found out what he was up to, and each time he would swear he would never do it again. One time she came home and found another woman with her husband on the couch. Debbie threw her husband out, but that wasn't the end of it. Debbie told everyone she met what a louse she had been married to. She blamed him for how she felt (rather than for what he did), and she had a doozy of a grievance story.

Every time she complained about her ex-husband, her stomach would hurt and her body would tense. Debbie did not know how to deal with her loss and pain in a productive manner. It was crucial to her that everyone realize what a louse he was, that what he did was wrong, and that what happened was not her fault. The temporary glee she felt when recounting her travails was dwarfed by the power it gave to her ex. Rather than moving on, Debbie remained fully in her husband's thrall, feeling no more healed than when she found him in the act.

Through forgiveness training, however, she recognized that reciting her grievance story only highlighted the power her ex-husband still had over her. If she wanted her life back she had to take it back from him, and that meant she had to forgive. Debbie was so thankful when she was able to see things differently. And as a result, she was able to move on to a new and better relationship.

Though there may be an infinite number of ways people can be unkind to you, the mechanisms by which a deep hurt is created are the same. No matter what caused the pain, the three steps of the grievance process can be clearly dissected. Understanding this process will lead to the wonderful experience of forgiveness.

Jill entered my forgiveness classes when she was in her late forties. Her mother had been dead for a decade, but Jill still complained about

her mother's inability to love her. She talked about events that had happened thirty-five years ago with a freshness that belied the fact that she had whined about her mother her whole adult life. Jill resented the power her mother held over her and hated her life.

I worked with Jill until she saw that if she continued to blame her mother for how she felt, her mother would retain power over her indefinitely. Until she took my forgiveness training Jill had not considered that her complaining had no effect on her dead mother but had hurt her a great deal. She practiced my techniques and forgave her mother. Jill is now able to look to her female friends for the support she never got from her mother.

Over the years I have seen many people who have trouble forgiving, and most tell me that the major problem was that no one showed them how. After working with thousands of people who have been hurt and have struggled to forgive, I am convinced that the ability to get over these wounds is crucial to health, both emotional and physical.

The forgiveness classes that I teach usually last for six sessions. I am always a little nervous before starting because of the burdens the people in my classes carry. Many of the people have been in therapy for years, while others have tried time and again through various means to help themselves, often exhausting the patience of their family and friends as they struggle to make sense of their suffering.

While each person's story is unique, all of the students share one thing: they have been unsuccessful in their quest for healing and still feel hurt or angry. I share with each group my story to let them know I have experienced many of the feelings they have. I tell you, the reader, what I tell the people in my classes: that if you can learn to forgive (and in these pages you'll learn how), you will feel better and gain a power over your life that might have seemed impossible.

If you learn to forgive you will find your life to have possibilities you could only dream of. You will gain a sense of control over your feelings and discover that you have more energy available to make good decisions. You will find that your decisions are based less on hurt feelings and more on what is best for you and those you love.

In this book you will learn how a grievance is formed, how carrying one is destructive, how to forgive, and how to keep from getting hurt

again. You will learn to employ these proven forgiveness techniques to move beyond past hurts so you can greet each day with confidence and create better relationships. In these pages you will find a prescription for how to recover from life's slings and arrows to gain a state of peace and well-being.

Fascinating research has emerged in the past ten years that documents the healing power of forgiveness. In careful scientific studies, forgiveness training has been shown to reduce depression, increase hopefulness, decrease anger, improve spiritual connections, increase emotional self-confidence, and help heal relationships. Learning to forgive is good for both your mental and physical well-being and your relationships.

Studies reveal:

- People who are more forgiving report fewer health problems.
- Forgiveness leads to less stress.
- Forgiveness leads to fewer physical symptoms of stress.
- Failure to forgive may be more important than hostility as a risk factor for heart disease.
- People who blame other people for their troubles have higher incidences of illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and cancers.
- People who imagine not forgiving someone show negative changes in blood pressure, muscle tension, and immune response.
- People who imagine forgiving their offender note immediate improvement in their cardiovascular, muscular, and nervous systems.
- Even people with devastating losses can learn to forgive and feel better psychologically and emotionally.

I recently offered two rounds of forgiveness training to groups of Catholic and Protestant people from Northern Ireland who had lost family members to the thirty years of political violence. In both of these projects I conducted research on the outcomes, and each project was successful. In the first session I worked only with women who had lost a son to the violence. After the week-long forgiveness training, the women showed less hurt, depression, stress, and anger. They also showed more optimism and forgiveness. The women returned to Northern Ireland

and six months later still reported all of the positive changes in mood and outlook.

On one standard psychological test, the women reported that the hurt they felt went from more than 8 on a scale of 1 to 10 at the beginning of the week to less than 4 at the end of the week. On a different psychological test their rate of depression was reduced by 40 percent from the beginning of their forgiveness training to the end. Each of these women has agreed to go back to Northern Ireland with the goal of helping others in their country to learn to forgive. With this act they demonstrate the incredible power of forgiveness to help both others and ourselves.

In the second round of training with people from Northern Ireland, I worked with Catholic and Protestant men and women who had lost a family member in the violence. Some people's parents had been murdered; others had lost brothers or sisters, and still others had lost a child. Seventeen people had suffered the loss of a loved one to murder. Each of these people had a right, if anyone does, to be bitter, angry, and victimized. Yet at the end of this week of forgiveness training the victims were less depressed, felt more physically healthy and energetic, and were less hurt by their loss.

Clearly, the loss of a child or other family member is a devastating experience. Nothing can fully replace that loss. Yet if these men and women can improve their emotional and psychological functioning, then there is no question that each of us as well can heal.

As a pioneer in this forgiveness research, I will integrate the findings from this emerging science with my developed art of helping people to make *Forgive for Good* an indispensable tool for anyone wanting to forgive.

For me, forgiveness means much more than the end of a grievance. Forgiveness has become my life's work. I am the director and cofounder of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, the largest interpersonal forgiveness training research project ever conducted. The Forgiveness Project replicates on a larger scale an earlier study that established the effectiveness of my forgiveness training.

In the Forgiveness Project we recruited people from the San Francisco Bay Area who said they could not get over an interpersonal hurt.

Participants learned to forgive, and our research team measured the effectiveness of the training both right after the workshop and up to four and a half months afterward. The people who took my forgiveness training became less hurt, stressed, and angry and more forgiving and optimistic, and they even reported slightly improved physical health.

Forgive for Good distills the essential elements of my forgiveness training into a program that can be of great value to many. In my work I have heard untold stories of pain and mistreatment, but here are techniques that can help you feel less hurt and angry. My forgiveness work has shown that to forgive now also can help you limit the degree to which you get hurt in the future.

When I initiated my first research project on the training of interpersonal forgiveness in 1996, I was completing my Ph.D. in counseling and health psychology. I was excited for the opportunity to scientifically test the forgiveness methods I had used to help myself and occasionally others. At the time only four studies had been published in the field, the earliest from 1993. I am one of the pioneers in the emerging field of integrating the training of forgiveness with the science of demonstrating which techniques actually work. Through my teaching I continue to refine my processes, resulting in what I know to be the strongest forgiveness training the field has to offer. For the first time, this *Forgive for Good* method is available to everyone.

I know what it's like to keep grievance planes circling in my mind for years. I have seen the benefits in my life and the lives of countless others of the peace that comes when your grievance planes are allowed to land. So, fellow seeker, if you are looking to learn how to *Forgive for Good*—for the good of your health, for the good of your relationships, for the good of the world and, possibly, forever—please join me and read on.

PART ONE

Creating a Grievance

CHAPTER 1

Renting Too Much Space to Disappointment

Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

VIKTOR FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Thank you for joining me on this journey to well-being through forgiveness. Together we will see how a grievance is formed, how to forgive, and how to create a meaningful story of what happened. Remember that the process I teach has been proven to work in four careful research studies. In those studies people with hurts big and small made positive changes in their physical and emotional health. I have countless testimonials of how forgiveness has changed lives, and I will share with you many of those stories. I am convinced that when you learn these methods and practice what I teach, you too can Forgive for Good.

In order to understand the process of forgiveness, it helps to see how a grievance begins. In the early chapters, I will explain how a grievance is formed, examine the parts of a grievance that make your life difficult, and help you test for the signs that a grievance has taken hold. I have seen that when people understand how a grievance is formed they emerge ready to heal.

HOW A GRIEVANCE FORMS

A grievance emerges when two things coincide. The first is that something happens in our lives that we did not want to happen. Then, second,

we deal with this problem by thinking about it too much, or what I call renting too much space in our minds. In this chapter I will explain these two ideas and show you how each occurs.

The difficulty at the core of being hurt is how to remain peaceful when someone hurts or disappoints you. Another way of stating this is to ask, how can we be hurt but not end up with a smoldering grievance? Each of us has at some point in our lives been hurt or mistreated. But some people adapt better than others. Some talk about their wounds for a long time and some let them go. If you are one of those who have not let go of what has hurt you, then this book is for you.

It is not easy to recover a state of peace when we are mistreated. Everyone to a greater or lesser degree struggles when facing injury, abandonment, cheating, or lying. At the heart of the myriad of wounds is the simple fact that a grievance results because some event or thing we really hoped would happen simply did not occur.

While I may sound repetitious, I want to stress the importance of this concept. At the very core of creating a grievance or grudge is that something happened that we did not want to happen. Alternatively, something we really wanted did not happen. In either case, a grievance begins when part of our life turns out radically different from what we expected. Faced with the unexpected, we lacked the skills to manage our feelings. Here are two examples.

Dana is an account executive at a large software company in Silicon Valley. She has worked for this company for almost ten years and has a successful career. Often she stayed late and toiled for long hours, missing precious time with her two children. Recently she was passed over for a promotion. Dana was told her job performance was excellent but that her company had instituted a new policy to hire some executives from the outside. Yet even with this information, she was furious at being passed over and talked about how her continued dedication to work was causing her health to suffer.

When I met her, Dana was bitterly complaining about her bosses, life's unfairness, and the wasted time she had spent at her office. She clearly stated that she was owed this promotion and that it was unfair she did not get it. Dana was now reappraising her ten years with the company and finding slights she had previously ignored. The story she

told was of many years of unfairness, not just of a missed promotion. What I saw was a woman who did not get a promotion she felt was owed her and in response created a whopper of a grievance.

Mike works at an Internet start-up company. He works all of the time at a place where everyone else works all of the time. It is common in this work culture for employees to do whatever is needed to make the company successful. Mike was originally hired to help with Web design, and because he enjoyed this work, the seventy-hour weeks did not bother him. However, as the company grew, managers hired more Web designers and found they now needed technical writers. Mike was asked to take this on, and soon his days at work became a drag. While he is good at technical writing, he does not enjoy it. He wanted to be a design person and now complains to everyone that he is wasting his time.

When Mike came to my forgiveness class he was disgruntled and bitter. He had invested a great deal of time and energy in his company and did not feel ready to leave because of the chance he could make a lot of money if the company went public. Mike felt trapped in a job he did not like. He complained that he had been cheated out of the opportunity to do work he enjoyed and was forced to do work he hated.

Both Dana and Mike had to cope with disappointment. Dana did not get promoted, a perfect example of not getting something she wanted. Mike had to do work he disliked, an example of getting something unwanted. The problem is the same either way.

Dana and Mike's stories show how difficult it is to deal with things not working out. However, it is not only at work that we struggle to make peace. Not getting what we want occurs in a host of situations from the ridiculous to the horrendous. See if any of these stories rings true with you:

- You drive into the parking lot at work and notice someone has taken your parking space. The result is you have to go to a spot at the other end of the lot. You did not get the parking space that you wanted.
- Your partner announces they want to end your relationship when you want it to continue. You are asked to move out. You did not get the long-term relationship you desired.

- You go into the supermarket closest to your home, and they are out of the only kind of cereal your sick child will eat. You have to drive across town to another store, and there is lots of traffic. You have less time to care for your sick child.
- Your friend cancels three nights in a row because of a new lover. The result is you miss your friend and end up feeling lonely. Your friend did not treat you the way you think friends should.
- Your business partner leaves the partnership without notice or forwarding address, and you are left holding the business and debts alone. Your economic future has changed for the worse.
- Your mother was self-absorbed and did not give you enough attention. When you were growing up she appeared more interested in her needs than in yours. As an adult, you may be at a disadvantage in establishing satisfactory relationships and likely will have to learn to parent yourself.
- You go to your doctor to help deal with a medical problem, and she is too busy to fully answer your questions. You leave feeling rushed and unheard. You may have to go on the Internet or call the doctor back to get the answers you need.
- On the way home from school a drunken driver seriously injures your daughter. You could not protect the health of your child.
- Your partner does not come home one evening, and you know she or he is with a former lover. You were not able to create a relationship in which your partner was faithful.
- One of your parents regularly came home drunk. You were often afraid and scared and learned not to trust this parent. As an adult you understand that you did not get the nurturing parenting that children deserve, and you are still looking to find emotional support from a source other than your parents.

In each of these situations a grievance is formed when we lack the skills to confront the reality of things not turning out the way we had hoped. These situations range from the trivial, like missing a parking space, to the serious, like having an alcoholic parent. When we deal with our experience well, a grievance can be avoided. When we handle the situation poorly, a grievance is usually the result.

I do forgiveness work with people who have suffered the ultimate horror, the murder of their children. I have seen people cry over the wrongful death of their child twenty years after it happened. I have worked with people who are still trying—and failing—to make sense of that tragedy. No matter how great or small the tragedy, each person faces the challenge of how to make peace with losing something precious.

Most of the people I see struggle to come to terms with the fact that life does not always seem fair. I witness needless suffering because people do not recognize that making peace with this fact is an unavoidable life task. Often people react with depression or fury when a painful life experience happens. They may cling to their initial reactions because they do not understand that the specifics of what happened may be less important than learning how to deal with their reaction to the experience. Abandonment, lying, or injury are difficult enough to address without adding outrage to the mix.

Dana, for example, made not getting a promotion worse by complaining that the company was wrong. To hear her tell it, the previous ten years had been wasted. By focusing on her disappointment, she wiped away the satisfaction she had gained from her job, when she might have focused her energy instead on how best to deal with the situation. Like Dana, many people deal unskillfully with painful life situations by creating and maintaining long-standing grievances. They end up renting too much space in their minds to the hurt.

Grievances are formed when people are unable to deal successfully with not getting what they wanted and then they rent too much space in their minds to the injustice. This is the grievance process we go through even when the disappointment is as severe and horrible as the loss of a loved one. It is the same process when the injustice is waiting an extra moment in a supermarket line or struggling in traffic when we are late for an appointment, or struggling to make sense out of a random act of violence.

RENTING TOO MUCH SPACE IN YOUR MIND

When I first met Charlene she talked incessantly about the horrors of life with her ex-husband. In a sneering and clipped voice she would talk

about how he had regularly lied to her. His affairs dominated her conversation. She honed in on any conversation about insensitive or uncaring people and seized the opportunity to chime in with how awful her ex was.

From listening to her you would think that he had walked out on her yesterday, but in fact it was five years earlier. To Charlene, what he had done was wrong and that was the end of the story. To me, what he had done was wrong and that was the beginning of the forgiveness story.

Charlene may not have been married to her ex-husband anymore, but she was still renting out the best part of her mind to him. In that important way they were still living together. In fact, I would be surprised if she thought of him that much when they were married.

Are you like Charlene? Do you talk over and over about what happened to you? Do you let your mind dwell on your grievance many times during the day? Do you have friends or family who do this? Do you get tired of the amount of time that you spend thinking about things from your past? Do you get tired of listening to other people repeat their same story?

If you can view your mind as your house, I can teach you to control how much space you rent to your wounds and grievances. You are the proprietor, and you set the rent. Each of us decides who our tenants are and the conditions of their lease. What kind of accommodations do we want to give our wounds and grievances?

We can rent our grievances the master bedroom and build them a hot tub out back. We can give them a great lease with terrific terms that never expire, or we can grant them only a day-to-day tenancy. We can allow them to put their stuff in all the rooms of the house, or we can restrict them to a small room in the back. In other words, we need to ask: How much time do we spend thinking about our hurts and disappointments? And, When we think about them, how much intensity is there?

The answers to these questions will determine how much of a problem a wound or grievance will cause you. When you have rented too much space in your mind, then you have a grievance. When, like Mike, you have to do work you do not want and then you obsess over it, you create a grievance. Mike did not have to focus on his dislike of the work. He could have focused instead on the real possibility that he was

going to make a lot of money when the company went public. Mike did not know how to deal with not getting what he wanted, and so he created out of that inability a grievance.

Just because bad things happen does not mean you have to dwell on them. I regularly ask people why they do not dwell on their good fortune with the same energy that they invest in their bad fortune. This question always catches people by surprise. They rarely consider appreciating their good fortune as an equal option to obsessing over their bad fortune. Are you one of those people who seem to find their problems more compelling than their blessings? Do you, or someone you know, rent out more space to what is wrong than what is right?

What plays on the screen of our mind is like a TV picture that we control with a remote. We can watch horror movie channels, sex channels, soap opera channels, and grievance channels as well as channels that focus on the beauties of nature and the kindness of people. Anyone can tune in to a grievance or choose to switch to the forgiveness channel. Ask yourself, What is playing on my set today? Is your remote tuning in to channels that will help you feel good?

If you remember the air traffic control screen from the introduction, your grievances are the planes that will not land. They fill up your screen, they occupy your mind, and, most important, they make it harder for you to appreciate the things in your life that are wonderful. Missing the beauty in our lives is the unanticipated damage that grievances can create. We just watch one TV channel at a time and what we tune in to often can become a habit.

Just imagine how much of her life Dana is not seeing as she focuses on the fact that she was passed over for a promotion. Do you think she is aware of how lucky she is to have her health or the people in her life who love her?

It saddens me to see countless people who fail to pay attention or be grateful to those they love because they are either thinking of people who have hurt them or feeling sorry for their loss. Let me make one thing clear. I am not saying to ignore problems in your life or deny that people have hurt you. What I am saying is that focusing too much attention on a hurt makes it stronger and forms a habit that can be difficult to break. I am saying that you do not have to dwell endlessly on the

painful things in your life. Dwelling on wounds gives them power over you. What you remember, or focus your attention on, can be shifted in the same way that you can change the channel on your TV. If we get used to watching the grievance channel we are likely to see that the world has many grievances, but if we get used to watching the forgiveness channel the world can begin to look very different. (We'll explore this idea further in chapter 9.)

DO YOU HAVE A GRIEVANCE?

Before we delve any further, let's check to see if there is a situation in your life that has become a grievance. I ask you now to revisit an interpersonal wound. In this way we can get a sense of how this is affecting you now. Begin the process by closing your eyes and thinking about the painful situation for a couple of minutes.

When you are clear about what happened, think about or write down a brief summary of the experience. Tell your story about what happened, either on paper or in your mind.

Now examine what happens when you think about this situation today. For example, examine the most common thoughts you have about what happened. Then consider how you feel when you think about the problem. Finally, think about the ways your body reacts when you revisit the hurt.

After you have taken the time to consider your answers, please answer the following questions:

1. Do you think about this painful situation more than you think about the things in your life that are good?
2. When you think about this painful situation, do you become either physically uncomfortable or emotionally upset?
3. When you think about this situation, do you do so with the same old repetitive thoughts?
4. Do you find yourself telling the story about what happened over and over in your mind?

If you answer yes to any of these four questions, you have likely formed a grievance that is renting too much space in your mind. If you

answer yes to any of these four questions, you most likely have a grievance that can be healed. You are in the right place and can learn to Forgive for Good. If you answer yes to any of these four questions, then read on and discover how you formed your grievance in the first place.

Remember, the basis of any grievance is that something painful happened to you and at the time you did not have the skills to manage your emotional pain. Then, like Dana, who did not get the job she thought she was entitled to, you rented out some substantial room in your mind, and, voilà, you formed a grievance. This is the way you helped a bad situation become worse. In the next three chapters I will describe in detail exactly how this happens.

In this chapter we learned how a difficult situation becomes a grievance. It all begins with either getting something you did not want or not getting something you wanted. In order for a painful experience to end up renting too much space in your mind, three specific things have to happen. These three elements will be explained fully in the next three chapters of this book.

When we understand the three steps that lead to renting out our mind to a grievance, we will be ready to begin the process of forgiveness. And when we grasp how our grievance was formed and grew, we then learn to forgive those parts of our life that did not work out the way we wanted. Through this process, we can learn to Forgive for Good.

CHAPTER 2

Taking Things Too Personally

A physician is not angry at the intemperance of a mad patient, nor does he take it ill to be railed at by a man in fever. Just so should a wise man treat all mankind, as a physician does his patient, and look upon them only as sick and extravagant.

SENECA

In the first chapter Dana, Charlene, and Mike tried to understand what fueled the long-standing grudges, hurts, and angers that troubled them. They struggled to grasp how they ended up hurt and angry and unable to help themselves. I imagine that many of you, when others hurt you, also wonder why it has to hurt so much. Or perhaps you know people who cannot get over their bitterness and hurt.

We all have seen that some people deal with painful circumstances by developing grievances while others do not. Each of us knows someone who simply does not let things bother them. Some people are able to adapt to difficulty, while others remain stuck for years.

Some of you who hold grudges may surmise that you feel bad because other people simply do not get as upset as you do. Others may think they suffer more because they tend to dwell on the past. People often wonder if the reason they are upset is because what hurt them is worse than what hurt other people. Or they conclude that they feel so hurt because they may be more sensitive than other people.

While each of these hypotheses has some merit, I assert that forming a grievance follows a simple three-step process. The process is clear,

easy to understand, and predictable in every case. To form a grievance that interfered with your life, you have done the following three things:

- Took an offense too personally
- Blamed the offender for how you feel
- Created a grievance story

I want to make clear that creating a grievance is not a sign of mental illness. Being hurt is not a sign of weakness, stupidity, or lack of self-esteem. Often, it simply means we lack training in how to do things differently. Feeling hurt is a normal and difficult aspect of all of our lives, and almost everyone creates grievances at some point.

However, just because grievances are common does not mean they are healthy. While reacting to hurt by creating a grievance may be common, reacting differently to painful life events will lead to less suffering. Through forgiveness training, Charlene stopped dwelling on her husband and felt empowered to heal herself. By using this process you too can heal the hurts you already have. You can also recognize the way you create grievances and thereby limit the number you develop in the future.

Learning to handle hurts, wounds, and disappointments more skillfully will not stop things from going wrong in life. People may still be unkind, and random events can still hurt you. The world is filled with suffering and difficulty, and just because you have learned to adapt better does not mean these problems go away. What will change, however, is the space you rent them in your mind and the amount of anger, hopelessness, and despair you feel. I cannot emphasize this point too strongly. Life may not be perfect, but you can learn to suffer less. You can learn to forgive, and you can learn to heal.

ANGER HAS ITS PLACE

Even with all the forgiveness training in the world, there will still be times when it is useful and even necessary to get angry. A personal boundary may have been broken, we may be in danger, or we may have been mistreated. However, the number of situations where acting out the anger is the optimal response is quite limited. Acting out of

anger is helpful only in situations where the resulting action resolves a problem.

For example, getting angry with someone who is threatening your child may be the only way to protect the child's well-being. If a family member is abusive, you need to let them know that their behavior is unacceptable. On the other hand, getting angry because three years ago your mother said something unkind neither helps you nor resolves the situation with your mother. Neither does getting angry on the freeway because the traffic jam causes you to be late for work.

There are very few instances where the long-term use of anger will be of help to you. I want to make clear, once a situation has passed, both the long-term naming of angry feelings and the expression of anger rarely lead to good results. Anger can be a wonderful short-term solution to your life's difficulties, yet it is rarely a good long-term solution to painful events. Anger is simply our way of reminding ourselves that we have a problem that needs attention. Yet too often we get angry instead of taking constructive action, or we get angry because we do not know what else to do.

It is my contention that the long-term experience of anger, or what we call a grievance, is almost never helpful. As I will explore in later chapters, grievances lead to frustration, hopelessness, damaged relationships, and health problems.

Now that I have reminded you that anger itself is not bad and distinguished the helpful from harmful expression of anger, let's explore the first step in forming a grievance. This step occurs when you take personally something you did not want to happen. A painful life event, such as an unfaithful friend, cheating business partner, or lying relative, becomes an event you take personally, and you thereby miss an opportunity to transform your hurt or angry feelings into an experience that helps you grow.

PERSONAL VS. IMPERSONAL

All painful life events have both a personal and an impersonal quality. Marilyn's story helps us distinguish the personal from the impersonal and shows how focusing exclusively on the personal creates a grievance.

Marilyn is a woman in her early fifties who struggles with depression and low self-esteem. She traces her emotional problems to her upbringing. She was an only child born to parents who felt trapped in a loveless marriage, and she grew up in the care of a cold and preoccupied mother. She felt loved by her father, but he was rarely home, for he was in the military and they moved often. She remembers the feeling of coming home from school knowing no one would be there to care for her, and forty years later she can easily reexperience that feeling.

Marilyn still complains to her husband and friends that her mother did not love her enough. She did not feel safe growing up. She talks about how difficult it is to make friends and traces this back to her rejection as a child. Marilyn continues to feel genuinely angry and sad about her loss. Her mother is in her eighties now, and Marilyn still hopes that before she dies she can get the love she missed. Marilyn is still mad at her mother, both for the care she did not give her as a child and for the continuing inability to love her in the present. She longs for the loving connection that she says only a parent can give.

Marilyn, at the age of fifty-two, is still taking personally the rejection by her mother and because of that continues to be in pain. Marilyn suffers from a forty-year wound. The neglect she feels is personal because she still wants love from her mother while the love her children and husband offer is often rejected. The neglect is personal because Marilyn feels alone in her lack of love and rents a lot of space in her mind to her loneliness. Moreover, the offense is personal because whenever anyone gets to know Marilyn, the story of her mistreatment is central to how she describes herself.

What Marilyn does to make her poignant experience more difficult is instructive, as she chronically re-creates her sense of injustice. For Marilyn, the wounding process begins again every time she takes what her mother did personally. This is because every painful life event has a personal and an impersonal element and Marilyn has not learned to find the impersonal perspective. The imbalance in her personal-impersonal balance initiates Marilyn's experience of a grievance.

The personal quality refers to the fact that Marilyn's mother did not give Marilyn the love she wanted. In addition, her mother still does not offer the care Marilyn craves. This is happening to Marilyn and to no

one else. When something painful, like an uncaring mother, is part of our life, our first response is to cry "ouch" because of the personal nature of the hurt. Having an uncaring parent hurts, and neither Marilyn nor any child deserves to be unloved. In addition, no child is responsible for any emotional neglect they have experienced. Abusive or neglectful parents are a painful and difficult experience to overcome, and I wish that every child were blessed with loving parents. However, Marilyn, like so many others, did not have the attentive parent she hoped to have, and in that way she did not get what she wanted.

As a child Marilyn legitimately took her mother's lack of care personally. Unfortunately, she continues to do so as an adult. When something painful happens to someone else we are able to experience the impersonal quality of the offense, and we rarely feel personal pain. Every day when we read the newspaper or watch TV, we learn of numbers of people who experience tragedy and suffering. Friends tell us stories of the difficulties they or members of their families face. In every city in the country people languish in hospitals and nursing homes without anyone to care for them. Thousands of people are murdered each year in the United States, and drunk drivers kill, maim, and disable thousands more. Rapes, murders, natural disasters, robbery, cheating, lying, and unfaithfulness occur every day in every corner of our country.

We cannot feel the impact of each of these tragedies personally. We have to care more about some than others. The fact that we ignore, or care less about, some tragedies reflects our understanding that we cannot possibly deal with all the suffering in the world. We know that impersonal hurt is everywhere.

The challenge is to locate the impersonal part of the hurt when the rejections, mistreatments, and insults happen to us. Instead of feeling alone in our suffering, we might remember how uncaring or neglectful parents happen to many other people as well, which means that our own mistreatment was not only personal. It is unfortunate that Marilyn does not see the possibility for community with the ranks of other people who did not get the love they craved. She rarely contemplates how other people hurt just as she does. She does not see that it is common both to have neglectful parents and to hurt from it. If she could see some of these things, Marilyn would find the impersonal nature of her hurt.

If Marilyn had been able to shift her attention in this way, she could have shortened the period of her suffering and not formed such a long-standing grievance. Marilyn, because she felt so hurt, acted as if her mother hurt her deliberately. Marilyn's painful and long-standing grievance is a direct result of being unable to understand the impersonal nature of her wound.

FINDING THE IMPERSONAL IN THE HURT

For Marilyn, as for each of us, the impersonal nature of the hurt can be uncovered in two ways. The easiest way is to realize how common each painful experience is. It is a fact of life that nothing that has happened to you is unique. If you remind yourself that you are just one of two hundred people burglarized in your community, it is hard to take it as personally. By looking carefully, we can always find at least ten people hurt in the same way. The large and diverse number of support groups over the country attest to this fact. Remembering how common our suffering is can make it seem like the hurt is being trivialized, but it is worth taking that risk to suffer so much less pain.

Every now and then it is helpful to remember that untold numbers of people are alone because of the neglect of friends and family. Marilyn is not the first, and will not be the last, to crave love from a cold and distant parent. You are not the first and will not be the last to be hurt the way you were.

The second way to uncover the impersonal dimension of hurt is to understand that most offenses are committed without the intention of hurting anyone personally. Marilyn's mother did not want to ruin her child's life. Marilyn's mother was unable to love Marilyn because of a variety of factors. She was in an empty marriage that she entered into at a young age to escape her abusive father. Her husband moved regularly, which made making friends difficult. She also suffered from arthritis, which caused her great pain. In addition, Marilyn's father was crazy about Marilyn, and her mother felt jealous.

Many of the offenses we ache over were not intended to hurt us personally. Some were, but they are rare. Exploring the ways that Marilyn's mother did not deliberately intend to hurt her daughter does not excuse

her behavior. To suggest there is an impersonal dimension to many of our offenses is not to deny the pain of loss and neglect. Marilyn needs to recognize what her mother did and did not do. She does well to understand the root of some of her difficulties in life and to trace them to her upbringing.

However, Marilyn would be helped by learning from her mother's cruelty so that she does not repeat those mistakes. When I met Marilyn, she was repeating her mother's coldness with her own children. Her pain and loneliness were such that she was often too consumed with her own loss to offer any love or warmth. Marilyn also did not intend to hurt her children, but my guess is she caused them a great deal of pain.

Each offense carries both the personal and the impersonal within it. Each hurt happens to a specific individual. Marilyn is the one to bear the scars from her mother's neglect, and it is her life that has suffered. If your spouse leaves you, you alone have to create a new life. Even if the offense is toward a group, each person in the group reacts in a personal way to the offense. Simultaneously, each personal hurt can be seen as just one instance of a common experience. More than likely someone has hurt each one of us, whether it is a parent, in-law, business associate, or stranger. If you ask your friends and family, someone has likely hurt every one of them. Being hurt is common. Even the harshest offenses, such as abusive parenting, are common, albeit painful, human experiences.

When we fail to acknowledge the impersonal aspect, we set the stage for creating a grievance. We focus only on the feelings of pain we experience and ignore both the omnipresence of hurt and the frequency with which the event that hurt us occurs. We take an injustice too personally, and for that reason the hurt lingers and a grievance forms.

Marilyn asserts that her parental neglect ruined her life, and for her this is intensely personal. To a sociologist conducting research on parental neglect, Marilyn may be only one subject in a study with three thousand women. The sociologist will see that some women were able to overcome the handicap of their upbringing while others struggled their whole lives. The sociologist will take parental neglect as an interesting object of study—a view far different from Marilyn's. From the sociologist's perspective, Marilyn's experience is typical, not special.

The sociologist sees Marilyn's hurt as impersonal; to Marilyn her

hurt is personal. Both perspectives are valid. Each is a different way of seeing the same situation. People deal best with offenses when they can find both perspectives. When you see the impersonal dimension after focusing only on your personal pain, you discover that your specific hurt does not have to cripple you.

I must caution that one can also focus too much on the impersonal aspect of hurts. I see this much less commonly, but it too has its dangers. When we find only the impersonal dimension of a painful event it is often called denial. Saying that something painful was trivial or that the person who did it did not know better, we minimize the legitimate damage done. When responding to other people in pain we want to find the personal aspect of the hurt and be able to offer acknowledgement and support.

When we react to things that happened to us or to others we want to be able to acknowledge the pain but not remain stuck in it. This may be easier to do with the pains that other people suffer, but it is possible with yours as well. I believe we heal best from our offenses when we are able to acknowledge the damage done. At the same time, I want each of us to be able to say that what happened is not a unique catastrophe but the beginning of a new story of forgiveness and healing.

Taking things less personally does not mean that we have to like what was done to us. Marilyn does not explain away her mother's behavior because parental neglect is common. She does not excuse her mother because her mother was also in pain. She does not ignore her own pain by understanding that parental neglect is a difficult but common problem we all face. When she sees the impersonal, she does not deny the impact of the personal. The personal and the impersonal exist side by side.

By focusing on her personal pain, Marilyn feels that her mother wounded her for life and that she was particularly mistreated. Marilyn has created a long standing grievance out of a difficult life experience. Focusing on the personal aspect of a hurt is the first step in creating a grievance. Because Marilyn has ignored the impersonal aspect of the way her cold and neglectful mother treated her, she continues to suffer forty years later.

We know we are focusing too much on the personal when we feel angry long after the specific hurt has occurred. When we take a hurt too

personally, our body releases stress chemicals to respond to the perceived danger. These chemicals prompt the fight-or-flight response and lead us to feel discomfort in both body and mind. When we feel this discomfort long after the specific hurt has occurred, it is a sure sign that we have taken something too personally.

In the next chapter, I describe in detail how taking something too personally can hurt us physically as well as emotionally. The link between taking something too personally and endangering our health is the second step in the grievance process. We endanger our health when we blame the offender for how we feel and make a bad situation worse.

CHAPTER 3

The Blame Game

It is circumstances which show what men are. Therefore, when a difficulty falls upon you, remember that God, like a trainer of wrestlers, has matched you with a rough young man. For what purpose? you might ask. So that you may become an Olympic Conqueror; but it is not accomplished without sweat. . . . No man has had a more profitable difficulty than you have had, if you choose to make use of it as an athlete would deal with a young antagonist.

EPICETUS

In the first two chapters, I showed how the grievance process begins when something happens that we do not like and continues as long as we rent the hurt too much space in our minds. The potential for a grievance occurs when we take something too personally and, like Marilyn from chapter 2, lose sight of the bigger picture. That said, if Marilyn simply took her mother's behavior too personally and then moved on, minimal damage would ensue. But she did much more than that. Marilyn spent her life blaming her mother for all sorts of difficulties she had in her life.

Marilyn had trouble establishing good relationships with men. That was her mother's fault. Marilyn never finished school and so worked at

I agree that Marilyn has a number of legitimate difficulties. There is also no question that Marilyn's mother contributed to the difficulties she faces. No doubt if Marilyn had had a loving and supportive mother, she would have had a better chance for a successful life and would be less likely to suffer from chronic depression. What I do not agree with is the amount of blame that Marilyn places on her mother. What Marilyn does not know is how harmful blaming can be for both her physical well-being and the health of her relationships.

Marilyn is looking to her childhood and an emotionally crippled mother to explain all current problems. She is looking to the past to help her in the present. She is looking outside herself for solutions to problems that she alone faces. She is unable to see that no matter what happened in the past, in the present she is responsible for the course of her life. Marilyn is knee-deep in the second stage of the grievance process, called the "blame game."

This stage in the grievance process begins after something was taken too personally. Remember Dana, from chapter 1, who took personally not getting her promotion even though she was told that her company was trying to hire people from outside the company? Dana reacted to the lack of promotion as a personal affront even though she was assured her job performance was excellent. Because Dana took the lack of promotion too personally, she felt upset and angry.

To make matters worse, Dana also played the blame game. She blamed her bosses for lying to her. She blamed the company for stringing her along. She blamed her resulting stomach trouble on being humiliated and rejected at her job. She blamed her employer for the stress and struggle in her life.

When we become upset and ask ourselves "Whose fault is this?" and then insist that the reason for our suffering lies with someone else, we have entered the second step in the grievance process. We are playing the blame game, blaming someone else for our troubles. This is a problem because when the cause of the hurt lies outside us, we will look outside ourselves as well for the solution.

Blame is one of the hypotheses we can make about why we feel bad. When people are hurt in the past yet still feel the pain in the present, they look for reasons to explain their pain. They commonly choose the

blame hypothesis. A hypothesis is a guess that one offers as an answer to a question when the answer is not clear. When you buy a house and want to know what your monthly house payments will be, you can look up the answer. That answer will be specific in dollars and cents. A real estate agent might offer an educated guess or hypothesis when she does not have her calculator, but the exact answer is easy to find.

In matters of the heart, precise answers are hard to come by. You can never know exactly why another person has acted cruelly. You can never know for sure why you feel angry or upset. You never know any other person's thoughts. You are also not privy to each of the painful things that have happened to a person who hurt you. You cannot know if the actions this person committed were meant to hurt you. You can't know which of the things in your past is actually influencing your experience today.

You can only feel your hurt and offer a hypothesis as to why you're in pain. Some people blame misfortune on the position of the stars in the sky or possibly on a curse. Others blame their suffering on the people who have hurt them. I know people who blame everything on stupid decisions they have made. There is no one right way to explain why things are the way they are.

HOW BLAME WORKS

Alan is a man of thirty-five who found out his wife was having an affair. They had been married for six years, and Alan thought the marriage was solid. When he found out Elaine was cheating on him, Alan was furious and wanted a divorce.

While Alan theorized a lot about what was going on with his wife, it is interesting to realize that Alan had almost no idea of what Elaine was actually thinking. This is because Elaine refused to talk with him. Alan does not know if she felt unappreciated by him or simply wanted better sexual relations. He does not know if Elaine would or could ever tell him the truth. Alan does not know if Elaine hated herself or him or even whether she thought about him at all.

When he talks about her now, he says that she tried to ruin his life. He claims that she was afraid of intimacy and that she was afraid to

has chosen the blame hypothesis to explain the pain he continues to feel.

Like Alan, when we are in pain in the present, we often blame our bad feelings on the hurts done in the past. One of the ways we do this is to assume that people meant to hurt us. Another way is to link the cruelty in the past with our current feelings. Both of these hypotheses make it harder for us to heal. This is not to say that understanding some of the causes of our feelings and behavior is not helpful. Remember that feeling hurt does not automatically mean someone meant to hurt you. The crux of the matter is that even when we think we understand where our feelings originated, we still have to develop skills in the present in order to change for the better.

We can learn to make hypotheses that will motivate us to improve our lives and thereby heal our hurts. This is the opposite of blaming. When we blame someone for our troubles, we remain stuck in the past and extend the pain. Unfortunately, we are unaware of how much we limit our chances of healing when we blame someone else.

One of the goals I have for this book is to help you learn to develop hypotheses that help you resolve your pain. Understanding that blame is simply a hypothesis made to try to understand why we hurt is an important step. When we play the blame game we offer the worst kind of hypotheses for why we hurt. Blame hypotheses are usually guaranteed to make us hurt and hurt and hurt until we change them.

The beguiling thing about the blame game is that at first you may feel better. You may feel short-term relief because the hurt you feel is someone else's responsibility. Over the long run, however, the good feelings fade and you are left feeling helpless and vulnerable. Only you can take the steps that will allow you to ultimately feel better.

Alan does not know exactly why he is still in so much pain. His hypothesis is that he suffers because his wife wanted to hurt him and so left him for another man. Alan blames his ex-wife for his pain. The problem Alan faces is that he cannot change something that happened in the past. He cannot go back in time and make his wife love him. He can only change his present circumstances. What is done is done, and for Alan to link his emotional well-being to something in the past is risky. Neither the past nor his wife can be changed.

Yes, Alan's wife behaved poorly. She broke her marriage vows and did so repeatedly. Her behavior hurt her husband, child, and community. She is responsible for her part in the breakup of their marriage and appropriately is asked to pay child support and share parenting rights. I am not claiming that Alan deserved what he got. I am not absolving his wife of responsibility for her behavior. I instead object to Alan's insistence that his ex-wife is causing his suffering in the present. I see how pointless it is for Alan to play the blame game. I object because instead of making Alan feel better, the blame game makes him feel worse. His wife of the past remains in power over his present well-being.

My hypothesis about what ails Alan is that he is renting too much space in his mind to his ex-wife. He is doing something in his daily life that leads to his current suffering. Alan's blaming is causing him pain, and as he reduces his blaming his pain will lessen. Alan is solely responsible for the way he feels in the present. Instead of blaming his suffering on his ex-wife, Alan should ask himself the following question: "What can I learn to help myself suffer less?"

When we blame someone else for our suffering, when we believe that someone else is the cause of our pain, then we need something from that other person in order to feel better. When Alan blames his ex-wife for his current distress, he needs his wife to apologize, admit she was wrong, change, or beg forgiveness before he can feel better. That is a tall order. The likelihood of that is minuscule, and Alan feels helpless as he waits in vain. The sad reality is that Alan's wife has moved on to another long-term relationship and hardly thinks of Alan at all.

As long as Alan blames his wife he makes it harder to get over his rejection. He also makes it harder to develop a good relationship with another woman. Alan thinks he needs his ex-wife to do something for him, and Alan has no power to make her do so. Because he is powerless over her, Alan now adds helplessness and resentment to the rejection and abandonment from which he already suffers. Blaming his wife has made a difficult situation worse.

Alan and Marilyn learned the hard way that we cannot know why other people acted the way they did. Nor do we know for certain the reasons we continue to suffer. In response to painful situations, we offer the best hypotheses we can about what happened. However, it is difficult to

know for sure what causes what. Some of the influences on how we feel are from the past, some are from the present, and some are the wishes we have for the future. Some influences result from our behavior, some from the behavior of others, and some due to random factors. We can never know for sure why we hurt. The most practical thing we can do is learn how to hurt less.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

When we think about a hurt, our body reacts as if it is in danger and activates what is known as the fight-or-flight response. The body releases chemicals whose purpose is to prepare us to respond to danger through fighting back or running away. The chemicals released are known as stress chemicals. They are designed to make us uncomfortable so that we will do something to get ourselves out of danger.

These stress chemicals get our attention by causing physical changes. They cause the heart to speed up and blood vessels to constrict. This raises blood pressure. Our liver dumps cholesterol into our bloodstream so that it can gum up our heart in case we lose too much blood. The stress chemicals alter our digestion and cause our muscles to tighten. Our breathing becomes shallower, and our senses are heightened to cope with the problem at hand. Digestion ceases, and blood flow is diverted to the center of the body. We feel jumpy and uncomfortable.

Most of us blame this unpleasant body response on the person who hurt us. When we do this, we are playing the blame game in a way that can keep us trapped and helpless for a long time.

The physical stress we feel when we mull over an abandonment or deception is the reason many of us struggle so hard to give up our grievances. Every time Marilyn thought about her mother she felt tense. Every time she imagined her unloving parent she felt her stomach tighten and would often get a headache. And each time she felt a physical symptom, she experienced another wave of anger toward her mother for ruining her life. She blamed her mother for her current discomfort, for activating her fight-or-flight response. This normal physical response, and the blame you have for the person who hurt you, cements the griev-

ance that began when you took too personally something you did not like.

When you think about someone who has hurt you deeply, your sympathetic nervous system springs into action. The sympathetic nervous system is the branch of the autonomic nervous system whose goal is to rev up our body to protect us from danger. The autonomic nervous system controls inner organs such as our heart, smooth muscles, and breathing. Our autonomic nervous system has another branch called the parasympathetic system, which calms us down after the danger is past. Both of these systems are operating all the time. When a danger comes into view, our sympathetic system gears up and controls the action in the fight-or-flight response. When the danger has passed or we are relaxed, our parasympathetic system controls the action and we calm down.

The fight-or-flight response of the sympathetic nervous system is quick and predictable. The problem is that it gives us only two choices: fighting back or getting away. We may want to pay back the person who hurt us. We may want that person to suffer the way we have suffered. Alternatively, we may never again want to see the person who hurt us. We may try never to think of them again. While these responses to taking something too personally are common, they are primarily the result of the stress chemicals running through our body. They are primitive responses and usually not the result of careful or productive thinking. Our problem is the choices these stress chemicals offer us are inadequate in helping to regain control of our emotional life.

Simply put, these are poor choices. They do not help us face charged emotional situations with people close to us or come to grips with painful life experiences or deal with the subtleties of intimate relationship.

You may have considered that the ideas of seeking revenge or avoiding harm are carefully thought out responses. Not so. They are the product of a biologically designed system of protection. Your nervous system offers these responses when you perceive danger. What is unfortunate is that your nervous system cannot tell whether the danger you are seeing is occurring now or ten years ago. Your nervous system does not know if your mother is yelling at you today or in 1981. Your nervous system does not know whether your husband had an affair today or in 1993. Your

nervous system responds the only way it knows how whether you have thought about a problem once or twelve hundred times.

To make matters worse, the fight-or-flight response alters our ability to think. The stress chemicals do part of their work of protecting us from danger by limiting the amount of electrical activity available to the thinking part of the brain. The stress chemicals also play a part in diverting blood flow from the brain's thinking center toward more primitive parts of the brain. When Marilyn says she is so upset over her mother that she can't even think straight, she is telling the truth. When you get frustrated because you have thought the same thing repeatedly about your grievances, there is a reason.

The body is so exquisitely designed to protect us from danger that it won't allow us to waste our precious resources planning things out or thinking of new ideas. Our biology says survival is most important. Our body is willing to stand guard each of the 100 times we remember the horrible way our boss yelled at us or the 263 times we describe in bitter detail the day our mother walked out on the family.

Think about this. How else could our bodies limit us to only two choices? Our bodies are trying to save our life by diverting some electrical energy from the thinking part of the brain to the more primitive and reactive parts. Your body will try to save your life when you face a saber-toothed tiger. Your body will try to save your life if the car in front of you swerves and you have to jam on your brakes. You will need every ounce of concentration on the task at hand to survive these challenges.

Your body has no need to save your life when you are remembering how unkind your mother was ten years ago. You do not need fight or flight when you tell your spouse that your best friend yelled at you. You do not need sympathetic nervous system arousal to explain for the thirty-fifth time how unfair it was that your father loved your sister more than you. You must learn to distinguish real from imagined danger to function effectively. You cannot learn this critical life lesson when you are busy blaming others for how bad you feel or how poorly your life has unfolded. Playing the blame game, you are trapped in a vicious cycle of hurt and physical discomfort.

GIVING AWAY OUR POWER

The biggest mistake we make while under the influence of the stress chemicals is to blame our distress on the person who hurt us. When we blame another person for how we feel, we grant them the power to regulate our emotions. In all likelihood, this power will not be used wisely, and we will continue to suffer. The number of people who give power over to those who did not care about them is shockingly high.

Feeling bad every time we think of the person who has hurt us becomes a habit and leads us to feel like the victim of someone more powerful. We feel helpless because we are constantly reminded both in mind and body of how bad we feel. When we blame this normal protective response on the offender, we make a mistake. This mistake takes the keys to our release out of our hands and puts them in someone else's hands.

Joanne gave her power away to her friend Nancy. Nancy had advised Joanne on what to do in a love relationship, and the advice had been wrong. Nancy had not given good thought to what Joanne asked, and if the truth were told Nancy was jealous of Joanne's way with men. When the relationship ended, Nancy took up with the man that Joanne had been dating.

Joanne felt like a victim of Nancy's capriciousness and lack of care for her. Joanne wanted Nancy to make things all better to stop her suffering. Nancy did not intend to stop dating Sandy because she thought he was better with her than with Joanne. Nancy wanted to remain friends and told Joanne so. Joanne could not imagine that and was clearly operating from her fight-or-flight experience. Joanne imagined either revenge or never seeing her again.

Clearly, Nancy treated Joanne badly. She gave Joanne bad advice on her relationship, and when the relationship ended, she broke Joanne's heart by taking up with Joanne's ex. But until Joanne was able to take responsibility for her own feelings, Nancy held the power over Joanne's fight-or-flight mechanism. When Joanne gave her power away to someone who did not give her what she wanted, she became and stayed upset. Joanne took the actions of Nancy personally, which triggered anger and the activation of her body's stress chemicals. The resulting stomachaches, muscle tension, and anxiety Joanne blamed on Nancy.

Because of this Joanne was on her way to creating a mighty grievance. She allowed someone who was not going to change continue to hurt her, and the result was that Joanne felt like the helpless victim of an uncaring and unkind friend. There is great danger in giving people without your best interests in mind power over you. There is great danger in giving people who have hurt you power over the way you feel.

If you remember Dana from chapter 1, her bosses meant her no harm at all. In fact, they admired and appreciated her work. They passed her over for a promotion to hire from outside the firm. This did not stop Dana from blaming them for her career, health, and emotional distress.

Stan faced an entirely different situation yet ended up with a grievance like Dana's that was cemented by the blame he placed on other people. Growing up, Stan was treated terribly by his alcoholic mother and absent abusive father. He remembers seeing his mother passed out on the sofa and the embarrassment he felt when friends came to visit. His father came home each day, fought with his mother, and then attacked Stan. Stan was sixteen at the time and ran away from home. Stan had no further parenting from either parent because neither would respond to his calls or letters.

To add insult to injury, Stan's mother blamed Stan for the disruption in the family. Stan would call, and his mother would tell him how he had hurt his father and fractured their family. In their last phone conversation she yelled at him for breaking up their family and then died shortly thereafter.

While I empathize with Stan's terrible childhood and early adulthood experiences, I wonder if there is any value in blaming his mother for his present angry feelings. His mother was an indifferent and often cruel parent. However, his now-dead mother can hardly change things. Stan stays tied to her as long as he blames her for the failures of his life and for his chronic anger. Even more chilling, Stan continues to give up his power to someone who was cruel and to the end of her life unwilling and unable to change.

I see time and again that Stan's experience is common. I see many people who give away their power to people who were cruel to them. I ask you: How many of you give away your power to relatives who did

not care for you? How many of you give away your power to business associates who meant you harm or to lovers who cheated on you? How many of you know people who look backward more than they look forward? How many of you spend years renting too much space in your mind to past hurts?

Think of the wasted suffering that emerges from staying tied through blame to people who did not care for you. This suffering is the bottomless pit that awaits those who play the blame game. When Nancy took Joanne's boyfriend, the loss of the relationship should have been bad enough. When Dana did not get her merited promotion, the loss of income and prestige should have been the extent of her suffering. Being raised by and then rejected by an alcoholic mother, Stan clearly had suffered enough. When Alan's wife cheated on him and then left him, his loss alone was painful enough.

Each of these four people kept themselves stuck by blaming their friend, boss, parent, or spouse for their continued pain. Each stayed connected for years to the worst parts of their lives. In trying to solve the problem of an unmerited hurt, each actually made the problem worse. Their problem was how to live their lives so that they heal and move on. The solution they tried, blaming, kept them stuck. It kept them in relationships with someone who hurt them and prolonged their helplessness and pain.

Holding people accountable for their actions is not the same as blaming them for how you feel. It is justified to hold wayward spouses to their commitment to pay child support. It is justified to expect a hit-and-run driver to spend time in jail. What leads to unnecessary suffering is making your spouse responsible for your continued suffering or your inability to enter into another relationship. What does not help you is holding that hit-and-run driver responsible for your ongoing depression or the unwillingness you might feel to take risks ever again.

It is difficult to release hurt when people have been cruel. I have seen repeatedly that forgiveness grants that ability. Forgiveness allows us to reclaim our power from the people who continue to hurt us through our use of blame and personal offense. Staying tied to people who were unkind by taking things too personally is the first step in a process by which we intensify the grievance that began when we did not get what

we wanted. Blame is the second step. Forgiveness is the key to unlocking the door to let you out.

In the next chapter I will continue to explore the creation of a grievance. I will discuss the ways that taking an offense too personally and then blaming the other person for how we feel evolve into a grievance story. We will see how mistreatment often ends up as a story of victimization, a story told over and over. Whether we tell it to ourselves or to others, the constant retelling offers scant relief or hope.

CHAPTER 4

The Grievance Story

The attitude of unhappiness is not only painful, it is also mean and ugly.

What can be more base and unworthy than the pining, puling, mumping mood, no matter by what outward ills it may have been engendered? What is more injurious to others? What less helpful to others as a way out of difficulty? It but fastens and perpetuates the trouble, which occasioned it and increases the total evil of the situation.

WILLIAM JAMES

When a friend goes out on a date or takes a vacation, you want them to tell you what happened. You hope to hear an interesting story, and if the vacation or date was a good one your friend will have good tales to tell. While you are interested in the story as a whole, you are not necessarily interested in each moment or detail. We would be bored silly if a friend detailed each second of a taxi ride they took in Manhattan. Only imagine your disinterest if they told you every item on the menu and their deliberation over what to eat for breakfast. We would beg for mercy if a friend told us the minute-to-minute breakdown of every show they saw on television. What we want from them is a good story and not an overly detailed accounting.

When we tell friends about our relationships with our parents, we select particular memories to describe. If we had a mean father, we will give a couple of examples to show his character. If our parents were kind and generous, we will provide some anecdotes that demonstrate their kindness. No one describes each morning of their life or details each situation when they were hurt. It is impossible to describe every moment of a childhood.

What we do instead is craft a story to give our friends a sense of what our childhood was like. We offer a talking snapshot of our life. To tell our story, we pick the events we find most representative of how it was for us growing up. We check our memory banks, and out of the millions of moments of our childhood, we select a few. We create a story that we hope shows the picture of our experience.

In the same way out of the thousands of moments of your friend's vacation, they will select what they think are the interesting ones to tell. While listening you hope they are conveying the most important and interesting aspects. In either instance, whether listening or talking, a story is constructed. How we construct that story has consequences to our well-being. When we are talking about grievances or wounds, the way we create our story will be of the utmost importance.

Our story places what happened to us in sequence and allows us to describe our feelings. We offer commentary on the events and provide interpretation of people's actions. Most important, our story allows us to say what the experience means to us. To do that we must decide which events to highlight and which to minimize or dismiss. Little do any of us know how much is riding on the outcome of what we decide to highlight, interpret, and leave out in our account. Little do we know the potential damage if our story becomes a grievance story.

You may not have considered that the stories you tell emerge from selecting content out of a wide range of possible experiences. You may not have considered that some decision making was involved or that there are many ways to describe any particular situation. You may not have considered that the main purpose of your story is to help you understand what happened. The primary purpose of any story you tell is to help you place what happened in context. The secondary purpose is to describe what happened.

MANY POINTS OF VIEW

Let's look at one simple fact. No matter how clear and obvious the events of any hurtful experience may have been, each person involved will tell a different story. Whether we are the person who committed

in any given situation notices different aspects. Bystanders, friends, and family all tell their own tale of what happened. Naturally, each of us has his or her personal view, which depends on our role.

There is no story that tells exactly what went on from all points of view. There is no one true story, only many points of view. Your story reflects your point of view and in addition communicates a theme. In choosing your theme, you often have to choose between looking like a hero or a victim or describing other people as heroes or villains. Sometimes the point of your story is how well you acted. Sometimes the point of your story is to promote your accomplishments. At other times the point of your story is to detail how awful things were.

The story can be something you keep to yourself or share with others. Just because you do not tell anyone else does not mean you do not have a particular way of talking to yourself about what happened. For each thing that happens, you create a story. This story, how often you tell it, to whom you tell it, and in what way you tell it dramatically affect your life.

Your story is not simply an objective accounting of reality. There are times when we have to communicate bad news, and to do that we tell a certain kind of story. Tact may be necessary, and we will relay the events in a certain way. Your story provides information as well as communicates ideas and may be intended to influence other people. The kind of story you tell determines how you remember the incident and how it affects your life.

Too often through telling a story we lock in the negative way a hurtful situation has affected us. The danger is that we can get caught telling a story where we take an offense too personally and then blame the other person for something done in the past. We paint the picture of helplessness in the face of someone's cruelty. In so doing, we create a grievance story.

Research has shown the story you tell about hurt changes according to whether you were the offender or the offended. Psychologists in a study asked volunteers to respond to a prompt that described a common situation where one person hurt another, such as a car accident. In this experiment there was clearly an offended party, but the subjects who

then asked the research subjects to create a story that filled in the details from either person's point of view. The volunteers could speak as either the offender or the offended.

To make this experiment interesting, the volunteers were given leeway in how they responded. They could describe what happened before the accident, what the participants were thinking, or something else such as the weather or traffic conditions. Their response could be as long as they chose. The reason for the flexibility was to give each person the freedom to answer as they wished.

The results of the study clearly showed one thing. If you are the offender in a difficult situation, you see things quite differently than if you are the offended. The subjects who responded from the point of view of the offended minimized their responsibility for what happened and put blame on the offender. To these subjects, the person who hurt them meant harm, and they themselves were relatively blameless for what happened.

Subjects writing from the point of view of the offender responded differently. These people placed more responsibility for what happened with the offended and minimized the damage done by their actions. In their stories the hurt was more accidental, and the offended party often did something to put themselves at risk. Interestingly, in neither group did people offer an objective reporting of the situation. People on both sides offered the versions that reflected their point of view in the best light. There was no agreed-upon, objective reality.

ARE YOU TELLING A GRIEVANCE STORY?

Depending on whether you are the offended or offender, some of your stories become grievance stories. If you look in your memory bank, I am certain that some of the items stored there are grievance stories. Grievance stories describe the painful things you have endured but not healed from. You will know these stories because telling them makes you mad or hurt all over again. You know it's a grievance story when you feel a flutter in your stomach, a tightening in your chest, or sweat forming in your palms. Grievance stories are the stories you tell when

you explain to a friend why your life has not worked out the way you hoped. They are the ones you tell to make sense of why you are unhappy or angry.

Here is a brief test to help you determine whether the story you have been telling to yourself and others is a grievance story.

1. Have you told your story more than twice to the same person?
2. Do you replay the events that happened more than two times in a day in your mind?
3. Do you find yourself speaking to the person who hurt you even when that person is not there?
4. Have you made a commitment to yourself to tell the story without upset and then found yourself unexpectedly agitated?
5. Is the person who hurt you the central character of your story?
6. When you tell this story, does it remind you of other painful things that have happened to you?
7. Does your story focus primarily on your pain and what you have lost?
8. In your story is there a villain?
9. Have you made a commitment to yourself to not tell your story again and then broken your vow?
10. Do you look for other people with similar problems to tell your story to?
11. Has your story stayed the same over time?
12. Have you checked the details of your story for accuracy?

If you answer yes to five or more of the first eleven questions and/or no to question 12, there is a good chance you are telling a grievance story. If so, do not lose hope. You can as easily change a grievance story as create one.

CREATING A GRIEVANCE STORY

The way we create memories is what makes our grievance story so hard to shake. Our mind stores memories in categories. In order to make sense out of things that have happened, we link thoughts by association with other memories. Some memories can be stored in more than one

category. When bad things happen to they can be stored in the "grievance story" in-box. Or they may be stored in the "people do not love me" in-box. Sometimes we store them in the "life is unfair" in-box. Some of us have large in-boxes for these categories and as a result become easily reminded of hurts and grievances.

After storing memories in various categories, our mind searches to find past events that match our current mood. If we feel sad in the present, we get instant access to sad memories from the past. If we feel angry in the present, then our tendency is to find memories of other things that made us mad. If we are thinking of a situation where we were mistreated, other examples of that will fill our head.

The most harmful memory categories are those that remind you of when you were helpless or angry. Grievance stories do this by their nature. Due to the associative nature of memory, things that trigger these categories lead only to more and more painful feelings. We don't realize how many of our moods are determined by the random memories of past hurts. When we focus on painful events in the past, we decrease our self-confidence. In addition, we activate the stress chemicals, which pose risks for physical well-being.

I worked hard to help Victor acknowledge the risk inherent in the way he told his grievance story. Victor is a Presbyterian minister, and when we met he was feeling hurt and angry over the fact that his superiors refused to let him relocate. He wanted to move to a warmer climate primarily to help his arthritis. He lived in New England, and winter was brutal.

Victor had an important administrative position. His bosses told him they needed him to remain where he was. To Victor, they were callously indifferent to his health and feelings. Victor complained bitterly about this decision and would often bring up other decisions his superiors had made that he did not like. Clearly, Victor was hurting himself by focusing so intently on the unpleasant consequences of his superiors' decision.

As a result, Victor was unable to remember any good decisions his bosses had made. In this way he was taking on a host of poor decisions instead of just his current dispute. It was hard for him to decide the optimal course for his future while dealing with all the items he had stored

in his "bad bosses" basket. Victor was stuck, feeling like a victim of unfair fate.

Like Victor, when we create a grievance story, we enter the final stage of the grievance process. We suffer if we tell the grievance story repeatedly to others or ourselves. Even though it is the third and final step of the grievance process, the grievance story often signals the onset of future difficulties. The grievance story is our tale of helplessness and frustration based on taking something too personally and blaming someone else for how we feel. The grievance story seems true every time we tell it because familiar stress chemicals course through our body. However, telling a grievance story too often is dangerous to both confidence and mood. It is also a health risk since high blood pressure can become a factor when thinking about a grievance story too often.

When Dana from chapter 1 did not get the promotion she expected, she was devastated. She took the rejection personally, blamed her bosses for the loss of her dream, and told anyone she met how they had ruined her life. Every time Dana told the story she experienced her undeserved loss and triggered anew her anger and frustration. Dana's grievance story placed her squarely at the mercy of unkind fate and capricious bosses. As long as she told this same story, she felt continued anger and helplessness.

Dana's co-workers at first were sympathetic to her plight. They empathized with her loss and frustration. However, as Dana's job performance suffered and she continued to claim, "I have wasted ten years of my life," people at work became less supportive. Soon people avoided her because they no longer wanted to hear her grievance story. Her co-workers began telling a story of their own. In their story Dana was the problem, disrupting the work environment and unable to move on with her life. Dana wondered why her co-workers started to avoid her.

To create his grievance story, Alan from chapter 3 focused on the parts of his abandonment that made his hurt personal. Alan highlighted his ex-wife's infidelity and ignored problems in their marriage. His wife had complained for years about his lack of sexual enthusiasm. Alan focused on his ex-wife's flaws and not on any of the attempts she made

that a huge number of other people endure similar circumstances. He blamed his ex-wife every time he was lonely, became jealous of other loving couples, or struggled with financial problems. Alan's grievance story solidified his belief that life was empty without his wife's love and support.

Alan did not complete the grievance process until he formed his grievance story. When his ex-wife left he was in a situation that hurt like hell. He could have taken his ex-wife's actions too personally, blamed her for his pain, and still created a story where he had some personal power. It was not until Alan created the grievance story that he lost flexibility in how he could respond. He did not have to describe himself as a victim. There are as many stories of men surviving loss as there are of men who fall apart.

When his wife left, Alan's friends were on his side. They supported him and let him moan and complain. Alan found other men whose wives had left them, and they all agreed that women were unreliable and selfish. This led to a short period in his life when Alan, although in a great deal of pain, felt a good deal of support.

Unfortunately for Alan, the support eroded as his friends developed other interests and went back to their lives. The other recently divorced men moved on and no longer needed or wanted to hear the same complaints. These men got tired of hearing themselves and Alan complain. They began to shun Alan, and this too he blamed on his ex-wife. Grudgingly, Alan began to date but was always disappointed; one was too skinny, one talked too much, one did not listen enough.

When I met Alan he was bitter, alone, and without a clue as to how he had become so unhappy. He did not know the toll his grievance story was taking on him. Each of the mental daggers he was sending to his ex-wife was hitting him instead. The anger he directed at his ex-wife made it difficult for him to attract another woman. The mistrust he felt led him judge people harshly. The pain he was suffering made it nearly impossible for Alan to develop interests with which to engage friends in conversation. Alan blamed it all on the fact that he was dumped, and that is the painful story he told.

I want to make clear the crucial distinction between creating a

grievance story and simply telling other people you have been hurt. Alan's story did not become a grievance story because he told other people about his wife's betrayal. Alan was smart to reach out for help when his marriage ended. Alan had a grievance story because he told the same story over and over. He told a story that put the responsibility for his well-being on his ex-wife. His story became a grievance story because at every turn he took his wife's actions too personally. At every turn he blamed his present misfortune on things done in the past. He resisted his friends' and familie's advice to get on with his life and instead remained stuck in a cycle of pain.

FINDING SOCIAL SUPPORT

Researchers have found that people like Alan and Dana who share their life experiences with others tend to deal better with stress. This is called social support, and generally the more of it the better. Research shows that good social support is beneficial for people dealing well stress. People who rely on friends or family are generally happier and report better health.

Scientists have found that people who do not have friends and have to deal with things alone struggle more with difficult life experiences and also die earlier. In fact, one large study showed that people who were socially isolated were at the greatest risk for premature death. Lack of companionship is just as, if not more, dangerous to survival than smoking. In a different study, elderly people who had heart attacks were more likely to die in the hospital if no one visited them. If they had one visitor their odds of leaving the hospital alive increased substantially. With each visitor, their odds for survival increased.

When it comes to dealing with life's difficulties, such as loss of a job, corporate shake-ups, stressful work experiences, or an extended hospital stay, social support is crucial. Research also shows that appropriate help from friends and family can help protect us from getting sick. It can help resolve the stresses we face.

However, in one series of studies, researchers found some interesting things about social support that suggests that there may be both productive and unproductive types of support. We all need the help of people who care. However, we have to use their help wisely.

The people who profited most from social support asked for comfort for a shorter period of time. They requested advice and wished to learn how to cope better with what had happened to them. They wanted their friends and family to be honest with them and then tried to use their assistance to make changes in their lives. These people used the support to help themselves through a difficult period and received health benefits as a result. They saw themselves as faced with a challenge and were up to the task. They could have created a grievance story but instead used gumption and the support of friends to endure a crisis and tell a positive story of their successful coping.

Those who did not profit from social support asked for different things from their family and friends. These folks tended to complain to family and friends about how poorly they were treated. They encouraged their friends and family to support them even if they were wrong. They saw their problems as big and resented the challenges they were faced with. Their self-esteem was so fragile that they resisted advice that would help them change for the better. These people were telling a grievance story and resisted giving up that story. They suffered health consequences as a result.

I want to relate a story of a woman who used the help of her friends and family wisely. Up to this point I have written about people whose grievance stories were more important to them than learning to cope well with their losses. But here is the story of a woman I find remarkable. Her story illustrates that not all offenses must become grievances and that a grievance story is not inevitable just because we are grievously hurt. Reading her story, you see how the help of people close to you can lead you to become a hero instead of a victim.

Renee was hit by a car while riding her bicycle on a quiet side street in a small city. She was an expert cyclist, rode to work regularly, and knew the rules of the road. She was riding on the correct side of the road, signaled properly, and wore a helmet. She was not in a hurry and was careful. None of what she did protected her when a driver in a hurry tried to pass on the inside and hit Renee. Renee was hit flush, the car knocked her flying, and then the driver sped on his way. Renee was badly hurt and spent two weeks in the hospital with a crushed pelvis

and a severe concussion. When she was released from the hospital she recuperated for six months at home.

Her pelvis never fully healed, she suffered from chronic headaches, and Renee needed a cane for five years after the accident. She never found the driver who hit her. She had to quit her job, and her husband had to change his to earn more income. Renee, however, survived the accident, survived the loss of her job, survived the random act of violence, and continues to tolerate her chronic pain. She did this by becoming a person whose suffering developed into her compassion for the pain of others. Besides a new full-time job, she volunteers regularly in a pain clinic helping others deal with their injuries.

Instead of complaining, Renee talks with gratitude about the help given to her by her husband and family. She reminds visitors that she could not have survived without their help. She is thankful they showed her love but not pity. Renee commends her husband for pushing her to go back to school when she was still hurting. She has kind words for her father, who told her to talk with other people who overcame similar problems. She remembers her father saying, "While you can't change the past, you are the only one who can make your future." Renee, while frustrated about her pain, admits she is a much better person today because of what she has gone through.

Each of us can learn to deal with our wounds and hurts like Renee. We do not have to tell endless stories of victimization. We can forgive those who have hurt us and move on with our lives. We can forgive ourselves for being stuck and getting hurt. We can forgive our parents if they have hurt us and our friends and family if they have not been supportive. We can help our friends to forgive and move on if they are stuck. We can create a story that shows us as hero instead of victim.

CHOOSING A STORY

We begin the process of creating a new story by taking care every time we talk about the unresolved painful things that have happened to us. When you hear yourself talking about a past hurt, stop for a moment to see if you are telling a grievance story. If so, pause and take a deep

your enemy. That grievance story, more than what hurt you, has imprisoned you. It keeps you in the past. It alienates your friends and family and reminds you and others that you are a victim. Once we change our grievance story, we are on the road to healing.

Remember the grievance plane metaphor I used in the introduction? I would like you now to think about these planes in a different way. I am going to use this metaphor to illustrate the variety of ways we can use to describe any difficult situation.

The planes are in the air and have been circling for hours and hours, but now each of us is a passenger stuck waiting to land. Finally the plane lands, the door opens, and we have arrived at last at our destination. I am interested in the different ways we react when we see our friends and family who are waiting for us.

Some of us will have grievance stories already developed to spring on our friends. We will complain about the delay, talk about the lousy food, describe in minute detail the airline's incompetence, and discuss all the ways we can be compensated for our pain and suffering. Others will see their loved ones and exclaim how glad they are to see them. These people will talk about how they missed their family and friends and how thankful they are that they finally landed safely. These folks will want to catch up with their friends and when asked may say they found it a challenge to stay hopeful when they were stuck in the air so long.

It seems reasonable to assume that the passengers who already have a grievance story will suffer longer than the people who don't. For the people who are simply happy to land and delighted to see their family again, the plane ride is over. For those with a grievance, while the ride is over, the grievance may keep them tied to the plane for months. Each of us chooses which kind of story we want to tell. Remember, we can either forgive and move on with our lives or be tied to things over which we have no control.

Now that you know the three steps in forming a grievance, I will teach you to how to forgive. I will teach through the experience of forgiveness to tell a different story. You will see that you have the choice to amend your story so you no longer highlight the wrong done or the hurt

you have suffered. You will learn to tell your story so your problems become challenges to overcome, not simply grievances on which to dwell. By the end of this book, your story will show you as the conquering hero capable of overcoming difficult obstacles. Your story will be that of a hero who succeeded on a journey of forgiveness.