

Can't We Just Forgive and Forget?

Forgiveness is a subject that comes up quite a bit in marriage. Offenses are common, and the offender usually wants to be forgiven. But the offended is usually reluctant to forgive, particularly if the offender hasn't learned anything from the ordeal. But if forgiveness is difficult, **forgetting can be downright impossible** for many partners. How can people be expected to forget some of the most painful experiences of their lives?

I approach the subject of forgiveness from the perspective of someone (me) who **believes in forgiveness**, but also **believes that marriage should be fair**. Since, in many cases, forgiveness is unfair, what should be done? I support **just compensation** for some marital offenses, so I don't always recommend forgiveness. It should be an encouragement to those of you who have been feeling guilty about being unable to forgive and forget. But, at the same time, *it should also encourage offenders, because the compensation I propose will earn you a terrific marriage, and it won't hurt at all.*

Forgiveness is something I believe in with all my heart. I forgive others and have been forgiven many times. God wants us all to be forgiving just as he has forgiven us. And, as you have noticed, when you don't forgive someone, it can "eat you up." It's not healthy to keep resentment bottled up inside of you.

The vast majorities of couples I work with who have been through the horror of an affair, have better marriages after the affair than before. It's because the affair jolts them into recognizing the need for building an affair-proof marriage, and the safety precautions they use help them create compatibility and love. But has the offended partner forgiven the offender in these marriages? Yes and no.

First let's try to understand what forgiveness is. One illustration is telling a person who owes you \$10,000 that he won't have to pay you back. You "forgive" the debt. In other words, **forgiveness is eliminating a obligation of some sort**. But we generally don't think of money when we think of the need of forgiveness. Instead, we are concerned about inconsiderate behavior that has caused us great pain and suffering -- the pain that an affair causes, for example.

Forgiveness in these situations means thinking about the person as if the offense never took place. That is extremely difficult to do. The offended partner usually thinks, what can he or she do to make it up to me. How can I be compensated for the pain I've suffered?

To make matters worse, whenever a wayward partner sees me for counseling there is rarely regret and rarely a willingness to compensate the offended partner. They usually ask to be forgiven, but that doesn't mean he or she is deeply remorseful. It usually means that he or she doesn't want us to bring up the subject anymore, or require a change in behavior.

In other words, the wayward partner wants the pain suffered by the offended partner to be ignored or forgotten. Like a \$10,000 debt, they want it forgiven, and then they want to borrow another \$10,000.

I'm in favor of forgiveness in many situations, but this isn't one of them. In the case of infidelity, compensation not only helps the offended partner overcome the resentment he or she harbors, but the right kind of compensation helps restore the relationship and prevents the painful act from being repeated.

In most cases, an offended partner would be stupid to forgive the wayward partner. It's like forgiving a friend of the \$10,000 he/she owes you, when it's actually in the friend's best interest to pay you in full because it would teach him how to be more responsible with money. As it turns out, in every affair there is a way to adequately compensate the offended partner that is good for the offender and good for the marriage. At first, the offended partner may not want to be compensated. He or she may try to get as far away from the offender as possible to avoid further pain. But if the partner asks for forgiveness along with a willingness to compensate, the offended partner is usually willing to entertain the proposal.

So let's talk about adequate compensation. What could the offending partner possibly do to compensate for an affair? After all, it's probably the most painful experiences anyone could ever put his or her partner through.

I've made the point that partners usually have affairs because **their emotional needs are not being met in the marriage**. The way to affair-proof a marriage is for couples to meet each other's most important emotional needs. So whenever one partner has an affair, the other should try to learn to meet the unmet needs that led to the affair.

That's a tough sell to someone who has just learned about their partner's unfaithfulness. "I'd sooner kill him than meet his needs," is the most common reaction. Besides, we haven't talked about compensation at all. Instead, we've gone and blamed the offended partner for the affair! But in most cases, **neither partner is meeting the other's needs prior to the affair**. The reason that there were not two affairs is often a lack of opportunity for the offended partner. And sometimes when there is that opportunity, there actually are two affairs. The point I'm

making is that in most cases **both the offending and offended** partners' emotional needs were not being met by each other prior to the affair.

A compensation for the affair, therefore, is for the offending partner **to learn to meet the emotional needs of the offended partner**. But if I can also motivate the offended partner to do something that should have been done all along, **meet the** offending partner's **emotional needs**, the arrangement seems more fair to the offending partner. There is not only compensation for the affair, but the conditions that created the affair (unmet emotional needs) are removed. The marriage is restored and the marriage is affair-proofed.

Forgiveness comes much more easily in these cases because the change has compensated for some of the pain that was suffered, and the offender is usually forgiven by the offended. Technically, it isn't really forgiveness. It's a compensation for the pain of the affair. But I don't quibble. If they want to call it forgiveness, that's fine with me.

Using this meaning of forgiveness, the person asking to be forgiven must:

1. First **demonstrate an awareness of how inconsiderate the act was and how much pain his or her partner was made to suffer**.
2. Second, he or she **must express some plan to assure the forgiver that steps have been taken to avoid the painful act in the future**.

Lewis R. Bigler, M. Div., MA, AAPC
Family/Couple/Individual Counselor/Mediator
Licensed Mental Health Counselor
Suite 204 Snyder Square
4476 Main Street. Amherst, NY 14226
716-634-0658 - www.Biglercounseling.com