

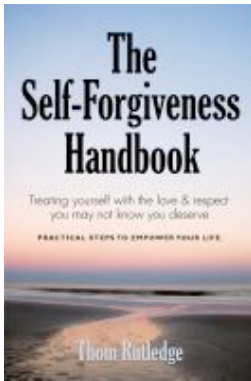


# The Self-Forgiveness Handbook

Treating yourself with the love & respect  
you may not know you deserve

**PRACTICAL STEPS TO EMPOWER YOUR LIFE.**

Thom Rutledge



*A step-by-step guide to overcoming damaging self-criticism, developing a compassionate relationship with the self, and living a more positive and productive life, free of the committee of internal voices that dismiss strengths and magnify blunders and mistakes. Based on the author's inspiring "self-image workshops," The Self-Forgiveness Handbook takes readers through a program of guided exercises that introduce and reinforce the seven essential components of self-forgiveness and personal responsibility.*

# The Self-Forgiveness Handbook

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THE  
**SELF-FORGIVENESS**  
HANDBOOK

*Treating yourself with the love & respect  
you may not know you deserve*

**THOM RUTLEDGE**  
Author of Embracing Fear

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# Introduction

**F**orgiveness is a concept more often associated with spirituality than with psychology, or at least that's how it used to be. Increasingly --- over the past twenty-five or thirty years --- the line of demarcation between spirituality and psychology has blurred. For the purist from either discipline this may be disturbing. The traditionally trained psychotherapist's world is contaminated with the introduction of spiritual concepts (especially those that defy rational explanation) such as forgiveness, soul, and God. For the deeply religious, the insistence on scientific principle associated with psychological theory, not to mention the tendency to not necessarily honor mother and father, can be offensive.

In as much as the two disciplines can still be distinguished from one another, this is a book of psychology. Herein we will examine the psychology of the relationship of the Self with the Self. For some readers, this will quite naturally involve their spirituality, but there is no prerequisite belief system to benefit from *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*. All that is required is a desire to feel better about yourself and your life.

Too often, self-help books dwell predominantly on the explanations of how we became so ... well, in need of self-help books, and then devote only a few chapters (toward the end of the book) about how we might recover from our now well-understood dysfunction. I want *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook* to be of practical use to you beginning with page one, chapter one. I want this book to be a box of tools you can learn to use --- with practice --- to make a real difference in your life.

Certainly, it is important to understand how we got from point A to here. After all, those who do not remember --- and understand --- the past are doomed to repeat it. I think you will find plenty of explanation within these pages about what makes someone need a book on self-forgiveness. But there is no need to put off the work of change to the final chapters. In fact,

considering the negative bias that most of us have toward ourselves, it is difficult to imagine how we can become objectively understanding, let alone empathic, until we at least learn to stop attacking ourselves at every turn.

In a way learning self-forgiveness is the classic human search for identity. As long as we remain in hiding from the so-called negative aspects of ourselves, we remain incapable of embracing all of who we are. When we consider only certain of our human characteristics acceptable, we have no choice but to remain fragmented, experiencing ourselves as less than whole. And since rejecting certain aspects of ourselves does not exorcise them from our personalities, we find ourselves in a stagnant pool of guilt (for having such unsavory traits) that, left alone, will become at least the toxins of self-distrust and dislike, and possibly the poisons of self-disgust and hatred.

In one sense, all of this may come to pass due to a sort of collective ignorance, a void of essential information in our society. Sure there are many negative, not to mention untrue, things we are taught to believe as we grow up. And destructive, false beliefs will need to be confronted and transformed. But none of these may prove as harmful as one big missing piece of developmental information: in our society, historically, we have not been taught the importance of maintaining a positive, loving and respectful relationship with ourselves. In fact many of us have been actively discouraged from such a self-compassionate state, learning instead that to care for ourselves is selfish.

If we were not taught this essential component of good mental health --- that self love is good and necessary --- it is for one reason: those who taught us could not teach what they did not know. There is no master plan for one generation to destroy the next; it is a matter of legitimate ignorance and/or inadequate application of knowledge.

If you take the risk of believing this to be true and decide that you can learn to forgive yourself, there will be many obstacles along the way, but none as daunting as those that you will discover within your own consciousness. Some beliefs you

will gladly release, and others will be strangely difficult to let go of. This book will provide a quality set of tools (instruction manual included) for the task of identifying and confronting those internal obstructions.

At the blatant risk of mixing metaphors (I am certain that I will eventually have to attend Analogies & Metaphors Anonymous) this book is also intended to provide a practical map to help you navigate your way from here to wherever you choose to be.

## How to Get the Most Out of This Book

*The Self-Forgiveness Handbook* is presented in four parts. Part 1 provides what I consider to be the essentials for your self-forgiveness toolbox --- the hammer, pliers, screwdriver, and wrench, so to speak. They will help you explore your personal thoughts and feelings about self-forgiveness. Part 1 ends with what some of my clients have called my “sermon” about the healing power of awareness. (When we can learn to slow down our thinking enough to take a more accurate look at what is going on around us and within us, everything changes. Amen)

Part 2 introduces you to the seven components of self-forgiveness. Chapter 4 makes the introductions --- Reader, these are the Seven Components; Seven Components, this is the Reader --- and the subsequent chapters guide you in an exploration of each component. The response I have received from clients, workshop participants, audiences, and readers is that once this material is experienced, it becomes impossible to maintain an exclusive hold on your old negative self-image.

I think it works something like the “Hidden Pictures” game in the children’s magazine, *Highlights*: you search and search and search for the image of the shoe, and you can’t find it anywhere, from any angle. You have already found the duck, the thimble, the umbrella, and the puppy, but no shoe. Then, just when you are about to give up, your gaze relaxes, you sit back and there, clear as the sky on a cloudless day, right in the

middle of the big tree is the shoe. Once discovered, it becomes impossible to not see the shoe. And so will be your experience with part 2 of this book. You will no longer be able to escape your new awareness of your “committee,” your “should monster,” and your “decision maker.” And you will be stuck with the ability to recognize when you are giving away, or throwing away, your personal power.

Part 3 is a natural extension of part 2. These chapters identify common problems encountered when applying the seven components to day-to-day life in the real world. Better yet, these chapters also suggest solutions to those common problems.

Part 4 is a bit of a departure --- from the rest of the book as well as from the average self-help book --- at least in how it is presented. Each section is a brief essay addressing, or posing, some question related to living a life of self-compassion. These essays were fun to write, and I hope that you will enjoy reading them. I am a card-carrying, charter member of the If You Don't Have a Sense of Humor, You Had Better Get One or You Are in Big Trouble Here on Planet Earth Club. Nowhere in my policy and procedure manual does it say that as we struggle to free ourselves from the tyranny of self-criticism, we shouldn't have a little fun along the way.

Part 4 is also a departure in that it dabbles in topics that are probably beyond the scope of this book. But I have never tended to color inside the lines and don't believe that we can effectively discuss the subject of forgiveness without at least acknowledging the philosophical and spiritual implications.

## Keeping a Journal

A little writing can go a long way as you explore your relationship with this powerful and elusive thing called forgiveness. Hopefully what I (and others) have to say on the subject can be useful, but it can only be so to the degree that you are committed to remaining aware of what you think, feel



and believe. Your experience is what counts. Keeping a free-flowing journal is a tangible way of tracking and enhancing your experiences along the way.

If you don't already keep a journal, and if you think it wouldn't make that much difference, I strongly recommend that you find a notebook of some kind --- one that you like the look, size, weight, and fee of --- and write in it as you read *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*. Use your journal to do the writing exercises you will find throughout the book, but don't stop there. Don't just take your direction from me. Your greatest wisdom, your greatest authority is not in me and not in this book. Nor will you find it in any other teacher or book. Your truth is inside you, and putting pen to paper when you don't have the slightest idea what might come out is an invitation for that truth and wisdom to emerge. An honest journal will always reflect that you are a work in progress --- as are we all.

Here is a helpful hint about *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook*. Parts 1 and 2 will be most useful if read in sequence; these chapters are the foundation for your daily practice of self-forgiveness. But read parts 3 and 4 in any order you wish, whenever you feel the need for a little reinforcement. These chapters are like golf clubs: choose the one you need depending on where you find yourself along the fairway.

Think of your journal as a workbook. Don't treat it too gently; don't be afraid to scribble in it or write in the margins. A journal is your work space, and it has only one purpose: to record your thoughts and your feelings --- the positive and the so-called negative, the vague and the precise, the understandable and the confusing. These are all parts of the same whole: you. The totally acceptable, forgivable and responsible you.



PART ONE  
The Essentials

*Our capacity to make peace with another person and with the world depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh,  
*Living Buddha, Living Christ*



# Chapter 1

## What Self-Forgiveness Is and What It Isn't

First, this is not a book about playing God. I have a good friend, a devoted Christian, who (when she heard the title to my new book) told me that I was going to be “treading on shaky ground.” Initially, I was surprised by her response, but as we talked I came to understand that her belief—and therefore objection to my book—was that only God can forgive. But the exploration of all the philosophical and theological questions that raises is a whole book in itself.

If your religious or spiritual beliefs are similar to my friend's, I encourage you to think of *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook* as a guide to help you learn how to effectively receive forgiveness. What we are given, from God or from each other, is of no use unless we can learn to accept the gift(s). Those of us who would read (or write) this book will have at least one thing in common: we have all had difficulty accepting gifts, be they compliments, attention, love, or peace of mind. Most of us cannot trust good things to be genuine, or if we accept that they are genuine, we don't trust them to last. Of course this doesn't even touch upon the question of whether or not we feel we deserve the good things.

Consider the various dangers: the danger of seeking something you are sure you don't deserve; the danger of gaining something you will certainly lose; the danger of believing the best of yourself while still falling short of your personal expectations; the terror of genuinely accepting your human imperfection, letting go of the dangerous double standard by which you measure only yourself.

This book is about facing these dangers, daring to tread on that shaky ground—and living to tell the story. To open yourself to forgiveness is a frightening proposition. But remaining closed to forgiveness is not such a great option either.

The bottom line is, learning to forgive yourself is not for the faint of heart. To learn—and maybe one day to master—forgiveness and compassion as a way of life, you will need plenty of willingness to take risks, an excellent sense of humor, enormous portions of persistence, and plain, old-fashioned guts. The good news is that I will help you to discover and enhance these and many other necessary tools along the way.

If your experience with religious or spiritual beliefs has been harsh or frightening, and is contributing to a negative view of yourself, try approaching this material as an aid to detoxifying from archaic beliefs that depict you as, somehow by your very nature, sinister and undeserving. Such beliefs only serve to terrorize and paralyze; they do not pave the way to a life of serenity and personal acceptance as they claim.

## What Self-Forgiveness Is

A common fear—and criticism of self-help psychology—is that self-forgiveness is a snazzy, politically correct, socially acceptable way of letting ourselves off the hook by avoiding accountability and personal responsibility. This is absolutely not true. In fact, as we will explore throughout this book, the more powerful and accurate definition of forgiveness is quite the opposite; self-forgiveness is the natural starting place for anyone who wants to lead an ethical life as free from hypocrisy as is humanly possible.

Think of it this way: When I was a kid, my father owned a dry-cleaning store. As an adolescent, I drove his delivery truck, picking up and delivering dry cleaning all around the small town where I grew up. In essence, I drove my Dad's truck around town, working to meet the needs of other people, my Dad's

customers. Was my father selfish for taking excellent care of that truck? Was he being selfish to make sure its tank was full, that the oil was changed on schedule, and that the tires were aligned?

Of course not; my Dad's priority care of that truck was not about being selfish. It was about being smart. Without regular, quality maintenance, the delivery truck would eventually require much more time and attention, not to mention money, than he could afford. People are the same way.

Self-forgiveness is that regular maintenance that keeps us on the road. The self-forgiving person is not—as many believe, or at least fear—a selfish person. It is the person who remains stuck in self-doubt and self-condemnation who will lead the more selfish, less productive life. As a psychotherapist, I have learned this lesson well. The better I take care of myself, the more effective I will be with clients and workshop audiences. When I have a noisy, neglected engine rattling under my hood, I will be distracted and unfocused on the work at hand. When I “run out of gas” I won't be able to show up (mentally). Self-forgiveness keeps us from being stuck; it keeps us moving.

### *What I Believe*

Let me tell you what I believe about forgiveness, and in particular, self-forgiveness. First, I believe that all growth moves from the inside out, and that our repetitious, and very human, attempts to resolve problems from the outside in are just what (on closer examination) they appear to be: *backwards*.

I believe that in years past if I were to love my neighbor as myself, my neighbor had better watch out.

*The first part of any conflict that I must resolve  
is that which is between me and me.*

I believe that self-compassion is our first nature, and that excessive self-criticism and self-condemnation are a learned

second nature. I believe that forgiveness—of ourselves and others—is not so much something we do, as it is that natural state when we are not holding on to old resentments, pain, and guilt. I also believe that resentments and grudges I hold against myself are every bit as destructive as those I harbor for the fellow down the street.

I believe that living a life of self-compassion has nothing to do with being selfish, or in any way excluding others. I believe that the first step to giving is receiving; that when we are genuinely self-forgiving, the benefits automatically (or with minimal effort) spill over into the lives of others. When we practice genuine self-forgiveness, we will naturally live according to a positive value system that includes respect for—and a desire for—the well-being of others.

I believe that in order to practice genuine self-forgiveness, we must accept full responsibility for who we are and what we do. Accountability is a requirement, and perfection is not even an option.

Finally, I believe that living a life of forgiveness, attending to daily life from the inside out, is the most energy efficient and most productive way to live. I believe that self-forgiveness is essentially inseparable from self-respect and self-responsibility.

## What This Book Is and Is Not

In no way is this book an exhaustive and comprehensive study of forgiveness. As you read, bear in mind that these are one man's ideas and beliefs about forgiveness. This material is based as much on my experiences in learning to forgive myself as it is based on my teaching and clinical experience working with clients and workshop participants.

I have never trusted anyone who claimed to have the ultimate answers, and so my promise (and a sort of disclaimer, I guess) to you is that I will not claim to have *the* answers. I sincerely believe that all any self-help book, workshop, or psychotherapist can do is offer support (“You are not alone”),



guidance (“Have you ever tried going down this road?”), validation (“You have a right to be in charge of your own life”), and positive confrontation (“Like it or not, you are in charge of your own life”).

Like good psychotherapy, I want your experience with *The Self-Forgiveness Handbook* to be collaborative. Take what is helpful; leave what is not. But I encourage you to take time with the ideas and the exercises that follow. Try them on—as opposed to viewing them from a safe distance. Then if something doesn’t fit, leave it. But if something does fit— be it shoe or otherwise—it’s yours. And it will be your choice to wear it or not.

And please don’t be afraid to argue with and question this book. Allowing the more restless, even rebellious parts of yourself to participate, as you will read about later, is an important part of learning how to forgive yourself. In many ways, we have learned to accept only select aspects of our personalities, and to reject others.

For example, “I’m okay as long as I’m doing something helpful for someone else, but it is selfish of me to pursue my own interests. The anger that I feel is wrong. I should be happy and grateful.”

In my book, *every part* of you is welcome. Come one, come all.

## Moving Toward Self-Forgiveness

Throughout many years of involvement in the process of personal growth --- as a psychotherapist, as a client in psychotherapy, and as a self-help explorer --- I have returned again and again to one central awareness: The key to genuine, long-lasting change lies not in the resolution of any particular circumstance, but in developing the ability to forgive oneself.

As a psychotherapist I probably spend 80 percent of my time redirecting clients’ attention from the *content*, or circumstances, of their lives to the *process* of their relationship with themselves. It is the proverbial choice between giving

someone a fish and teaching someone how to fish. I can choose to approach my clients as a *collection of problems*, and set out to help solve those problems one by one, or I can approach my clients as *problem solvers*, and enter into a collaboration with them to improve their ability to solve their own problems. The latter has always made much more sense to me.

And of all the possible problems that problem solvers might encounter, there is one that seems to rise above all of the rest again and again: inappropriate and excessive self-criticism.

### **Journal Exercise: What I Believe**

At the top of a page write, "What I Believe about Forgiving Myself." Then make a list, each time completing the sentence "I believe ...". Remember to let the associations run free. Write whatever comes to you mind without judgment --- as much as that is humanly possible. And don't be concerned if you discover seemingly conflicting beliefs. These are very common, even useful, as you will see in Chapter 6.

Your page will look like this:

#### What I Believe about Forgiving Myself

I believe \_\_\_\_\_  
I believe \_\_\_\_\_  
I believe \_\_\_\_\_  
Etc.

### ***The Attentive Supervisor***

Imagine that you and I are sitting in a room together and that I give you a task to perform; let's say the task is to complete the journal exercises in this chapter. As you begin, I lean in close over your shoulder, watching your every move. As you attempt the written task, I talk to you constantly, critiquing everything you write as you write it. I sigh heavily to express my disappointment. I clear my throat, obviously casting doubt on the sentence you've just completed. I remind you that you are

probably not doing the exercise correctly and that you never have been any good at following directions, not to mention (but I do mention it) that you're not a very good writer and, while we're on the subject, don't forget that your handwriting is horrendous.

If the task was difficult to begin with, my "attentive supervision" will make it impossible. If the task is simple to begin with, my oh-so-helpful sounds and comments will make it far more difficult and complex than it needs to be.

Does any of this sound familiar? If so, it could mean that you've had a boss, a teacher, a parent, a friend, or a spouse like this. It could mean that you were taught to think of God like this. It very likely means that with or without outside assistance, you have tended to treat yourself in this constantly critical way. Sure, you may discover that you need some help with the original task, but you really can't know that until there is a significant change in your style of supervision.

In the simplest terms, that is what I do for a living: I teach people how to respect, protect, support, and even like themselves. And when that is accomplished (which is no small task), there are not many problems that cannot be solved. It's amazing how much you can get done when you are not having to look over your shoulder every other minute to see if that bully of a supervisor is coming.

*When we let go of constant attempts to solve the content of our lives, and attend to the important process of how we treat ourselves and each other, we have a real chance for peace of mind.*

The key to quality, lasting change is the presence of self-compassion. With that awareness as a starting point, over the years I have distilled into seven categories what I have come to consider the *basic components of self-forgiveness*.

The best part is that these seven components are not specific to any one problem area. If you are depressed, if you

are anxious, if you are concerned about addictive or compulsive behaviors with food, drugs, alcohol, relationships, and so on, the components act as a map that can guide you to the information and insights you will need in order to face and resolve your problems. These are fishing lessons. What you decide to catch is entirely up to you.

## *Respecting Yourself*

Going toe to toe with your problems (many of which you may have been sidestepping and ducking for years) is a frightening prospect. But with “map” in hand, plus the lessons you will learn from this book, a tangible sense of hope will join your understandable fear. And hope and fear are not, as they may initially appear, opposites. They are, instead, old buddies—traveling companions. You will seldom find one without the other.

### **Journal Exercise: Hopes and Fears**

Make a list of some of your hopes --- and the fears that will accompany them.

The seven components are also a viable set of tools for *maintaining* your successful changes. Forgiveness is never a one-time event; if it does not become a way of life, it is nothing. But when you learn to live a life of self-forgiveness, everything changes.

Specifically, self-forgiveness will allow you to gather your dreams, your desires, and your courage to live the life you choose to live, the life you want to live. But what do you want? This is not necessarily an easy question to answer. If you have grown up learning to value being hard on yourself to the point of self-induced martyrdom or self-condemnation, it will not be surprising to find that the idea of “what you want” was swept under the rug long ago.

A friend of mine offers an interesting explanation for this problem from a developmental vantage point: Children are not welcomed into the world and brought up with enough curiosity from the adults around them. My friend says that there are essentially two opposing metaphors for parenting:

- Children are clay, and parents are the sculptors. A parent's job is to mold the child into the person the parent believes it is best to be.
- Children are seeds, and parents are the gardeners. The job of a parent is to care for the environment in which the child will grow—providing the proper conditions for “the seed” to grow into whoever he or she is.

*Learning self-forgiveness will change you  
from the inside out, creating a power ripple effect.*

The lack of curiosity adults have about who children are is an inadvertent, but habitual, expression of disrespect. (Respect being defined as the conscious recognition of another's individuality.) The sculptor-parents (and other teachers) interact with children predominantly in one direction: parent to child, teacher to student. Genuine curiosity is missing, or at least in short supply.

*Open minded curiosity about another person's  
perspective is a powerful expression of respect.*

Consider the alternative: Adults who accept responsibility for creating and maintaining a safe and ethical environment in which children can experience permission and freedom to discover for themselves who they are, what they enjoy, where their abilities lie, and what they want. Parents and teachers secure enough in themselves to have faith in their children, and who can approach child rearing with curiosity, wondering with enthusiastic interest, “Who will she be?” or “What will he be interested in as he grows up?”

In this kind of healthy environment, children learn tolerance for imperfection (theirs and others); they learn to take appropriate risks in their efforts to explore the world around them; they learn to succeed; they learn that when they fail, there is no need to surrender their self-esteem. This is the natural state of a child. With self-forgiveness, we will rediscover that natural state in ourselves.

## Facing the Obstacles

For all of your potential, there will be many obstacles along the way. Fear of the unknown and a sense of not knowing what you want are only two examples. *But you can do this.* I have. And I have witnessed many others do this work and reap the rewards.

When in doubt, think of the wonderful movie, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion combined their strengths to overcome whatever was put in their path by the Wicked Witch of the West. Along the way, each of the travelers faced a sense of hopelessness, and when they did, the others were there with the encouragement needed to keep the hope alive. Ultimately they succeeded in finding the Wizard. And when they did, they discovered that what they were seeking, what each of them wanted more than anything, had been a part of them all along.

*Children are seeds. And seeds are pure potential.*

Self-forgiveness is like searching for the Wizard: when you get there you will know that you have always had a brain, a heart, courage, a home—whatever you want more than anything. It's right there inside of you. (You don't have to believe me now. Just keep reading.) And we are each other's Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion, here to remind each other to keep hope alive.

### **Journal Exercise: Off to See the Wizard**

Answer these questions to the best of your ability. Your answers can be in the form of a paragraph, a list, a poem, a story --- whatever form feels right for you.

In what ways were you brought up by “sculptor-parents?”

In what ways were you brought up by “gardener-parents?”

Are you more of a sculptor or a gardener in your relationship with yourself?

What makes you curious about yourself?

What do you want from the Wizard?





## Chapter 2

# Self-Forgiveness and Personal Responsibility

**T**he yellow brick road may have been a romantic journey, but it was not an easy one. The Wizard has the power, as we all do, to point out what is already true. He does not have the power to make true what is not. I do not claim Wizard status, but very often, as a psychotherapist, my job boils down to just that: pointing out to my clients what is already true, what they have not been able to see from their perspective. Often, to make this point, I will move my eyeglasses to the top of my head, look straight at my client and say, “I can’t find my glasses and I have looked everywhere.”

Certainly, a large part of the road to good mental and emotional health is learning ways of thinking and behaving that are new to us. We must do this learning—a lot of which is *unlearning*—in order to live more effectively in our day-to-day lives, especially when we decide to define “effectively” as something more than the never ending pursuit to please others. Contrary to popular belief, we don’t have to change ourselves in order to be good, deserving people. The challenge here is learning to *recognize* the good and the deservingness that inherently exists. The Scarecrow never really needed a brain; he needed credible, external validation of his already-existing, fully functioning brain. The same is true for you and me.

*People with low self-esteem will admit to being wrong about almost anything except their own low opinion of themselves.*

## Check Your Perceptions

Have you ever known a woman who is convinced that she is ugly, or at least not very physically attractive, when the obvious truth is that she is beautiful? For the past six or seven years I have been working with young women with bulimia and anorexia. These young women experience drastic distortions in their self-perception, believing beyond all doubt that they are fat, ugly (many will describe themselves as “disgusting”), and worthless, when in fact they are slim (at least), attractive, and highly creative, productive people.

One lesson I learned quickly in working with clients with eating disorders is that telling them *the truth* about themselves, especially their physical appearance, carries no weight. (I suppose that pun was intended.) In fact, to do so, more often than not, is quite counterproductive. If I tell a thin woman with bulimia that she is the opposite of fat, the result will most likely be that she digs in with her opinion even deeper, defending her perception that she is overweight. The lesson learned: I can't do it for them.

The body- and self-image distortions presented by people with eating disorders are a magnified, exaggerated version of something that is true for us all. None of us see ourselves entirely accurately, and no one can convince us that something about ourselves is true when we believe strongly that it is not so. Validation will be accepted only when there is a corresponding internal awareness. For my clients with eating disorders, that usually comes in the form of their acknowledging that it is *possible* that their perceptions are not accurate. (That may not seem like much, but for them, it is extremely difficult, and is indicative of a milestone in their recovery.) Likewise, in order to benefit from the external validation of your family, peers, or caregivers, you must become *willing to be wrong* about your self-perceptions. No one can do that for you.

## No Reprieve from Responsibility

A criticism that frequently comes up in my line of work is that I'm letting people "off the hook," offering a reprieve from personal responsibility. Interestingly, this criticism often comes from clients and workshop participants themselves. I generally have two responses to this concern:

- I agree that learning self-forgiveness *must not be mistaken for a free ride*.
- The criticism itself is often *an expression of fear*.

Ultimately, it's not about blame, it's about responsibility.

### No Free Ride

There is no doubt that the trend in psychotherapy and self-help organizations known as the *codependency movement* (at its peak in the mid to late 1980s) produced some abuses: in brief, we were told to find our inner children, which we did. The problem was that no one had much to say about who was going to parent these inner children.

Eventually, most professionals involved with the codependency movement, and more and more of the lay support organizations, caught on. In the early '90s I started facilitating a one-day workshop called *Discovering the Parent Within* that became quite popular. Essentially, the basis of this workshop was to encourage people to take the best the codependency material had to offer (which was quite good in my opinion), but never to forget that the purpose of the inner child metaphor is to create a healthy self-to-self relationship in order to assume our rightful position as self-caring adults who accept full responsibility for our choices. In other words, *use* the metaphor; don't get lost in it. In order to be self-forgiving, some part of the self has to be responsibly taking charge.

## An Expression of Fear

The idea that I'm going around "letting people off the hook" of personal responsibility, beyond being a reasonable concern, is an expression of fear—*fear of the unknown*, what else?

As you will read about in later chapters, most people are accustomed to motivation by pressure, specifically the pressure created by the threat of heavy duty self-criticism and/or the criticism of others. When we start talking about self-forgiveness and living a life based on self-compassion, the objections move to the foreground: *If people are self-forgiving, what's to keep them from doing anything they want and then justifying it in the name of self-compassion?* The fear is that it is the self-criticism that has kept us in line all these years; we fear that we cannot be trusted on our own.

The answer to this question, of course, is that there is nothing to stop people from using this information for self-justification. Doing so, however, entirely misses the point of true self-compassion. These people are not self-forgiving; they are self-serving.

## Two Kinds of Guilt

To be self-forgiving is not to abdicate having a clear conscience. If you let yourself off the hook for things you need to be held responsible for, then self-forgiveness loses all credibility. On the other hand, if you hold yourself responsible for things that are beyond your control, or if you are incapable of letting go of the guilt once the necessary lessons have been learned, and the corrections made, you will become less, not more, effective in leading a responsible life.

Think of it this way: You are a swift sailboat, moving across the water with a strong wind. You are making excellent forward progress. Suddenly, a member of your crew drops a big, heavy anchor attached to a strong chain that is in turn attached to your boat. With sails full out, and an excellent wind, what happens to your sailboat now?

If the chain is long enough so that the anchor hits bottom, then the anchor is likely to become lodged in a permanent position, and your boat will be capable of nothing better than going in circles around the heavy anchor. If the chain is not so long, or if the water is very deep, then your boat will continue its forward progress, but at a significantly slower pace, as it drags the heavy anchor behind.

Guilt is the anchor, and when the anchor is dropped, it is important that you recognize it as such, stopping to take inventory of your situation, including your own behavior. When you have erred, you must accept responsibility and attend to your mistake. Once that is done, however, your job is to pull up the anchor and proceed forward. That is, I suppose, a nautical description of how natural, healthy guilt operates. This guilt doesn't hurt; it helps. It "keeps you honest," demanding your attention when you stray from your own value system.

What is not so effective is a captain who believes that once an anchor is dropped, it stays put. This is neurotic, unhealthy guilt—guilt that is hurtful instead of helpful; and guilt that demands attention constantly becomes a major impediment to any forward progress. Often, this type of guilt is only loosely (or not at all) associated with current circumstances. This guilt does not make you more responsible; it leaves you more self-absorbed, with your sails flapping in the wind.

## Confronting the Truth

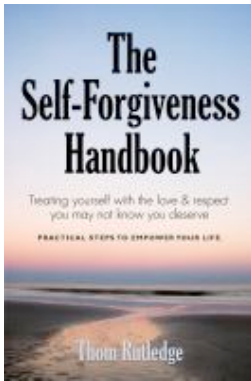
Self-forgiveness is based on the truth, not on some fantasy that everything we do is perfectly all right. A significant part of the truth is that *we are*—like it or not—*imperfect beings*. Ironically, to not accept our imperfection as fact will inevitably lead us to victimization, the natural result of endless attempts to achieve something that is impossible. As victims of self-perpetuated (if not self-induced) perfectionism, we are once more the sailboats weighed down by an untold number of heavy anchors.

*Perfectionism is a state of perpetual victimization.*

And so, the first truth to confront is that you and I are imperfect, and that will not change. When we accept this truth, we will be more capable of accepting responsibility for what is appropriate and deflecting what is truly not ours to be responsible for.

Another truth is that the best way to be fully available to others is to take excellent care of ourselves, or in our nautical terms, to mind our own anchors. Only when we learn the difference between neurotic guilt (multiple anchors in the water) and natural guilt (attending to each anchor in turn, and raising the anchor when corrections have been made) will we become fully responsible for ourselves. In this way, personal responsibility is necessary for genuine self-forgiveness, *and* self-forgiveness is necessary for genuine personal responsibility.

May the circle be unbroken.



*A step-by-step guide to overcoming damaging self-criticism, developing a compassionate relationship with the self, and living a more positive and productive life, free of the committee of internal voices that dismiss strengths and magnify blunders and mistakes. Based on the author's inspiring "self-image workshops," The Self-Forgiveness Handbook takes readers through a program of guided exercises that introduce and reinforce the seven essential components of self-forgiveness and personal responsibility.*

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