

Healing the pain from your own betrayals

OK. You did it. You did (or didn't do) something you're sorry about, and someone has been hurt. Did you betray a confidence? Fail to deliver on a promise? Steal from a friend? Cheat on your spouse? You can't change the past. But how can you go forward?

Maybe you had good intentions. Maybe you just made an honest mistake, or tried to help in a crisis situation and it backfired. Maybe you interfered when you shouldn't have and things got all fouled up. Or maybe your misstep was a biggie—dumping lives upside down, leaving hearts and dreams in shambles everywhere you look.

Whatever it was you did, you begin to heal by looking at how and why you came to do it. What led up to this whole mess in the first place? What else was happening at the time? Were you upset with the “betrayee”—or someone else? Confused? Jealous? Desperate? Did you rationalize to yourself, “They'll never notice,” or “They deserve it,” or “Now they'll see what it feels like”? What was your objective or need in all this? What kept you from asking for what you needed? Such honest after-the-fact reflection also makes you less likely to do anything like this again.

The past is now past; more important is what you do from now on. The 12-step programs offer a wonderful way to help “betrayers” heal, through a two-step process: (1) taking responsibility for harm they've caused; and (2) making amends. Steps 8 and 9 read as follows (www.12step.org):

8. “Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.”

9. “Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

Now, there are good reasons why amends aren't discussed in steps 1, 2, or even 7. Making amends doesn't mean assuaging your own guilty conscience at others' expense, such as e-mailing your college boyfriend after 30 years to "apologize" that while dating him you slept with his best friend, or calling your aunt in Fort Worth to tell her you're sorry you've always hated her. No, no. You contemplate amends only after first working on yourself. Then you carefully consider whether your amend would be in everyone's best interest.

Finally, what about forgiving yourself? Because you are suffering, too. Imagine that your most beloved person on earth—your child, grandchild, or pet—did something akin to what you did. Could you still love them? Could you forgive them? I'll bet you could.

All of us have done something we're ashamed about (OK, maybe several somethings). But what you did is not who you are. You're a good person who did something you wish you hadn't done. Now you're a sadder, wiser girl. In coming to terms with your weaknesses, you become stronger and more compassionate. And you'll find it easier to forgive others when they make mistakes.

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