

# How Forgiveness Clarifies the Soul

We not only step into someone else's shoes when we let that person off the hook, but we gain better health and more hope.

BY ELIZABETH M. ECONOMOU  
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In the Greek language, the word for forgiveness is syn-chó-re-si (συγχώρεση) — which literally means to occupy the same space as someone else.

Forgiveness stands in sharp contrast to so-called safe spaces today, which are widespread in our politically overwrought culture.

When we forgive others, we figuratively and humbly step into someone else's shoes, instead of retreating elsewhere.

In Mathew 18:21, Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven?” Jesus replies: “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to 70 times seven” — which implies that limitless forgiveness is essential and central to the Christian way of life.

Forgiveness can also lead us toward better health.

Physically speaking, forgiveness creates a higher quality of life, a healthier body, and a more positive attitude, the International Forgiveness Institute, based in Madison, Wisconsin, shares on its [website](#).

“When we forgive, resentment or unhealthy anger lessens,” Robert D. Enright, Ph.D., the institute's founder, told LifeZette via e-mail. “As that happens, the body can relax, blood can flow more freely through the heart, and the mood can lighten.”

Enright, also a professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says that research has indicated that as people learn to forgive, they are able to significantly boost their self-esteem, become more hopeful, and also lessen their anger, anxiety and depression.

“This has been shown in randomized experimental and control group research with, for example, incest survivors, people in drug rehabilitation, emotionally abused women, cardiac patients, women with fibromyalgia, and others,” he added.

The act of forgiving can also have astounding long-term health benefits.

“Unhealthy anger can lead to fatigue, a suppressed immune system, heightened blood pressure, and other indicators of stress,” said Enright. “Forgiving, in some cases, can reverse these physical symptoms.”

Despite the myriad health benefits, forgiveness does not happen overnight — as reflected by Enright’s 20-step forgiveness process model, which is broken into four phases, including:

- phase 1 — uncovering your anger
- phase 2 — understanding your anger
- phase 3 — deciding to forgive the offender
- phase 4 — solidifying the decision to forgive

Based in Houston, Texas, Cynthia Kostas, the director of spiritual education at Photophoros Retreat House, brings her hopeful message of forgiveness on the road and into Christian parishes of different denominations across the country.

A former theology major and graduate of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts, Kostas is inspired to share with others how forgiveness benefits not just the physical body but people’s spiritual well-being as well.

“While resentments contaminate our souls, forgiveness helps remove those contaminants, thereby clarifying our souls,” she told a congregation in Seattle recently.

Kostas also noted that forgiving ourselves is just as important as forgiving others.

“Wallowing in guilt inhibits us from repentance” — or metanoia, in Greek, “which means to change our ways,” she said.

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