



How to Bury a Grudge

A FAMILY FEUD. A COLD WAR WITH A NEIGHBOR.
A WORKPLACE INJUSTICE. IT MIGHT FEEL
RIGHT TO HOLD ON TO YOUR SENSE OF BEING
WRONGED—BUT YOU MAY END UP WITH
MORE THAN YOUR SHARE OF THE SUFFERING.
HERE'S HOW TO MOVE FORWARD.

By Melanie Mannarino

SEARCH YOUR HEART for a minute: Are you holding any grudges? Maybe your blood still boils whenever you remember getting laid off five years ago. Or perhaps you're still seething about that comment your sister made last month. Or you still can't move past how Grandma (RIP) favored your cousin when you were kids. (Full disclosure: That last example is all mine. It took me decades to get over my grandmother comparing my "beautiful" cousin to child actress Brooke Shields. I got compared to exactly nobody.)

It's perfectly natural to bear grudges of all sizes—against a relative who showed favoritism, against a partner who cheated on you, and worse. And it's hard for most of us to let them go, says sociologist Christine Carter, PhD, author of *The Sweet Spot: How to Accomplish More by Doing Less*. "For many people, it's easy to hang on to resentment," she says. When we've been wronged, it feels validating to think of ourselves as a blameless, oppressed victim. But playing that role makes it hard to move on, because it makes you powerless—you can't have it both ways, says Carter.

It took Mina, a 39-year-old payroll executive and mother of two, years to realize she couldn't fully move forward with her life as long as she was holding a grudge against her controlling father. "My father had anger issues and old-world views about a woman's role. When I was a teenager, we had a huge fight, and he threatened me with physical violence," she says. She cut off contact with him for more than five years. "I wished all kinds of evil on him. But after a while, I had accomplished so much on my own and was starting to think, 'I can't go on to new adventures and positive experiences if I still have this anger.'"

Harboring resentment toward someone who has insulted, demeaned, cheated on, or otherwise hurt you doesn't empower you. It can actively cause you harm, both physically and emotionally. Repeatedly recalling the slight (yes, it can definitely feel much larger than "slight") is called ruminat-

ing, says Everett Worthington, PhD, professor emeritus of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, who has spent his career studying forgiveness. "Research shows that when people keep ruminating, it increases the base level of the stress hormone cortisol in their bloodstream," he says. "That in turn can shrink the brain and also impact the immune system, cardiovascular system, GI system, sex drive—there are a lot of costs."

Research bears out the health benefits of forgiveness. In a study on young adults, higher levels of forgiveness were connected with fewer physical issues, like sleep problems, digestive trouble, and headaches, as well as fewer feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, anxiety, and depression.

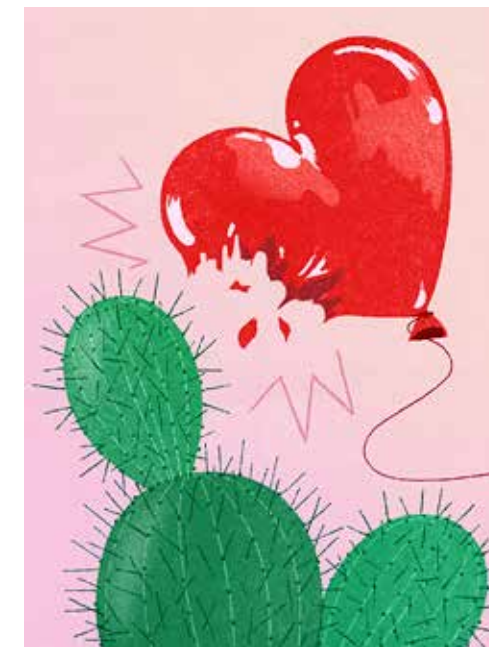
If your lingering anger toward the neighbors who wronged you ends up compromising your health, "the effects of the injustice are worse than the injustice itself," says Robert Enright, PhD, professor of educational

psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. It's like you've been hurt twice, and that's not really what you want, right?

What you want (presumably) is to move on and feel good about yourself and the world, while making sure the offense doesn't happen again. The only way to get there is through forgiveness. "Resentment is a slow, happiness-stealing poison," says Enright. "And forgiveness is like medicine."

By Enright's definition, forgiveness is being good to those who are not good to you. Difficult, yes, but the payoff is worth it. "Think of yourself as someone who has the power to create the life you want to create," says Carter. "Showing mercy to the people who wrong us is a little-known secret to happiness."

Mina found happiness in her 20s, while visiting friends over Easter break. "I woke up in Italy, and the bells were ringing at the nearby church, and the sky was filled with light pink and purple," she recalls. "I was happy in that moment, appreciative of my friends and thankful I was living the exact way I wanted to live. I silently said to my father, 'I forgive you. I love you! I thank you



for my life. I wish you well and hope you are all right.' That was it. I released my anger and hatred for him that morning."

Ready to release your own hurt? Set aside everything you think you know about holding grudges and follow these expert guidelines for letting them go and lightening your emotional load.

CONSIDER WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU.

"In holding a grudge, there's a sense of strength and righteousness in the short term," notes Enright. "You're saying, 'You can't do this to me.' The quest for justice seems right. But it does not cure the resentment." It's not about whether the offender deserves forgiveness. "You deserve it," says Enright, "because you are the one who is hurt. You deserve to live a life free of that gnawing and discontent."

SEE THE OTHER PERSON THROUGH NEW EYES.

It may feel like the offender's actions were meant to hurt you—and sometimes that's true. But Enright encourages everyone to view these incidents from a different perspective. "Don't define the person by

the words or action that hurt you," he says. "That is not all the person is. Try to see them more broadly, in terms of their humanity and when they might have done good. You'll see the weaknesses they have never overcome—that is a tragedy for them, making them and others miserable. When people are consistently mean to us, especially in families, there is likely something deeper going on. The offer of forgiveness is healing for both of you. You don't have to excuse them, but say, 'Here's a person who could be living a fuller life but isn't.'"

It's OK to recall the hurt, adds Worthington. But when doing so, replace the negative emotions with more positive ones of empathy or sympathy for the offender.

DON'T WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO "EARN" YOUR FORGIVENESS.

It's an altruistic gift, says Worthington. "People don't deserve forgiveness. They don't earn it. We simply give it."

Carter's advice: Do it sooner rather than later. "A lot of people hold grudges because they are waiting for an apology," she says. "They think, 'I'll forgive her, but she hasn't asked me yet.' But that's not the way the world works. Most people won't apologize in a way

that is satisfying—in our culture we aren't really taught how to do it. So if we want to be happy and heal ourselves when we've been hurt, we must forgive whether or not we are asked for forgiveness."

Anna, a 35-year-old writer and mom of one, spent years nursing a grudge against a teacher who cut her from show choir in seventh grade—even after they both moved on to the high school. "For the first two years of high school, I would not speak to her or look her in the eye," she admits. "But the first day of junior year, I was like, 'This is silly. I don't care.' So that day, I smiled at her. After that, I really enjoyed her class—and we are still in touch, nearly 20 years later. I'm glad for both of us that I gave her a second chance. Smiling at her was way less emotionally taxing than holding all that negative energy."

SEPARATE FORGIVENESS FROM RECONCILIATION.

By forgiving someone, you are not validating their behavior, the experts agree. This is especially important to remember in more serious situations, including cases of abuse, legal strife, or marital infidelity. Reconciliation is mutual; forgiveness is not.

Even if you've suffered a huge injustice, says Enright, "you can offer the gift of goodness to the other person, knowing they made a mistake—whether or not they understand what they've done, are sorry for it, or try to make reparations."

When people do not forgive, says Enright, they tend to pass their resent-



ment on to others. "In a family, the children inherit the anger," he says. "The innocent ones inherit the resentment that shouldn't be theirs. They grow up with an anger, and if they enter into a marital union, they bring that anger into the new relationship."

FORGIVE FREELY, BUT DON'T NECESSARILY FORGET.

Instead, reframe the relationship. Say you haven't spoken with your sister in 15 years, and lately you've been thinking of burying your grudge. Go ahead—but know that you have a right to redefine the relationship. You can forgive her parenting criticism and still choose not to vacation with her anymore. "A lot of times, we hold on to grudges to give ourselves permission to not bridge a divide," says Carter. "But you don't need the grudge to create safety for yourself. Forgive her,

you can use to improve your life and guide you and provide inspiration," she explains. "When you form a grudge against someone for bad behavior, it inspires you to behave in the opposite way." In time, you may even become grateful for the opportunity to avoid similar bad behavior and for the example of how not to treat others.

ONLY CONFRONT THE OFFENDER IF YOU THINK IT WILL CHANGE THINGS.

"If you think someone will deny their actions and criticize you for being overly sensitive, it's better to show you forgive than to proclaim it," says Enright. "Return a phone call or text, smile in the office hallway, pay them a visit—be good to them in a genuine sense. They will understand." If reconciliation does seem possible, he says, you can sit down with the person and tell them, "You hurt me, and I'd like for us to avoid having that happen again."

KNOW THAT IT'S NEVER TOO LATE.

REALLY. "You can even forgive someone who is deceased," notes Enright. "You can take an inventory of the injustices of your life, from your first-grade teacher up to your boss yesterday, and practice forgiving everybody so they don't 'win' twice. If you hold on to it, they win again. Forgive them, and it takes away their power."

but keep the boundary: If you know your sister is always going to hurt you, I wouldn't recommend spending Christmas at her house. Don't expose yourself to future harm."

FIND THE LESSON IN THE OFFENSE.

In her new book, *How to Hold a Grudge*, author Sophie Hannah explores the positive side of grudges—namely, the things they can teach you about how you want to live your life and interact with others. What stays with you, says Hannah, is the story you choose to remember about an incident that made you feel wronged or hurt. "The grudge becomes a story

"Think of yourself as someone who has the power to create the life you want to create. Showing mercy to the people who wrong us is a little-known secret to happiness."