



FORGIVENESS AND HEALTH. INTRODUCTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS

María Prieto Ursúa
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One of the most deeply human experiences, whether personal, interpersonal or social, is the offense and, where appropriate, forgiveness and reconciliation. Since man began to live in small settlements of tribes, clans or families, learning to deal with the experiences of offending and feeling offended, forgiving and being forgiven began to be of paramount importance to sustain the quality of life in the community. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to remain for a long time in a human group (no matter what kind) and not to experience conflict.

Professor María Prieto Ursúa (Universidad P. Comillas de Madrid) has been scientifically investigating the experience of forgiveness from a psychological perspective for many years. The fruit of these years is *Perdón y salud [Forgiveness and health]*. It is, without a doubt, a great little book. In 189 dense pages, the author offers a general overview of the main elements of this complex and profound concept of *forgiveness*.

The structure of the book is revealed diaphanously throughout its eight chapters. "¿Qué es el perdón?" [What is forgiveness? (19-31) gives an account of the richness of the term we have on the table. Forgiveness manifests itself on three different levels: emotional, rational, and behavioral. It can manifest in two dimensions, negative and positive; it is a right and it is constructed as a process. In terms of its various ways of historicizing, we can speak of unilateral forgiveness, silent forgiveness, hyperbolic forgiveness, humanitarian forgiveness, direct forgiveness, empty forgiveness, negotiated forgiveness, conditional forgiveness, dyadic forgiveness; revenge forgiveness, restitutive forgiveness, expectation forgiveness, forgiveness as social harmony, or as an act of love. The author does not forget the novel concept "forgiveness of oneself" and asks: is it possible to "forgive the circumstances"?

In "¿Qué no es el perdón?" [What is not forgiveness?] (33-43), María Prieto analyzes the risk of trying to reconcile situations through erroneous processes of forgiveness ("false forgiveness or pseudo-forgiveness"), either due to ignorance, or because they are proposed hastily or because they are not constructed based on an intention of truth and honesty. This chapter deals with the appropriate relationship that must occur between "forgiveness and justice," "forgiveness and absolution," "forgiveness and restoration of identity," or between "forgiveness and memory," which replaces the well-known popular saying "I forgive but I do not forget" (41-42).

As the concept has been seriously analyzed, now the issue of how to carry it out is addressed: What is it that facilitates forgiveness? (45-63).

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From the perspective of the offender and the victim, the many variables are exposed (attitudes, desires, and actions) that encourage an authentic experience of forgiveness: the type of offense and its severity, the intensity of the damage caused, or the type of relationship that exists between the victim and the offender. Among the different attitudes and behaviors that the aggressor may reveal, the importance and transcendence are emphasized of the sincere and honest process of "apologizing" (51-54), which must show signs pointing towards the authentic reconstruction of the relationship. Saying sorry generates, in the victims, empathy and inclination to forgive. But there are more variables. This chapter also discusses how conflict is experienced based on gender: do men and women live and feel the same in a process of forgiveness? What feelings are more prevalent in men and in women? (56). Empathy and its relation to forgiveness, rumination and the influence of spirituality and religiosity (especially what is the underlying image of God?) These are three key concepts that María Prieto studies with a briefness and depth in order to better understand the process of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The short Chapter 4 (65-72) presents two recent models of intervention to facilitate forgiveness: Worthington (2006), and Enrich and Fitzgibbons (2000). Prieto summarizes clearly and pedagogically the various phases that these authors propose in order to carry out an adequate process of forgiveness with so many variables on the table. The model of psychoeducation of the former is included in the acronym REACH, which covers the five phases of the process: **R**ecall, **E**mpathize, **A**ltruistic Gift, **C**ommitment and **H**old on.

One of the most interesting chapters in my view (73-86) is the one that links forgiveness with positive effects in the human organism, at the physical, mental, and spiritual levels: forgiveness improves the cardiovascular response, tension, blood pressure... forgiveness is literally a "change of heart" (74). Forgiveness improves muscular tension (corrugator muscle), the immune system, sleep, and it also reduces fatigue. Its positive psychological consequences are the reduction of stress and the reduction of anxiety about life and death. On the contrary, the lack of forgiveness can increase anxiety, bitterness, hostility and the tendency to depression in men and women.

And what can be said about "forgiveness of oneself"? (87-97) Is it possible? Is it recommended at all times and in all circumstances? Does it involve any risks? It is a concept as yet little studied and from which it has been discovered that it also has its "dark side", and risks that can associate it with "false forgiveness". The sample that is offered in 93-97 on the process of forgiveness of oneself in four phases seems to me an enormously lucid guide to embarking on this path of "self-forgiveness" with assurances: remorse, responsibility, restoration and self-acceptance.

The book advances from question to question, to which Chapter 7 (99-120) provides answers; it serves to demonstrate the scientific character of the research on forgiveness: "is it possible to measure forgiveness?" In little more than 20 compact and rigorous pages, María Prieto presents no less than 40 measurement instruments of forgiveness: specific forgiveness, dispositional forgiveness, forgiveness of oneself or in the family and within the couple. For the author, it is essential to continue studying these forms of assessment "in order to have a solid, valid body of knowledge, on which to base the psychological work on forgiveness" (120).





But any conflict or offense that can trigger a process of forgiveness occurs in a *context*. This is the object of study of Chapter 8 (121-135). It is surprising to discover the absence of training for forgiveness in the educational field; it has been studied slightly more within forgiveness and resolution of conflicts in the workplace (124-125). The most studied context, undoubtedly, is that of the family and the couple that María Prieto illustrates with the itinerary presented in six steps (129-130), following the proposal of Worthington and Drinkard (2000). The summary provided by the author seems very lucid and enormously practical.

For those not initiated in this topic, this book is a discovery of the surprising backdrop that underlies the concept—the experience of forgiveness. María Prieto has masterfully combined clear and direct language with a rigorous and scientific methodology. Her academic exposition is integrated into a clear pedagogy that leads the reader from

the presentation of the chapter to the invaluable summary that closes it. The 17 pages of bibliographical references (137-155), as well as the 16 final annexes, give a solid foundation to the assertions of the author, who does not take a step in her argument without explaining where the data or the statement she offers has come from.

A warning for navigators: almost all the references used in the research are works in English. This fact also makes us think about the (urgent?) need to continue to promote this research in the Spanish-speaking scientific field.

María Prieto closes her Introduction with these words: "... these years that I have been studying forgiveness, have been a privileged way of learning about the greatness of which the human being is capable" (18). With this book, the author has opened a window to allow us to participate in this breathtaking landscape.



**MY MIND WITHOUT ME
THE ONLY THING MISSING IN YOUR LIFE IS YOU**

Jenny Moix
Madrid: Editorial Aguilar, 2018

Albert Feliu Soler
Parc Sanitari Sant Joan de Déu

To begin with, I must confess that I usually do not write inside books. But in this text, there are so many useful examples (both for their rigor and practical application and their proximity and warmth) about how to explain what is the mind, the attention, mindfulness, the alienating role of technology in today's society, the role of the therapist, etc. that with a keenness almost like that of a collector, I found myself marking almost every page of the book with my pencil. That said, let's continue.

When in a session of mindfulness, the instructor directs a meditation practice, in which, with special care, it is intended to transmit more the "how" than the "what" to do, he or she must take special care not to generate more mental activity (in relation to the exercise that is being performed) in the practitioners than is strictly necessary and thus facilitate their "entry" into the exercise in the most curious and fresh way, and with as much "beginner's mind" as possible. Practicing as a health psychologist and as a researcher in the field of the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions, I have been fortunate to share spaces and words with beginning meditators and people with extensive meditative experience, and in all of them and in each of their practices the value of simplicity and the intention to contact the experience as directly as possible are noteworthy. It is for this reason that when, in the first chapter of the book, the author suggests the reader practice (in real time) exercises that are typically done in mindfulness-based programs but *without indicating* in those same pages that these are "mindfulness" exercises, in my opinion, she is intentionally facilitating a more direct contact with the experience of meditation (with the sensations in the body, with the realization of the nature of the mind) instead of spending time on conceptualization. Given the "commercial tirade" of mind-

fulness, when reading these first pages, I was impressed by the author's value, her humility and coherence (for the benefit of the "beginner's mind" of the reader) in not naming and not introducing in this first chapter this concept that is so in fashion and that could potentially trap the most eager reader into *telling* his classmates that he is reading a book about this "revolutionary" technique. At that moment, the book caught me; I recognized its value, because I understood that its main mission was to help me (me and other readers) on a path of self-knowledge and it was not about selling. That the message of the book was more important than the book itself and the author herself. This virtue has been cultivated lovingly by the author in all the pages of the book.

When reading this book, one feels caring, accepted, almost understood, as the author, while explaining in the text how desirable it is—for the sake of health and well-being—to cultivate self-knowledge and self-care, also pampers us through her words, through tolerance, openness and the endearing nature of the examples that come from her daily life, her friendships, and her family. This feeling of support, of gentleness and encouragement accompanies us while Jenny, in a diaphanous way, shares with the reader the results of recent research in neuroscience, proposes strategies and exercises to help us move forward on this path and invites us to transfer our learning to the experiences of our daily life (of how we get stressed, fall in love, desire things, get angry, face grief and pain, etc.) and questions that transcend the pages of any book (who we are, where, why, what for?)

When I first saw the cover of the book, the film "*Mi vida sin mí*" [My life without me] by Isabel Coixet came to my mind. Now, I have read it, I think that the title of "*Mi mente sin mí*" [My mind without me] was inspired in some way, voluntarily or involuntarily, on the part of the author, by principles common to those of the excellent film. Because both of them, in their own way, one hand-in-hand with science and the essay and the other through drama, invite us to the adventure of knowing ourselves, tasting what we are experiencing, and accepting the responsibility of trying to do so in coherence with our values.

