

Five Reasons Why Bad Things Happen



How to Turn Tragedies Into Triumph

by Brownell Landrum

FIVE REASONS WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN: HOW TO TURN TRAGEDIES INTO TRIUMPH

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CHAPTER 18: FORGIVENESS

As I looked for quotes on forgiveness, it was interesting how many I disagreed with. Things like, “Forgive many things in others; nothing in yourself,” and “It's far easier to forgive an enemy after you've got even with him,” or even “Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.” Ugh!

I realized it's because forgiveness is a concept that can create a lot of confusion and misconception. Which is a travesty, because not being able to forgive – or to be forgiven – can not only lead to more “bad things,” it can prevent healing or change!

Therefore, as it's such a crucial – and complicated – lesson, I decided to create an entirely separate chapter on the subject. And since forgiveness is something you can either give or receive, we'll look at it from both perspectives, starting with the Four Steps to Forgiveness, the things you need to do if you want to regain another person's trust.

Is there someone you've hurt? A relationship that needs healing? While you can never control how someone will react, and you can't force someone to forgive you, the following Four Steps will help immensely.

As you read, you may find yourself being challenged, even possibly wanting to argue about some of the points being made. Sorry to say, but any resistance you're showing indicates that you may not be ready – to give or receive – forgiveness. At least not yet. Pay attention to your reaction: there's a(nother) lesson in there! Another opportunity to “heal the hurt” so you can have the triumphant life you want.

STEP 1: ADMIT WRONGDOING

The three most difficult things for a human being are not physical feats or intellectual achievements. They are, first, returning love for hate; second, including the excluded; third, admitting that you are wrong.

- Anthony de Mello

Forgiveness is not just about saying "I'm sorry." Getting someone to forgive you requires that *they* know *you* know what you did was wrong. You shouldn't have done it.

All too often, when people say they're sorry, it's more that they're sorry you're upset – and less an indication that they really regret what they did, or even understand how their actions impacted you.

What this means, is that it's likely they'll do it again! So, the first step – admitting wrongdoing – is the key to opening the dialogue that leads to healing. And the clearer and more sincere you are, the greater the chance the relationship will be able to move forward.

By admitting you were wrong, and being specific, you're not trivializing the infraction. For example, you can say, "I'm sorry I didn't take out the trash when I promised I would." Okay, that's good. You said what you did wrong. But how about instead you say, "I'm sorry I broke my promise to you. I shouldn't have made a commitment I wasn't able to keep." Or even better, "I'm sorry I didn't take out the trash when I said I would. I should've kept my word to you, even when it was difficult. I know you count on me, and by not doing the things I say I will, it makes it harder for you to trust me."

See how even something "trivial" isn't, really, in the other person's eyes?

If you're seeking forgiveness, and not exactly sure of how "wrong" your actions were – ask! Find out! Sometimes we might not know the whole story, so dig deep! As with the above example, it's usually not about the trash, is it? And be prepared to listen – really listen – if you want to heal the relationship.

Since we're talking about commitment and trust, I'll divert here a little and share a little test I use when trying to discover whether someone's values are in alignment with mine. I pose a hypothetical situation: Suppose you and I were single and best friends 20 years ago, and we made a pact: if one of us was arrested, the other would bail him or her out of jail. Now, fast-forward 20 years. You're married; I'm not. We're not really in touch that much anymore. Yet one day, you get the call from me: I've been arrested and need your help. Now, let's say your spouse says there's "no way" he/she will allow you to go to the jail to bail me out. (For whatever reason). What do you do?

For me (and this is just for me, okay?), if that person says he won't keep their commitment to me, it's a deal-breaker. To me, to the relationships I want to cultivate, I need people who value their commitments – over everything else. (And, honestly, if I had a friend whose spouse didn't understand this, I'm not sure I could relate to him very well anyway!)

Some people might argue that their commitment is more to their spouse than to you. I hear this argument, but don't buy it. It's not (at least to me) really about their prioritization of the people in their life. It's about the value they place on keeping their commitments. (It's not like I wouldn't be understanding if, when I call them from jail, I find out their child is in the hospital, and they say they can't come. But I'd still hope my friend would find a way to get me out of the slammer! I know I'd do the same!)

STEP 2: APOLOGIZE

The second step, those three magic words, "I'm really sorry," are both crucial and cathartic, especially when combined with the other steps. For most people "I apologize" just doesn't carry the same kind of punch. And please have the courage to do it in person, looking him or her in the eye when you speak those words. Flowers and gifts can be nice, but they still can't make up for the impact of saying you're really sorry.

Here's an "inspirational" quote about forgiveness that bothered me immensely: "Apologizing does not always mean that you're wrong and the other person is right. It just means that you value your relationship more than your ego." Why does this statement bug me so much? Because it IS your ego that's choosing to placate the other person instead of getting to the real issue! He or she isn't angry with you for no reason! He or she feels hurt! For the apology to be sincere it has to mean you start listening to the other person to find out what they think you did was wrong.

How NOT to Apologize...

If you are really serious about fixing the relationship, the last thing you want to do is say the wrong thing, right? Hopefully! Otherwise, what's the point? (If that is a rhetorical question for you, and you think the answer is "To prove my point," or "to defend myself," or something even more heinous, then you might as well stop reading this book, because you'll have missed the point entirely!)

If you're still with me, and really want to know the things *not* to say...here they are:

First, never say, “I’m sorry you’re upset.” What that’s really saying is that you’re not sorry for what you’ve done; you’re just sorry you got caught! Or at least you’re regretting the reaction, not the action. To be really sorry, you need to admit wrongdoing – step #1.

Second, don’t try to defend yourself. You’re still looking at it from your point of view and not theirs. If (you think) your action is defensible, then it’s something you’re probably going to do again without the slightest restriction or remorse. You’ll always have an excuse. “I’m sorry I didn’t meet you for our date. I got really busy” is really saying “I’m not that into you to even call to cancel” and probably “I was flirting with another girl.” Is that “forgivable?” Didn’t think so...

Third, please don’t say “I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Again, you’re still focused on yourself. For most offenses, the other person probably didn’t intentionally go out of her way to hurt you. But still, when she delivers this message, what she’s really saying is she wasn’t thinking, which ultimately means they didn’t care if they hurt you or not. How can you forgive someone so immune to how her actions affect others?

Remember when we talked about Karma, that there are two factors related to karma: intent and effect? “I didn’t mean to hurt you,” might mitigate some forms of transgressions, but it doesn’t eliminate the effect. If he cut you off in traffic because he wasn’t thinking (or on the phone or...), but his action caused you to spin off the road and crash your car and break your back, do you really think he’s innocent because he “didn’t mean to?” No. Didn’t think so. (The law calls this “recklessness” or “reckless disregard” and is defined (by Wikipedia as “a person pursuing a course of action while consciously disregarding the fact that the action gives rise to a substantial and unjustifiable risk.” And, yes, it’s a crime; both legally and morally.)

If the other person is really so unconscious to have no idea what he said or did but really does want to make things work, see “safe word” below. If he agrees to this tactic, and really appreciates it when you call him out, then you can start to get through to his subconscious (Inner Self) and make him conscious of his actions.

You might be asking, “What if the other person is just too sensitive?” Good question! How you treat the situation will depend on three things: (1) your history with that person; (2) how much you care about him or her, and (3) if this has happened to you before with other people. If there’s a history, then the reaction is likely a build-up of past offenses and the latest “minor” infraction is the proverbial straw. If not, then you might want to decide if there’s a future. If other people being “too sensitive” happens a lot to you, then you’re missing an important opportunity for learning and personal growth!

Fourth, never, never, never say “I was just being honest” or “I was just being myself” if you want to have any possible hope of healing the relationship. You might as well be saying, “You mean so little to me that I have no interest in trying to control my words or actions around you.” (You might be asking: what if someone asks my opinion and then don’t like what I have to say? Don’t I have the right to be honest then? My answer, if you want it, is “No.” Not really. Any human being who wants to get along with another needs to be able to filter what he or she says to save the other person’s feelings. (Yes, sometimes “tough love” might be required. Sometimes. But, again, if you want to know what I think, “tough love” is all-too-often a euphemism for “verbally abusive.”) Don’t you deserve better? Don’t they? If you can’t say “yes” and be willing to move on (away), then you’re probably setting yourself up for future “bad things.”

Finally, don’t use deception or lies. This should be blatantly obvious. No further explanation needed. This includes not making commitments you are unlikely to keep. (See below).

When apologizing, can you add, “Please forgive me.”? Yes – but only if you’re willing to go the next step and make amends...

STEP 3: MAKE AMENDS

Do you really want the relationship to move forward in a positive direction? Offer to make amends. Do something to show you're serious about earning their forgiveness. You can come up with something on your own, but it's even better when you ask him what he'd like you to do. Some people might say, "nothing," but don't let her get away with it! Make her give you some task, large or small, to demonstrate your appreciation for her forgiveness. You'll both feel much better!

Have some amusing ideas? In one of my DUET stories novels, I tell the story about a vanity license plate that said, “ASN9.” It was seen on a man’s treasured, expensive vehicle. The license plate was the wife’s way of getting even for the husband’s infidelity. It was fictional and intended for humor, but it also conveyed an important message. The fact that his wife selected this form of “revenge,” and the fact that the man agreed to it suggests he wouldn’t have agreed to the plate if he hadn’t admitted he was wrong and wanted to make amends. Did the punishment fit the crime? You’ll have to decide. But you can’t deny she had to have had some form of satisfaction! (Not to mention significantly reducing his chances of repeating the offense!)

Again, it’s a fictional story. Can you think of some solutions for making amends that aren’t vindictive, but can help balance the scales? Share your thoughts in our Reasons Why online discussion group!

STEP 4: NOT DO IT AGAIN

You've admitted what you did was wrong. You've apologized sincerely. You've even paid your price by making amends. You wouldn't want to lose all that work, would you? Hopefully not! But just to be clear: DON'T DO IT AGAIN! Whatever you did before, if you repeat the offense, you're not only stupid (sorry, but I have to call it as I see it), you probably don't deserve another chance. That old adage, "Fool me once, shame on you; Fool me twice, shame on me," comes into play here. Do you really think the other person would - or should - keep letting it happen to him or her? Really? If so, you need to consider...perhaps you weren't looking for forgiveness in the first place. Perhaps your motives were, let's say, less enlightened?

A Safe Word?

Also in my DUET stories novels, one of my characters does something that really ticks off the other. She's angry, but doesn't know how to express herself. The relationship is in the early stages, so there's no history for her anger, the issue is isolated. But, if she "drops it," it can fester in the subconscious and come out later. (By now, you know the Inner Self can be quite devious when being ignored!)

So - what does she do? Does she utter those four treacherous words, "We need to talk?" No, thankfully, she's too smart for that. But she is annoyed. So, she starts by sending a text, "I've got some explaining to do." This was good; it allowed her to start out by taking responsibility for her reaction!

Then, when she meets with him, he's ready, but open to listening. They finally decide on an approach I think real-life people can learn from. They come up with a "safe word" when one has done something to upset the other. The safe word they come up with (I won't tell you here - no spoilers! You'll have to read the book to find out), but I will say it is one that is quite clever and humorous, and it bonds them tighter as a couple.

So...how can having a safe word help in forgiveness? I'm sure you've figured it out by now, but for the sake of clarity...

Sometimes we do things unconsciously. (Especially before we get to know our Inner Self!). By using a safe word, we can re-program ourselves (and, potentially, even others), by building awareness of our activities.

Now, what if you're on the other end, the one who needs to do the forgiving? And what if the other person doesn't follow through on the four steps? Here's some advice on forgiving someone else:

ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR ROLE IN WHAT HAPPENED

There are usually two (or more) sides to a story. And it's pretty rare when one person is 100% guilty and the other pure as the driven snow. When one partner cheats, for example, there's usually some problem at home he or she is avoiding. Maybe not always, but usually. When someone steals from another, he may be taking something he thinks he "deserves." Again, he's probably still over 50% wrong - maybe even 98% wrong, but as you learned in the Reasons Why, it happened to *you* for a reason. What was it?

Anthony de Mello suggests, "Every time you find yourself irritated or angry with someone, the one to look at is not that person but yourself. The question to ask is not, 'What's wrong with this person?' but 'What does this irritation tell me about myself?'" Pretty good advice! (He had a lot of that!)

Acknowledging your role in what happened is, in a word: Accountability. Taking (at least) some responsibility for what happened. As discussed under Lessons, it's one of the most important lessons of all! Without it, you'll likely never get to the Reasons Why - or forgiveness!

LETTING GO OF THE ANGER AND RESENTMENT

At some point, you've got to just let it go. In fact, some philosophers have said the definition of forgiveness is "to drop it." Others suggest forgiveness is "giving up the hope of a more enlightened past." (Think about that one a while!). But in the end, if you hang on to the resentment you're only hurting yourself. You know that, don't you? How many ailments arise from the stress of anger, hatred and resentment? If not, do the research. And keep reading.

SEEING SOME GOOD IN THE OTHER PERSON THOUGH IT MAY BE DIFFICULT!

Everyone has good points and bad. No one is 100% dark. As Goo the Guru, from DUET Stories Volume III: *A Chorus of Voices*, might say, "There are infinite shades of gray between pure light and lure darkness." So...what are some good things about the other person? Make a list. Write it down. If your anger has been raging, perhaps this can stifle it a bit. Just one caution: just because someone isn't all bad, it doesn't mean that he or she is good for you.

Often, you need to distance yourself and just send them away with good thoughts...

SENDING GOOD THOUGHTS

Yes. It might be difficult, but it really helps to send someone who's wronged you good thoughts. When I first heard the following story, it blew me away...

Forgiveness Can Save Your Life

Forgiveness can save your life. Exemplifying this truth is the powerful story of Marietta and Bill Jaeger. In 1973, Bill and Marietta took their children camping in Montana. In the early hours of June 27th, their seven-year old daughter, Susie, was kidnapped from her tent. As the horror turned into days, then into weeks, the Jaegers felt their hatred for the kidnapper grow.

One night, however, Marietta heard a voice inside her say, "I don't want you to feel this way." She decided the best thing she could do for herself – and for her daughter – was to forgive. While it didn't mean she had to pretend to like him or ignore what he had done, she would pray for him, sending him good thoughts.

Some days, she would wish for him to experience good weather. Other days that he would find something he had lost, and so on. "I felt that I would better honor Susie's life and Susie's spirit by having an attitude of concern and compassion towards the man who took Susie away from me, than by wanting to have him killed in her name. That would be a violation of all the beauty and goodness and sweetness that was in her."

Conversely, her husband, Bill, let his anger and hatred destroy his health, and ultimately his life, dying of a heart attack at 56. "If you remain vindictive, you give the offender another victim. Anger, hatred and resentment would have taken my life as surely as Susie's life was taken," reflects Marietta.

Forgive others as quickly as you expect God to forgive you.

- Unknown

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ASKING FOR "AMENDS"

As discussed above, offering to make amends when you've done something wrong is a key step in earning that person's forgiveness. But what

about the other way around, when you're the one who wants to forgive? Can you ask for amends?

Yes! Sometimes people don't realize they can fix the problem! For example, I used to travel a lot, and one time something happened with the airline that was 100% their fault (not the weather or something out of their control, but something egregious they should've *never* done), which caused serious problems for me and my schedule. I was furious!

I could've gone online and ranted, but this was (thankfully) before the internet. And how healthy would that be? Would I be able to change anything? Probably not!

So, what did I do? I wrote the airline a "strongly worded letter" (not too angry or it would've backfired!) and suggested they should give me 10,000 frequent flyer miles for my trouble. You know what? They did! You know what else? I not only forgave them, they earned my loyalty from that day forward!

Can this work with personal relationships? Maybe, maybe not. It takes two, as they say. But you won't know if you don't ask! You can say, "I'm really angry, but I've figured out a way for you to make it up to me. If you (fill in the blank), I'll let it go. And then, if they do it, keep your word! Have some ideas for amends that fit the "crime?" Let us know on our Reasons Why website! (Something really good the internet is for!)

GETTING HIM/HER TO SEE YOUR POV

If someone comes to you and he is angry/upset/hurt, defending yourself is usually ineffective (and potentially destructive).

But if someone hurt you and you want to (gently) get her to see what she did through your eyes, here's a suggestion:

I had a relationship that was decidedly one-sided, where I gave and gave and the friend not only didn't reciprocate, it was often rudely dismissive of my needs and wants. (Note: (this happened to be a friendship, but could apply as equally to a work or romantic relationship) I finally confessed, but started with a "what-if" question. "If you told me you (did something wonderful, needed help, etc.), how do you think I would've responded?" She answered as I suspected: she knew I'd do whatever I could to help and be supportive.

Then...I set the stage so I could shift the discussion to find out: why isn't she doing the same for me? I give her immense credit for trying to heal the relationship, but she started by defending herself. "You didn't ask," and "I

have my own issues.” I finally said to her, “I’m reaching out to you and telling you because I care. And want to talk about it. But before we do, I want you to think carefully on the question, How do you think your (doing whatever it was) made me feel? When you come back, the closer you get to understanding how I felt, the more likely we’ll be able to heal our relationship.”

So, if you can, see if you can get the other person to see things from your point of view. It’s worth a try!

LEARN TO DETACH

One of my favorite teachers/philosophers/spiritual leaders is Anthony de Mello. (As you’ll notice, I’m referring to him several times in this chapter). Reading his books (several times!) provided a profound breakthrough in my life, and the recurring theme throughout all his teachings related to attachment.

I agree with de Mello that it’s our attachments that produce unhappiness. It can be attachment to a person, concept or belief. And, yes, we can have an “attachment” to our own anger. Yet, as de Mello asserts, “An attachment destroys your capacity to love.”

Reflecting on the story above about Marietta Jaeger, then, what if we give up our attachment to our anger and, instead, seek out a more loving solution?

Anthony de Mello offered the following advice:

The happier the other person is, the more you can detach from him, the happier you can be. The key is that the other person has to be really happy, sincerely happy, happy that comes from learning and growth, deeply changed happy – then you can detach.

The truth is, the happier and more enlightened the other person becomes, the more it will improve their chances of realizing what she did was wrong. And, of course, it reduces the chance she’ll ever do it again!

Life becomes easier when you learn to accept an apology you never got.
- Robert Brault

AND, IF APPLICABLE, ACCEPT HIS/HER APOLOGY

When an apology is given, when you're lucky enough to hear those words, accept them graciously. Hopefully, the other person will want to follow

the Four Steps. But even if not, be the better person - STAY the better person and say, "Thank you."

SHOULD YOU TAKE ACTION?

I think the first step is to understand that forgiveness does not exonerate the perpetrator. Forgiveness liberates the victim. It's a gift you give yourself.

- T. D. Jakes

As the above quote implies, just because you forgive, it does NOT mean that you have to continue the relationship. Nor does it mean you should "exonerate the perpetrator," sit back and do nothing, not have a role in the "punishment," or become passive in what happens next. Remember the quote by Edmund Burke: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Besides, it's possible you have an unwritten "spiritual" contract with that person to be the one who helps him or her learn! If you do nothing, then you: (a) cannot claim any honor that this kind of assistance brings, and (b) might not be able to truly – and lastingly – forgive. Especially when you sense that you could've prevented someone else from the same kind of pain you went through. Just make sure your energy is coming from as high a level as possible (your Higher Self), and not out of anger and the need to "get even," or you'll just bring on more of your own karma!

OTHER VARIABLES TO CONSIDER

Finally, it might help to consider the following variables:

- Most issues have two sides. Do you understand both?
- There can be a range of responsibility. As suggested above, it's rare for someone to be 100% wrong. Usually, both parties have some level of responsibility in what happened.
- The angrier you get, and the less forgiving you are, the more "in the wrong" you appear. Have you ever seen this happen? I remember seeing this on a reality TV show. (I don't watch them much, but sometimes there is wisdom, as Edie Brickell would say, "on a cereal box.) Anyway, the man was rude and insensitive (and, frankly, a few fries short of a happy meal, if you get my drift). The woman was angry about it, and wanted to stand up for herself and express her displeasure. Nothing wrong with that. But at one point, she got so angry it ended up making *her* look bad!
- Find out: what's going on in that person's life? Does he or she have problems or issues outside of the one at hand? This can be really helpful in

being able to forgive someone, when you find out her daughter's got a serious illness or he just lost his job!

- Could you remind him of someone else, and his actions against you were just reflections that had nothing to do with you at all? It's easier to forgive someone for ignoring your calls when you find out her parent is dying.
- Is the problem ongoing? The answer to this question can have a significant impact on forgiveness. If it's the first offense, forgiveness is usually easier. Maybe the person didn't know you'd take offense. But if it's ongoing, it can build up over time, making the anger accumulate. However, consider this: if you let the offense go the first or second time, weren't you, in some way, condoning (or at least tolerating) the behavior? Was this fair? (Note: in my second DUEY stories novel, my characters discuss the "Predictable Surprises" that can occur in relationships. This includes the way that people are more "forgiving" (translation: more likely to ignore) problems in the beginning of a relationship. But over time, they build up and suddenly leaving a towel on the floor becomes a major offense!
- Is the problem a result of something that might've happened before? Could your anger or resentment be about something else entirely? For example, a wife may get angry with a husband for leaving dishes in the sink, but the thing she's really upset about is how he doesn't listen.
- Is it not really about you at all? The person may be lashing out to you because they remind you of someone. Or because you're the safer (or closer) target.
- Going forward, consider your commitments carefully. This can be easier said than done. I have a staunch policy not to ever make a commitment unless I know I can keep it. I'm not saying that I'm perfect (far from it!), and I sometimes forget/make mistakes, etc. But I do make sure I never tell someone I'm committed when I'm not. It's not so easy! A lot of people will do whatever they can to force you to behave in a certain way, and it can be very tempting to appease them. Very tempting! But the truth is, to placate someone with a half-hearted vow or guarantee is (sorry to be so blunt) not that far from a lie. Talk about bad karma! And practically guaranteeing another "bad thing" in the future! (By the way, this goes both ways. Don't try to coerce someone to promise you something!)
- And try to make sure you manage the other person's expectations! By saying, "I'll take out the trash this week," instead of "right now," you're giving yourself - and the other person - a very precious gift! Sure, it might stink up the house for an extra day, but at least it gives you something to negotiate.
- On that note, please be patient with me in getting out the Reasons Why workbook! I'm going to do my best to get it out as soon as I can, I promise! (I just have a long, long to-do list these days!)