



Letting go of resentment

Resentment can be a bitter feeling, steeping you in darkness, tension and pain. But there is a soothing elixir that can help — forgiveness. For those struggling through resentment, here is a psychology-backed guide to letting go of hard feelings.

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There's an old saying that holding on to resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

Resentment, that bitter feeling of injustice, the feeling that you have been wronged, can be a deeply painful experience. It can feel like a quiet rage smouldering slowly inside of you. It can manifest as tension, gripping your muscles and twisting your insides. And it can lock you into an obsessive feedback loop, as your mind replays the same thoughts and memories over and over, and the resentment, in turn, grows.

Put simply, holding on to resentment is exhausting. It drains emotional energy that can be better spent elsewhere. Learning to let go is a freeing gift you can give yourself, and it can benefit not just your mood and relationships, but your health and wellbeing too.

The tangled knot of resentment

"Resentment is a complex emotion," says Tamara Cavenett, a clinical psychologist and president of the Australian Psychological Society. "It's often defined as anger or indignation that you experience as a result of some sort of perceived unfair treatment by someone else. But underneath it there's often feelings of hurt or disappointment, or even fear."

It's a natural human experience and we've all felt it. Strands of resentment can come from any number of situations — some

big, some small. Some common themes are feeling overlooked or unseen, feeling betrayed, being criticised or humiliated, feeling used or taken advantage of or feeling that someone else (often less deserving than you) has something you want.

Maybe it's a colleague who has a knack for subtly putting down your work or asserting their dominance. Maybe it's your

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friend who doesn't return your texts, leaving you feeling rejected. Or maybe it's an ex who betrayed you, now flaunting their new relationship in happy, sun-kissed Instagram posts.

Whatever the cause, this knot of negative feelings can bring you a lot of suffering. "It can go quite deep, and often, you're the one experiencing this negative feeling while the other person might not even notice it's going on," Cavenett says.

Strangely, we don't even always recognise or acknowledge the experience as resentment.

Resentment and your mind and body

Research shows the effect of resentment can be immediately felt, in both your mood and body. In a 2001 study by Hope College in Michigan, psychologist Dr Charlotte Witvliet asked participants to recall an old experience of betrayal, rejection, insult or dishonesty. When they did, the participants' blood pressure and heart rate increased, leading to a surge of anxiety.

Feelings of resentment can provoke a stress response in the body. Commonly known as the "fight or flight" response, this is your body's reaction to a real or perceived threat in which it activates the sympathetic nervous system.

This sets off a number of physiological effects, including the release of cortisol (the stress hormone), an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, and the tensing up of your muscles as your body prepares to fight or flee.

While the stress response is a healthy and natural response when it's activated in the very occasional and appropriate context, too much of it is harmful. Research shows that chronic stress — such as what we experience when we hold on to hurt and bitter feelings — puts a load on the body that can lead to illness, including depression, diabetes and heart disease.

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function, increasing your risk of illness. Another study, published in *Psychology and Aging*, found that carrying anger into old age was associated with higher levels of inflammation and chronic disease.

It's clear that resentment doesn't just feel bad. Over the long term, it may also lead to poorer health.

The forgiveness cure

The good news is, there is a treatment that can help calm these stress levels and improve your health — forgiveness.

Many scientific studies have found links between forgiveness and better psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing. Forgiveness has been found to help lower blood pressure, heart rate and overall stress, as well as improving sleep and reducing fatigue.

Dr Frederic Luskin has dedicated his career to investigating the link between forgiveness and our health. He is, on all accounts, a forgiveness expert and leads Stanford University's Forgiveness Project, which conducts research around the topic of forgiveness. Dr Luskin hosts regular forgiveness workshops in which he frames forgiveness as an act of self-care that releases you from the prison of your negative feelings.

"Forgiveness is for you, and not for anyone else," he writes in *9 Steps to Forgiveness*, a manifesto written off the back of his research. "Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person that hurt you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace. Forgiveness can be defined as the peace and understanding that come from blaming that which has hurt you less, taking the life experience less personally, and changing your grievance story."

How to let go of resentment

Of course, letting go of resentful feelings can be much easier said than done. Cavenett suggests some gentle strategies for getting started.

Feel your feelings

It's important to let yourself feel the underlying emotions that are causing the resentment — whether it's hurt, anger, disappointment or fear.

"Allow the feelings to be there and acknowledge that this might be about more than just frustration at what the individual has done," Cavenett advises.

We often judge ourselves for our negative feelings, compounding

already-difficult emotions with feelings of guilt and shame. “Emotions don’t need judgement — all feelings are OK,” Cavenett says. “When we judge our feelings, we can give them more strength, and they can have more of a negative impact on our lives. Letting our emotions be there often allows them to pass more easily.”

Put yourself in their shoes

It’s not an easy path to take, but research shows extending empathy and compassion towards the person who has wronged you can help soothe your painful feelings.

If that feels like a stretch, explore the possibility that there could be another side to the story and consider what might have caused their negative behaviour.

“Look at it with more of an open mind, so that you’re not judging them, which is often where you get caught up in a loop,” Cavenett advises. “Try to think about their history, their experiences, how they might see a situation differently and why they might have acted in that way. The more understanding you can achieve, you can often let go a little bit more easily.”

Let it out

All that emotion built up inside you needs somewhere to go. Finding a healthy way to express it can help bring you some relief, and stop the repetitive loop in your mind. “For some people that’s about journaling or writing it down,” Cavenett says. “For other people it can be about doing physical activity like working out or going for a walk or run. Or it might be talking about it with someone who makes you feel good.”

Learn from what it’s teaching you

Like any strong emotion, resentment can provide insight to ourselves and what we really want. “Resentment can tell you a lot about what matters to you and what makes you vulnerable,” Cavenett says. “Ask yourself, why am I triggered by this? What does it say about me and what’s important to me? And how does that frame the rest of my life, as opposed to this one single event going through my mind?”

This curious approach can be particularly useful when you’re feeling vague resentment towards someone, without any clear reason why. In these situations, Cavenett recommends doing some thinking or journaling to uncover what’s really bothering you. “Try to figure out what it is that has triggered you — if it’s something about how they’ve treated

A few signs that resentment is lurking in your life

- **Recurring negative feelings.** You find yourself frequently consumed by feelings of anger, hurt, disappointment, frustration, bitterness or fear.
- **Obsessive thinking.** Your mind constantly replays the same painful thoughts and memories. You might have trouble sleeping, running over imaginary arguments in your head and thinking about what you wish you had said.
- **Tense relationships.** Feeling resentful of someone can naturally impact how you behave around them, leading to strained interactions. You might find yourself being passive-aggressive, sullen or snappy, and perhaps later regretting it.
- **Avoidance.** Resentful feelings might even cause you to withdraw and avoid people or situations that stir up negative feelings or past hurts. Often, avoidance actually allows resentful feelings to keep brewing, making the situation worse.
- **Victim mentality.** Past hurts might expand in your mind, causing you to feel that you are always treated this way. This can colour how you experience future situations, continuing a cycle of feeling hurt and victimised.
- **Desire for revenge.** Stewing in resentment can make you feel increasingly bitter and angry. You might fantasise about ways you can “win” or “get back” at the person.

you, or if there’s something about them as a person. Look for links to anyone else you’ve felt resentment towards in the past. If you can find patterns of resentment, you can often make greater sense of it.”

Challenge distorted thinking

Our minds are strange, miraculous machines — but, brilliant as they are, they often get things confused. “We often teach people that the brain can have distorted thinking patterns that they use quite regularly,” Cavenett says. “Everyone’s brain does it, and it can cause a lot of negative feelings.”

A few common thought distortions that might come up when you’re feeling resentful include the following.

- **Black and white thinking:** You might start to believe that someone “always” treats you a certain way, or that you “never” get a fair go. These absolutes can lock you into a victim mentality.
- **Catastrophising:** Strong emotions often trick us into believing things are much bigger and more catastrophic than they might really be.
- **“Shoulds”:** We often believe people “should” or “shouldn’t” do particular things, when the reality is, we don’t have that sort of authority. Reframing the thought as “I would prefer” can be helpful.
- **Mind-reading:** When you feel resentful, it can often be that you’ve made an assumption about what someone is thinking or intending, which may not be accurate.

The first step to challenging these types of thoughts is to consider how true

they are. “That doesn’t necessarily mean that everything you’re thinking is wrong, just that perhaps some of those thoughts could be a bit more realistic,” Cavenett says. “Strong emotions may have altered how you view things, so consider if there’s a more balanced way to look at it.”

A psychologist can give you more guidance on working through these distorted thinking styles. This is a key part of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a common and effective therapy for depression and anxiety. There are also many popular books on CBT, such as *Change Your Thinking* by Sarah Edelman or *Feeling Good* by David Burns, that can help you get started on your own.

Practise self-care and self-compassion

When you notice a resentment loop starting, try to mindfully come back to the present moment. The goal is to stop those repetitive loops in your mind and do something that makes you feel good instead.

“There is some good research around empathy and self-compassion, and particularly using meditation and mindfulness,” Cavenett says. “Any relaxation technique that you find useful for self-care or self-calming — or even just something that distracts you — can help ease those negative feelings.”

Ultimately, letting go of resentment is about freeing yourself so you can enjoy your life more fully. “Resentment can be quite a toxic feeling, especially when it gets to that level of bitterness and hostility and hard feelings,” says Cavenett. “Anything you can do to ease it can allow you to be healthier and happier and move forward in your life.” 🧡

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