

Why Are We So Hard On Ourselves?

We come to terms with our painful past by extending forgiveness to ourselves

By [Mark Coleman](#)

Mark Coleman is a Northern California-based meditation teacher, author, and founder of the Mindfulness Institute. Since he began teaching nearly two decades ago, he has led meditation retreats across five continents. The following is an excerpt from his newest book, [Make Peace With Your Mind: How Mindfulness and Compassion Can Free You from Your Inner Critic](#), which teaches how to use meditation practice to soothe our negative inner voices.

When I ask a room full of students, “Who hasn’t caused someone harm through their words and actions?” not a single hand is ever raised. We have all done things we regret. I similarly ask if there is anyone who has not caused harm in some way through their sexuality. Again, rarely does a hand go up. It is the same when I ask if there is anyone who doesn’t regret acting or saying something foolish in a moment of passion and reactivity.

Making mistakes, having poor judgment, and doing things we know we shouldn’t in the heat of the moment are a natural part of the human condition. Why then are we so hard on ourselves? How do we account for all the self-blame? We can trace this pathology of self-recrimination to the critic and to an idealised and impossible standard of human behaviour.

One of the things I’ve most appreciated about my years of meditation practice is having made peace with my humanness. It’s not that I don’t aspire to grow and develop and work on myself. But I’m no longer holding myself to some impossible ideal. The less I expect myself to be perfect and never mess up, the more likely I am to make headway toward forgiving myself. I am more able to release the heavy guilty burden I’ve been carrying for painful things I’ve done in the past, for the things I regret.

Sometimes I look back and am embarrassed at what I used to say, the views I espoused, and the self-centred hubris of youth. But that too is part of living, of growing up, the inevitable growing pains of being human.

When I first discovered meditation, I was like a “born-again meditator,” and I would enthusiastically try to convince all my friends and family that they should meditate. I was, in my youthful arrogance, eager to point out all the ways they were not enlightened and what they should do about it. Now my family teases me about that.

One particular realisation I owe to my meditation training is an understanding that there is no time but now. The future is an illusion, the past is now a dream, and the only reality we have access to *is* the present. In that light, self-forgiveness is the willingness to stop trying to fix our past or make it better. It is giving up all hope of improving that which has already happened. What is done is done.

If this is true, then why do we try so hard to fix the past? It is because we can't bear to live with the painful fact that we did and said all those things that we regret and wish we could take back. We do it as a way to try and stop the pain that still lingers in the present from past events. The mind has a deep-seated resistance to feeling pain, even if it happened a long time ago. That is why we spend so much time in our head, thinking, replaying, rehashing, arguing, rather than acknowledging the tender, vulnerable part of ourselves and letting in the sadness and loss that accompanied the pain when it occurred.

I went to school in a rough part of town. There were constant physical fights, and harsh bullying was rife. Like so much human pain, it got passed down the chain, from the older kids to the younger kids. I was on the receiving end of a lot of painful bullying and psychological taunting. However, I also learned to dole it out. I would pass on the psychological ridicule I had received to others, when there was no risk of being physically threatened while doing so.

I used to look back with horror and shame on the ways that I teased and taunted a classmate. How could I, who knew how painful it was to be ridiculed in public, serve out the same? Given the space of time and some wise reflection, I can now see I was just a cog in the wheel, just passing on what I had learned, trying to survive in my own way and to keep the bullying attention away from myself. Find a scapegoat and stay safe was the motto. Of course, that does not in any way justify it or make it right. I

still wonder to this day about the impact that my words and actions had on my poor classmate, and I still feel sad that I chose to act that way.

And it is self-forgiveness that allows me to understand the conditions of that period of my life and feel the pain of all involved; at the same time it allows me to release the judgment and shame. Even though I was the one being cruel, deep in my heart I also knew that it was mean and was fueled by my own pain and fear. It was what it was. It happened due to a painful set of causes and conditions, and I can feel tender toward myself, the classmate, and all the ways such actions continue today out of blindness, fear, and hatred.

In what ways do you judge yourself for your past errors? In what areas of life are you trying to make your past into a better one? In what ways are you unable to accept who and what you were? This is not about denying what happened or making it all better. It is about turning the light directly on the areas of painful regret and extending a loving hand to them.

Anytime we have an unusually large amount of space and time on our hands, our mind will ruminate on the paths of yore. This is partly the brain rehashing past experience in an attempt to learn for the future. In such times things from the dim and distant past that are still not resolved will surface in our hearts. This is especially true for those who have had brushes with death, are very sick, or are facing terminal illness. Given that we are social creatures, at these times our hearts may do a life review, with a particular focus on how we have acted in relation to others. This may certainly be about our romantic history, but it also includes our relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours.

I noticed this tendency in my father as he got older. He would occasionally ask about how he was as a father when I was young. In particular, he would inquire as to whether he was around enough or was gone too much. He served in the British Royal Navy, so he was absent for long stretches of time when I was an infant. I could tell it weighed heavily on his heart. There was nothing he could do about it now, yet something in his heart needed comforting and reassuring. And as much as I could offer assurance, it has to, as always, ultimately come from forgiving ourselves.

Any consideration of our relationships will inevitably reveal both joys and challenges. And, of course, it is easy fodder for the critic, who will pick on

all the ways we have let people down, spoken falsely, hurt our loved ones, or just not shown up as a friend in ways we might have wished. These are often tender and painful memories to harbour. It is important that we hold these memories with compassion and kindness, not recrimination. It is all too easy for the judge with 20/20 hindsight to see all the ways we could have done better. It's important to remember we always do the best we can with the information, skills, and resources we have available at the time.

So, as part of healing the heart and the past that keeps cascading into the present, we practice extending forgiveness to ourselves for our past choices and actions. We aim to fully accept what happened, take responsibility for it, and form a strong intention to learn from our past and live more wisely, with more care and compassion. We also extend forgiveness to ourselves in the present and for the future, knowing that, being human, we will make other choices that we may live to regret. We aspire to hold true to our intention to act with as much integrity and kindness as we can muster, but we forgive ourselves when we inevitably mess up.

In this way your practice of forgiveness becomes a positive mental habit that allows you to release judgment, regret, and the torment of shame from the past and present. And that opens the capacity for the loving heart to grow in all directions.

Practice: Fostering Self-Forgiveness

Turning toward our mistakes with forgiveness rather than judgment or blame contributes significantly toward feeling peace in our heart. It is like bringing a soothing balm to painful parts of ourselves that we have long rejected. When we can access this attitude of forgiveness in times of distress and angst about something we have said or done, it can allow us to release that experience and be at greater ease.

This meditation will aid you in developing a sense of self-forgiveness.

1. Find a place where you can be undisturbed for at least 10 minutes. Sitting in a chair where you can be upright yet relaxed, assume a comfortable posture.
2. Gently close your eyes and feel your breath in your heart centre (the centre of your chest).

3. Call to mind one particular way that you have harmed others through your words or actions. It may be mental, emotional, or relational pain that was caused.
4. Take a few moments to feel into the experience and suffering of those involved in these memories. Can you be with their pain and angst with a kind attention?
5. Hold that pain with caring attention, and offer these words slowly and meaningfully to yourself: *No matter what I have done, knowingly or unknowingly, that has caused pain and suffering to others, by my thoughts, words, or actions, by what I have said or not said, by what I have done or not done, or by what I have thought, I offer myself forgiveness as much as is possible in this moment.* Repeat these phrases a few times while remembering what happened. Try to stay connected to your heart and allow all your feelings to be present. If the critic arises and reminds you how bad you are and why you should feel shame, shift your attention away from the judgment. Thank it for its opinion, then shift your attention back to the meditation and the phrases of forgiveness.
6. Now call to mind one particular way that you have harmed yourself. It may be physical or emotional harm, caused by self-neglect or by the way you punish yourself, mistreat your body, or disparage yourself in public.
7. Hold the pain of that incident with caring attention, and offer these phrases slowly and meaningfully to yourself: *No matter what I have done, knowingly or unknowingly, that has caused pain and suffering to myself, by my thoughts, words, or actions, by what I have said or not said, by what I have done or not done, or by what I have thought, I offer forgiveness to myself as much as is possible in this moment.* Stay present to whatever feelings, reactions, or pain comes up. Try to bring as much loving presence to yourself, to the feelings, and to the pain as possible. Say these phrases several times, slowly and genuinely, so you can let in whatever feelings may be present.
8. When you feel ready to end this meditation, slowly open your eyes, and gently move and stretch.

Know that when it comes to forgiving yourself, you may not, at first, feel much mercy at all. The key phrase in this practice is “as much as is possible in this moment.” We do the best we can to begin the slow, patient path of forgiveness. Learning to forgive takes time, sometimes years. So

be patient as you weave a little forgiveness into your daily routine as a way of strengthening your capacity to forgive.

It is also important to remember that we do not do this forgiveness exercise to gloss over any harmful wrongdoing, past or present. We practice forgiveness while also taking full responsibility for what we did. And then we aspire to not repeat such behavior in the future.

Once you learn to do this in formal meditation, you can bring the phrases of forgiveness to mind wherever you are.



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