

## Can All Hurts in Marriage Be Forgiven?

In marriage we find that our spouses have the ability to hurt us in a way that very few others can. How we understand these particular hurts and the process of working through them is the key to getting to forgiveness. Can all hurts be forgiven in marriage? The answer is “yes” but it requires a process that takes work, understanding and patience. The insight and understanding gained when working on repairing a deep hurt often bring couples closer together and more intimately connected than ever before.

In my psychotherapy practice, couples often will come into my office, sit down and describe hurts they experienced by their partner. Their descriptions are vivid, are told with a lot of emotion and sound very much alive. Through the course of exploration I learn that many of these hurts often have occurred 5, 10, 15 or more, years ago. The question begs asking: If every year on Yom Kippur we are taught to ask for forgiveness and grant forgiveness, what are these hurts that just don't go away?

The hurts that stay with us are generally those that threaten our sense of secure attachment to our partner. We are hardwired to want to be in connection with another. The foundation for positive attachment comes from feeling secure that our partner accepts us and is there for us when we need him or her. Our sense of calm and well-being comes from this secure attachment. When the message we receive from our partner is that we are not important to him or her and our needs do not matter, we experience an “attachment injury.” These are typically the types of hurts that are hard to work through and forgive because they create a sense of insecurity in the relationship.

There are times when we feel more vulnerable and attachment needs are higher than usual, such as the birth or miscarriage of a child, death of a parent, sudden loss of a job and/or the diagnosis or treatment of a serious illness. These are the times when couples can easily miss each other in terms of seeing the others' needs and subsequently, attachment injuries are created. When our partner is not emotionally or physically there for us when we need him or her to be, it hurts.

Ignoring or burying relationship injuries does not work; unresolved traumas do not heal by themselves. Rather, the opposite is true. Hurt feelings generally lead us to protect ourselves, often by creating emotional distance that in turn can potentially create more conflict in our relationship. Our survival instincts scream out not to leave ourselves unprotected by trusting and risking emotional engagement.

So, can all hurts be forgiven? The answer is potentially “yes.” But it's a process. It's a process not dissimilar to the Rambam's four steps for tshuva, *Hakarat hachet*, *Vidui*, *Charata al haavar* and *Kabbalah laatid*. These steps can be applied to healing attachment injuries in relationships as follows:

*Hakarat hachet* is associated with awareness of why my partner is hurt. I need to take my partner's hurt seriously. Why is my partner so angry? Rather than dismiss my partner as being irrational or “making a mountain out of a molehill” (two approaches that generally do not lead to forgiveness), I need to hang in there even if I'm sure to be feeling uncomfortable and defensive. I need to ask questions until the meaning of the incident becomes clear. “What is the nature of the attachment injury for my partner?” is a question I will keep in the forefront of my mind. The insight I carry is that I must

have done something to make my partner feel he or she was not important to me or that I was not there for him or her.

Once we are aware of our partner's hurt we can articulate our understanding in the context of attachment. "I understand that I let you down by doing ... and that you thought I didn't care about you." This step correlates with the *Vidui* process, articulating an understanding of the hurt we caused.

*Charata al haavar*, or empathy/remorse, is when we take ownership of how we inflicted this injury on our partner and express regret and remorse, not with a "Look, OK, I'm sorry," – that sounds impersonal or defensive. Rather, we show our partner that his or her pain has an impact on us. Saying things like "I pulled away and in doing so let you down," "I didn't see your pain and how you needed me," "I didn't know what to do," goes a long way in helping our partner believe that we are really sorry. Caring and feeling our partner's pain, verbalizing that his or her hurt and anger are legitimate, owning up to what we did that was so hurtful, and feeling dismayed by our behavior are the ways we express *Charata*.

*Kabbalah laatid* reflects a commitment to be more sensitive and aware in the future. Providing reassurance at this juncture is very important. When we construct a new story that explains how the injuring event came to be and are aware of how our actions eroded trust and connection and sent us into a cycle of hurt and distancing, when we make a commitment to avoid repeating the hurtful actions or words in the future, then our partner can begin to trust again and healing occurs. Sometimes safeguards are required to be implemented in order to remove temptation and enhance our partner's sense of security.

Let's take the opportunity this year to turn to our partners and check in with them by asking "Are there any hurts that you are carrying from previous years, something I may have done that you are finding hard to forgive?" And if so apply the following steps:

- Gain awareness of the hurt created by asking questions and looking through the lens of attachment.
- Articulate awareness of the hurt within the framework of attachment.
- Empathize and feel remorse.
- Express commitment and reassurance that with sensitivity, awareness and possible safeguards, the hurtful event will not happen again.

Sue Johnson writes in her book *Hold Me Tight* "Understanding attachment injuries and knowing that you can find and offer forgiveness if you need to, gives you incredible power to create a resilient, lasting bond. There is no injury-proof relationship. But you can dance together with more verve and panache if you know you can recover when you step on each other's toes."

Let's make it that the old hurts don't follow us into the New Year.

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