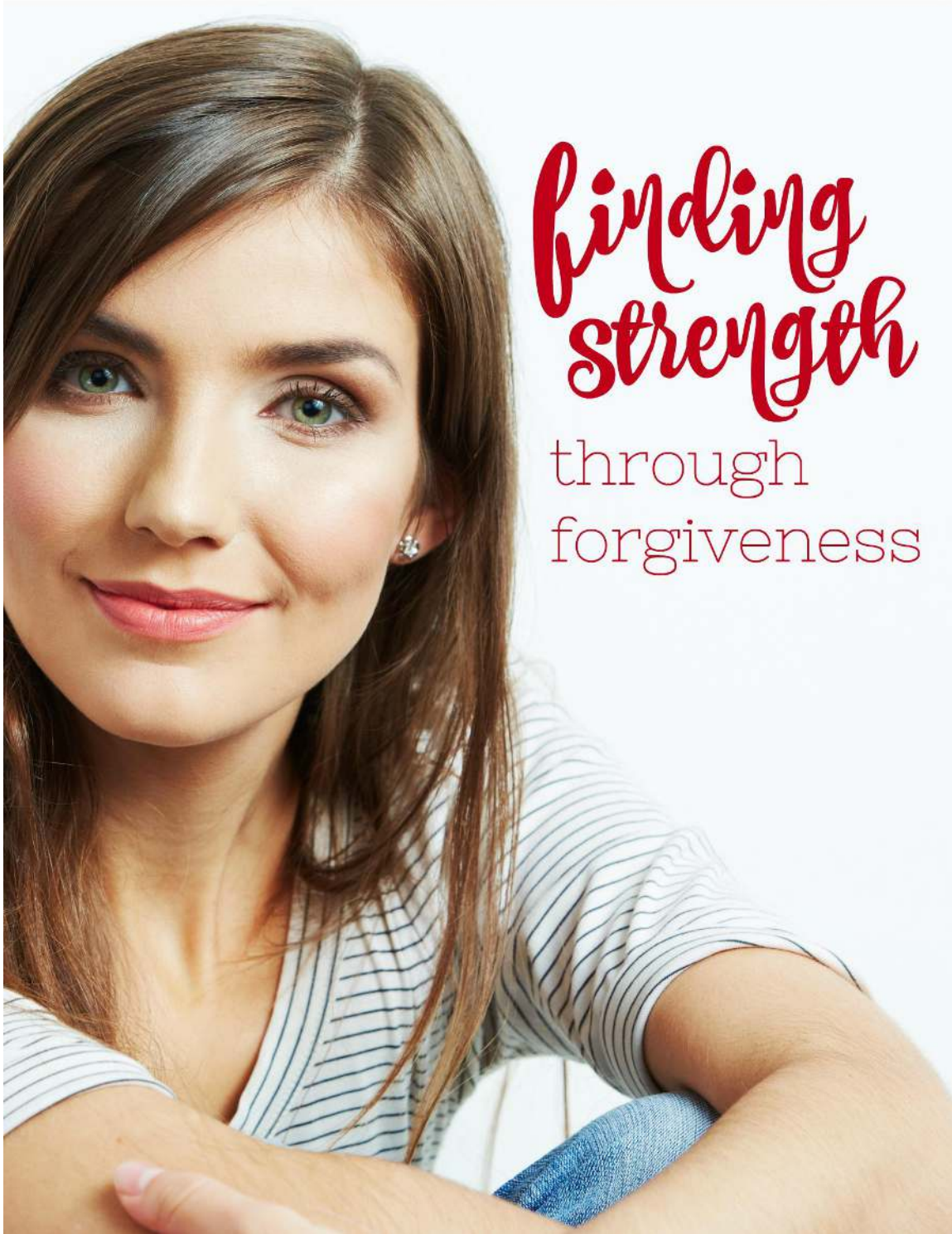


CHRISTY JOHNSON | author of Love Junkies



# finding strength

through  
forgiveness

# **Finding Strength Through Forgiveness**

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## **The Lies About Relationships**

Relationships are supposed to be a great source of comfort. Instead they are often our greatest conflict or source of pain. How can you heal from the pain when love hurts? How can you get away from the revolving door of disappointment and develop fulfilling, lasting relationships?

Through the next pages, I hope to show you that there is hope beyond the misery. That no matter how men have betrayed or hurt you, that despite the pain and drama that you've endured, you CAN find freedom, peace and personal power through forgiveness.

I've learned these things the hard way, but you don't have to. I was stubborn when it came to forgiveness. Why? Because I had believed so many lies about what forgiveness meant. And because I kept a record of wrongs and recited and memorized the details of every offense, bitterness consumed me and prevented the very thing I wanted—peace and freedom.

None of us can walk in freedom until we uncover the lies that so many of us have believed about relationships. Lies like:

- ♥ Romance is instant. #blameitonthebachelor
- ♥ Relationships are built overnight.
- ♥ A good relationships shouldn't take work.
- ♥ If he loves you, he'll never hurt you.

The truth is that even in the best of relationships, offenses will come. Hurts will be magnified. How you respond to hurts determines how much power you have. Holding onto offenses and keeping record of wrongs puts you in the victim's seat. Victims don't have power. Victims don't have peace.

Relationships take work! The only way to protect yourself and guard your heart is to overlook offenses. Forgiveness gives you power and freedom. Bitterness holds you in bondage.

## **My Story**

As a teenager and young woman, my own brokenness drew me to toxic relationships. I didn't think I deserved what I really wanted so I settled. It was a self-fulfilling prophesy. Then when love disappointed me, brick by brick, I built towers of hurt, one concrete offense at a time. I felt justified by creating monuments out of misdemeanors.

I was strong. I was resolved. I didn't realize I was only hurting myself.

When love hurt too much, I bailed that relationship and found another. It was a miserable merry-go-round.

If you take the bricks of your past relationship into the next, you'll build the same house. But I didn't know that. I was addicted to love. The euphoria of a new romance smothered the bitterness.

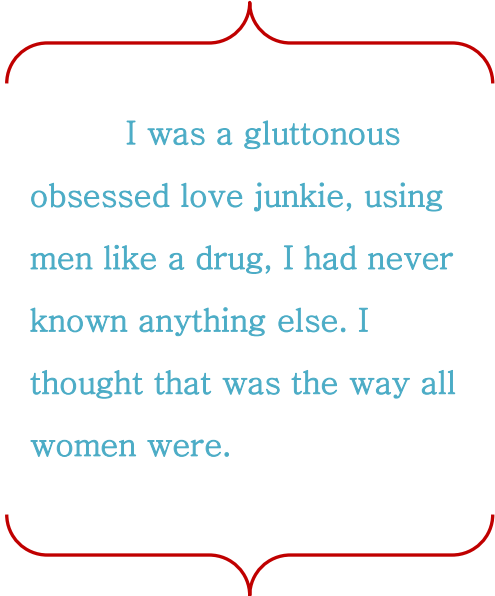
But the effects were only temporary.

My addiction to relationships started long before I got married. In high school, I spent every Friday night glued to the television. Truly, everything I learned about romance I learned from *The Love Boat*. By the time I figured out that real devotion comes from a friendship, not a cruise ship, it was too late—I was already hooked. Turns out I got old too soon and smart too late.

By the time my first husband and I were engaged, I had made him responsible for my emotional welfare. Bob’s actions dictated whether or not I was happy, sad, depressed or angry. His behavior monitored my peace. I gave him my heart and threw away the key. At the time, this twisted dependency seemed romantic.

Then we got married.

It didn’t take long for the new to wear off. His broken promises, deceit and manipulation had me in a constant state of confusion. We argued non-stop and then he returned to some of his addictions—drugs and pornography. That’s when the real insanity began. Eventually Bob and I both went to marriage counseling together, but I was only there for one reason: To change him. As far as I was

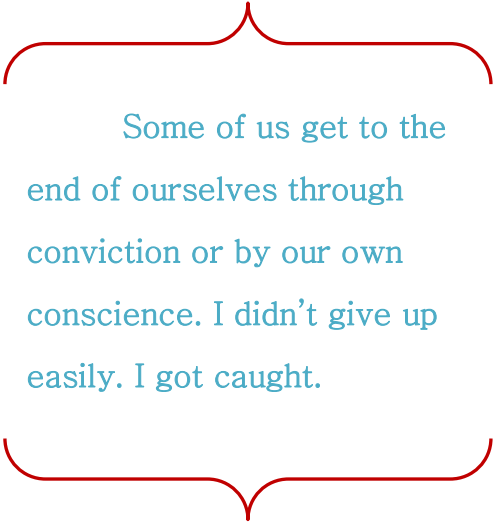


I was a gluttonous obsessed love junkie, using men like a drug, I had never known anything else. I thought that was the way all women were.

concerned, I wasn't the one with the issues. I was the good one. I was oblivious, however, to my own invisible prison of bitterness. Under constant stress, I suffered from frequent migraine headaches and irritable bowel syndrome. I thought my happiness was tied to my husband—if only he would change, I could be happy.

Without an outlet for my resentment, bitterness finally got the best of me. Some women turn to food or alcohol, but I had a different addiction—relationships. Just like food and water, we all need relationships, but some of us take good things to an extreme. One doughnut isn't enough. We have to have the entire dozen. I was like that with romance. I used the intoxication of a new relationship to occupy the vacancy in my heart. I was a gluttonous obsessed love junkie, using men like a drug. I had never known anything else. I thought that was the way all women were.

Relationships are a socially acceptable addiction. If you aren't married, it's easy to conceal the fact that you *have* to have a relationship to be content. When you are married, however, what once concealed your pain is no longer acceptable. Even though I knew adultery was wrong, once I made my first slip, I was hooked. I had no idea the romantic intoxication would be



Some of us get to the end of ourselves through conviction or by our own conscience. I didn't give up easily. I got caught.

so temporary, but nothing else took away the pain, disappointment and bitterness I felt. I *had* to have another fix. After years of futile attempts to change my husband, I officially gave up. Instead of the happily-ever-after I'd dreamed of, I settled for pain relief in the arms of another man. At first, the guilt was enormous, but a little justification worked wonders. *He deserved it. If he had treated me better, none of this would have happened.*

I never thought I'd be caught. Apparently divine powers were more interested in my character than my contentment. The day my husband discovered my affairs was one of the worst days of my life. The concrete castle crumbled. I had nowhere else to run but to God.

### **The Only Way Out is Up**

*When you hit bottom, the only way out is up.*

I loved Tyler Perry's movie, *The Diary of a Man Black Woman*, but I could have written my own movie entitled, *The Diary of a Mad White Chick*. Little did I know that God was using the adversity in my marriage—the broken promises, the drug addiction and the manipulation, to teach me how to forgive. I had never really



learned how to forgive. Instead, I bottled my hurt inside my soul. When I could no longer contain the pain, I exploded. That wasn't forgiveness. That was poisonous.

Sometimes it takes getting to the end of our rope before we accept the truth. That was how it was for me. Through a lot of tears, prayer and surrender, I finally resolved to let go of the bitterness that poisoned my soul and allowed God to help me learn a different way to deal with my pain. I'd like to say that my recovery was instant, but that wasn't the case. The only way to learn forgiveness is to suffer hurts, insults and offenses. Apparently, I needed a lot of training.

I'd also like to say that my marriage was instantly restored, but that wasn't the case either. What I can say is I got better gradually. Little by little, step by step, issue by issue. Throughout the next several months, I learned many life changing truths, but most importantly, I finally accepted responsibility to change myself. I had tried for years to change my husband, thinking that he was the problem. All the while, I ignored the fact that if I wanted to be happy, I had to determine to be happy.

I spent the next several years of my marriage hoping and praying that my husband would experience recovery as well. God had done so much to restore my life, so I prayed that my husband would surrender his life to God too. I wanted our marriage to be restored. Instead, Bob spiraled further into his drug addiction.

Twice we were separated for over a year, but during this time I learned how to develop the fruit of longsuffering. Some versions of the Bible call longsuffering patience. Patience sounds a lot prettier than longsuffering. Honestly, I've never heard anyone pray for longsuffering, because the only way to get long suffering is to suffer long.

My husband promised changes that only seemed to be temporary manipulation tactics to get what he wanted. But despite his manipulation and verbal abuse, I was healing. God showed me how to walk in joy despite the conflict around me. Insults didn't pierce me the way they used to. Threats no longer threatened me. My confidence had shifted. My self esteem no longer depended on the approval of others because I finally believed Christ loved me just the way I was. I no longer needed a man to provide my identity or a new romance to escape the pain. Like the apostle Paul, God was teaching me a secret—the secret of being content.

By the time Bob and I divorced eight years later, I was not the same person. A surrendered life and years of adversity had transformed me into a new creation. I liked the new me. Although there were several invitations to go back, I didn't want to return to my prison of bitterness. Misery loves company, and bitterness was still familiar. The pull back to the wilderness where I spent so much of my life was like

a magnetic field. That's why so many people go back to addictions after a measure of recovery. It's work to stay free. We have to change bad habits, make wise choices, and hang around wisdom. Recovery is not always easy, but it's always worth it.

Two years after our divorce, Bob had our two boys, Garrett and Jake, for his weekend visitation. By this time, he had a decent job and I thought he was rebuilding his life. I had no idea he had returned to his addiction again. On Saturday morning, June 13, 1998, he made plans to go to his brother's house to take the boys fishing with his brother and nephew Cody. It was Cody's thirteenth birthday, but Bob never made it to their house. Driving under the influence of Methadone, Demerol, Xanax, Valium, and Benadryl, Bob hit another car head on at 10:00 in the morning. Our youngest son Jake died at the scene. Garrett spent five days in Children's Hospital with a fractured jaw.

There are no words to describe the agony of losing a child. I had every right to be angry. I had every right to fall back into despair.

I once heard someone say that when we don't want to forgive, we can pray for willingness. Sometimes, even asking for willingness can be difficult, but God will deliver it. Once we are willing and choose to forgive, an amazing thing

happens. The grace to walk in forgiveness comes. It did for me. There is no way I was strong enough to forgive on my own, but I didn't want to go back to my former life. If I learned one thing from my years of taming my sin of bitterness, I knew unforgiveness was a deadly disease that would take me straight back to bondage. If I allowed bitterness to contaminate my soul once again, I knew I would die in my misery. Oh, it wouldn't have been an immediate death. The leprosy of bitterness is more deceptive than that. At first, I may have not even noticed it because it was so familiar. Mine would have been a slow death with the grasp of bitterness growing tighter with each passing day.

For years, I had clung to Isaiah 43:18-19.

*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.*

These scriptures again became my lifeline. I couldn't afford to look back. I had walked daily trusting God with hurts, insults, false accusations and disappointments. And now, my only hope was to trust Him again. Nothing was going to bring Jake back. Resentment would only bury me in anger again. I had no choice but to forgive my ex-husband.

As I chose to forgive, an incredible thing happened. God began to fill me with joy in the midst of my pain. I had never felt such a powerful force of joy in my life, and it made no sense that I could experience joy in the midst of such tragedy. Yet somehow, I was keenly aware that the joy was more than I was capable of containing. The joy was to be shared; the only way I could keep it was to give it away. My destiny changed the day Jake died. The purpose for his life was transfused into mine.

In the movie, *The Guardian*, Randall, the only survivor of a deadly mission, was advised of an opening for an instructor. The last thing that he wanted to do was teach. But his superior sternly advised him, “I need you to train the next generation.” Struggling with the loss of his crewmembers, he threw himself into his newest assignment. The birth of Randall’s purpose originated out of a great tragedy. His motto ultimately became, “So Others May Live.” The byline of the movie asserts that “your darkest hour can be your finest moment.”

Along similar lines, my hope is sustained by memorializing Jake’s life. For me, it’s not optional. It’s necessary to maintain my joy. Proverbs 10:7 says, “The memory of the righteous shall be a blessing.” Since the accident, I determined to carry the celebration of his life beyond the funeral. I may have buried my son, but I

did not bury his future or his purpose. His future and purpose did not die with his physical death because the kingdom of God does not operate with the same principles as the world.

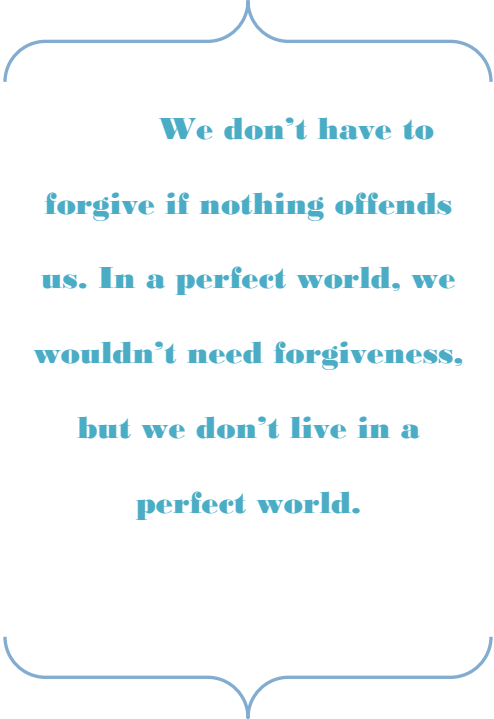
Death does not equate to finality. Eternity embraces our past, present, *and* future. Jake left a legacy of hope and joy in the midst of the storm. It is now my purpose to train other women to acquire the vision to see beyond life's difficulties. That is my mandate from heaven. Whether I initially wanted that assignment or not, my "Superior" advised me that he needed me to train the next generation. That is the purpose I was created for, the mission that keeps me awake at night, and the calling I was born to complete.

### **Boomerang Issues**

When circumstances and issues continue to rob our joy, often the very reason they don't subside is because God is trying to do a work in us. Our first clue that God is more concerned about our soul is when our issues are stuck on repeat. We pray and pray for the circumstance or the person to be removed and it keeps coming back like a boomerang.

It took me awhile, but I finally figured out that when this happens to me, it's time to wave the white flag and surrender and tell God, "Okay, I give. If the other issue or person won't change, please change me!" And he does. The heat increases for a while and it hurts when the useless waste is sifted off, but in the end, I become a little purer. More of him and less of me. Lee Ezell says it best: "When you don't forgive you permit your enemies to live rent free in your head."

God's is more interested in our purpose than our pain and before we can accomplish the purpose he's created us for, he has to remove the excess flesh. Does it hurt? Undeniably! Do we let go easily? No way, but when we allow him to perform a little heart surgery, the results are worth it.



**We don't have to forgive if nothing offends us. In a perfect world, we wouldn't need forgiveness, but we don't live in a perfect world.**

Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean forgiveness is easy. It always takes the grace of God to forgive. Jonah was a prophet, but he was angry. In fact, he ran away from God because he didn't think the people of Nineveh deserved God's forgiveness. When it came to forgiveness, he was a big fat chicken. If Jonah had surrendered his will and let go of his bitterness the first time God tried to get

his attention, however, there would have been no need for his chicken-of-the-sea ordeal. But to Jonah, Tarshish sounded like a good place to escape. Instead he got a three day trip in a whale's belly.

Despite his near death experience, God was up to something. Kingdom principles are different than the world's ways. Suffering always precedes glory. Once you endure the pain you get to go to the other side of what God is trying to accomplish in your life, so don't give up! Your pain is not in vain. There is hope and purpose on the other side of your hurt.

Your burdens will either defeat you or develop you. There is rarely any middle ground. Your burdens come to make you stronger and develop qualities in you that will prepare you for your future, but you can't achieve victory without a battle, so don't give up when life gets hard. Thomas Carlyle, Scottish historian and teacher during the Victorian era once said, "The tragedy of life is not so much what men suffer, but rather what they miss."<sup>1</sup> Without pain, many of us get stuck in our old demanding habits of trying to resolve conflict on our own terms. When we choose to embrace the hidden opportunities conflict brings, we can enjoy the peace that comes from trusting God to work things out and give us wisdom.



## **Pain has a Season**

It's a well-known fact that pain accompanies pregnancy and childbirth. Although the pain can be severe, knowing ahead of time that the pain has a season gives us comfort. The other encouragement to endure is we know there is a reward for the suffering—a beautiful bundle of joy. After we've suffered for a little while, we see the glory. There is an end to the pain and a reward for enduring.

There are countless women who have endured the same kind of pain who tell us with a great amount of assurance exactly what we can expect. We may live near a toilet for the first several months, consume large quantities of crazy cuisine, waddle like a duck and have more mood swings than a schizophrenic kangaroo, but we will make it. It may seem like an eternity, but it will be over in nine months. We even know going into this gig the maximum amount of time. There is a limitation of the season of gestation. If we have morning sickness, tender breasts, food cravings, swollen feet, frequent urges for the nearest bathroom, at least we have comfort knowing, that in nine months, we will be done.

A mother endures the pain because of the joy set before her. She knows that although she may suffer, at the end of her travail, she will receive a beautiful treasure. In the same way, Christ endured his suffering. He also had a vision for the prize on the other side of his pain. After tremendous agony comes beauty. It's a kingdom principle because God gives beauty for ashes.

So what is on the other side of your pain? Just like women in labor use a focal point to help them get past the pain of contractions, ask God for a focal point to press past your own pain. He wants to give you a glimpse of His glory on the other side of your situation. He wants you to overcome and walk in joy, so do it now.

Make the ask. I believe he wants to birth something beautiful in your life.

## **Ten Ways to Know if He's Taking Advantage of You**

Does your spouse or partner take advantage of you? It may sound harsh, but it may be your own fault.

I know that may be a tough pill to swallow, but once when you accept the responsibility to take care of yourself, it will set you free.

When you recognize the part you play in allowing him to take advantage of you, you can be liberated by another revelation: If you allowed it, you can also put a stop to it—just by saying, “No!”

It's a hard thing to admit that you have allowed your partner to take advantage of you, but you and your relationship will benefit from putting boundaries in place. Boundaries allow you to take care of yourself and prevent him

from taking advantage of you. The most spiritual thing you'll ever learn how to do is to say "no" AND not feel guilty.

Ok, so here's the list. **10 ways to know if you are responsible for allowing others to take advantage of you.** Check it out and see how well you guard your heart.

1. You say yes when you mean no.
2. You say yes without considering the request because you want to be "kind".
3. You think saying yes is the Christian thing to do.
4. You say no, but others pester you until you relent.
5. Your schedule is so crammed, you can't possibly fulfill the request you just committed yourself to.
6. You expect others to know what you mean without actually expressing it.
7. You have no boundaries.
8. You don't know what boundaries are.
9. You think others are more worthy than you.
10. You think boundaries are unspiritual. (Consider Proverbs 4:23<sup>L</sup>).

"Guard your heart for out of it flow the issues of life.") If you

don't know how to put boundaries around your heart, people will walk all over you and you'll have plenty of issues.

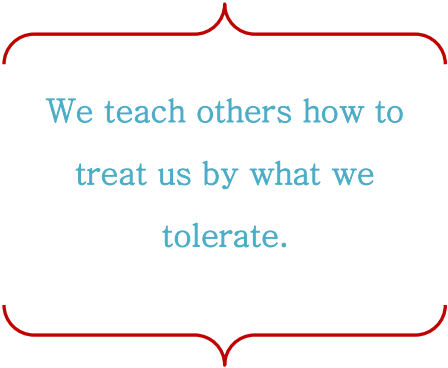
How did you rate? If you checked more than 2 or 3, it's time to learn how to say no. The best way to love others is to first love yourself.

## How to Say No with Love

If other people's behavior stresses you out, quit letting them! Here's the bottom line: We teach others how to treat us by what we tolerate.

If you respect yourself first, you'll have less conflict in relationships because resentment will not stand in the way.

Here are two tips to help you decide whether you should say yes or no. First, when your spouse or partner asks you for a favor take a moment to consider the request. Just because he asks you to do something doesn't mean you have to give an immediate response. We often say yes without even considering the request.



We teach others how to treat us by what we tolerate.

Instead say, “Let me think about that a moment.” Next consider how it will make you feel if you say yes. Will you feel frustrated, irritated or obligated? If so, say no! Doing something to help him, but ultimately making a big ole mess on your own property is self-defeating. Plus, it often deteriorates relationships because your frustration will eventually come out in the way you treat him.

Saying yes may feel like a spiritual thing, but when it causes you to walk in unforgiveness, saying yes when you mean no is a sin you commit against yourself.

## **Forgiveness Truths**

Maybe you are like I once was. I didn't have a firm grasp on what forgiveness meant. As a result, I didn't want to let go. I clung to my offenses because I had believed a lot of lies about what forgiveness meant. So, just to clear the air, let's go over a few points about forgiveness.

- ♥ Forgiveness is a choice.
- ♥ Forgiveness doesn't mean the other person's actions were acceptable.
- ♥ Forgiving another doesn't release them from the natural consequences of their actions or legal obligation for restitution.
- ♥ Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation

- ♥ Forgiving is not something we do for the other person.
- ♥ We forgive out of obedience to God.
- ♥ We forgive so that the chains of bitterness don't destroy our soul-health.
- ♥ It only takes one person to forgive.
- ♥ Forgiveness is an access to great joy.
- ♥ Forgiving someone doesn't mean you have to trust the offender again.
- ♥ Forgiveness is required, but trust has to be earned.

### **Have You Forgiven and Forgotten?**

How can you tell if you're past the pain? Here are some ways you can tell if you've forgiven and forgotten:

- ♥ The "tapes" are erased. You no longer replay internal conversations.
- ♥ You can pray for the person who offended you.
- ♥ You don't feel unhinged when you see them. The "sting" is gone.
- ♥ When you hear of problems they suffer you don't secretly rejoice.
- ♥ You can feel compassion for them.
- ♥ You can be genuinely friendly when you see them.
- ♥ You have no angst when you think of them.

- ♥ You have no more expectations of the person who offended you.
- ♥ You understand expectations are a down payment on resentment.

I hope you've enjoyed *Finding Strength through Forgiveness*. True forgiveness will set you free. It's your secret weapon to personal freedom and power.

### **The Poison of Bitterness (Video)**

Did you know bitterness is a poison? In the video below, *The Poison of Bitterness*, from the *Love Junkies* video teaching series, you'll find out how to eliminate the toxicity!



*Don't forfeit your joy. Strength is not optional.*



Click below to watch the rest of the Love Junkies video series.

