

Forgiveness: A Practical and Powerful Approach to Health

An Interview with Fred Luskin, PhD

Interview by Matt Laughlin



BIOGRAPHY

Frederic Luskin, PhD is the Director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Projects and an Associate Professor at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. He has completed nine successful research projects on the training and measurement of forgiveness therapy. Dr. Luskin's research demonstrates that learning forgiveness leads to increased physical vitality, hope, greater self-efficacy, enhanced optimism and conflict resolution skills. His research also shows that forgiveness lessens the physical and emotional toll of stress, and decreases hurt, anger, depression and blood pressure.

On three occasions he has successfully worked with men and women from both sides of the violence in Northern Ireland who have had family members killed. In addition, he worked with five different groups of financial advisors after the stock market crash of 2000 to enhance their conflict resolution and stress management skills. Over the course of a year, the advisors in his groups show a 25% reduction in stress and a 20% increase in sales. Currently, Dr. Luskin also serves as co-chair of the Garden of Forgiveness Project at Ground Zero in Manhattan.

Dr. Luskin is the author of the San Francisco Bay Area best-seller *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness and Stress Free for Good*. He has worked with organizations such as the City of San Jose, Kaiser Permanente, Mountain States Health Alliance, Superior Court of San Francisco and others to help them work with conflict and grudges. He has trained lawyers, doctors, church leaders and congregations, hospital staffs, teachers and other professionals to manage stress and enhance forgiveness all over the United States. Dr. Luskin's work has been featured in Time, O, Ladies Home Journal, U.S. News and World Reports, Parade, Prevention as well as the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, U.S.A. Today and the Wall Street Journal. In addition The Public Broadcasting System has made a pledge drive video of his teaching called "Forgive for Good."

UE (*UnifiedEnergetics™*): How did the Stanford University Forgiveness Project come to be? Why forgiveness?

FL (Fred Luskin): There were really two streams. The first was a personal hurt I had experienced by a very close friend who had abandoned and rejected me unexpectedly. I really struggled, and wasn't able to recover from this until forgiveness became the center of my experience. I tried all the psychology stuff of articulating my feelings and making him wrong, and a lot of other approaches. But it was just unsatisfying and it didn't work. It was only when I released into forgiveness a bit that I really started to see that I did not have to be a prisoner of this. My understanding of what forgiveness was emerged from that initial hurt and was also influenced by other related trainings I had gone through.

The second stream came when I was looking for my dissertation topic to get a PhD at Stanford. I wanted to do a study that would prove, so to speak,

that spiritual qualities and principles were true and effective in a tangible sense. I have spent enough time meditating, paying attention, studying the cosmology of a lot of the spiritual teachings and many just don't hold water to me. They are not wrong nor right, just not tangible and applicable. I have studied Buddhism and other teachings and you can just get lost in it. The thing really most important to me was these essential, positive human qualities espoused in such teachings could actually be applied to and improve people's lives. That seemed the most important take-away of spiritual practice.

UE That reminds me of what especially struck me about your work - how meaningful, pragmatic and accessible it seems to be.

FL That's the whole intention, because if it is not, what is the point? I believe the point of any spiritual practice is to heal ourselves and reduce suffering. I wanted to show through this Stanford study that you

could teach people to forgive, that you could measure it, and that it would show positive, tangible gain for people. When I started the research, I wasn't certain that I was going to choose forgiveness, and I didn't think it really mattered. I was interested in cultivating one of the heart qualities, whether forgiveness, deep tolerance, compassion or kindness.

UE They seem so synonymous.

FL In essence, they seem to cultivate a similar state despite different provocation or stimuli. At the time I started the project, forgiveness was the only one of these qualities that had any prior clinical research, and this was only four studies. There were no clinical studies on compassion, kindness or gratitude; or whatever the heart quality. You cannot invent a field as a dissertation student; with the forgiveness studies, there was something for me to draw upon so that a section of my dissertation could reference other research.

UE And your research presented a new approach?

FL I had two ideas that were at variance with the way forgiveness had been taught, at least in those former studies. My first idea was that forgiveness was exactly the same no matter what the offense; this idea that forgiveness is an inner quality and is only tangentially related to what happened. In other words, you don't forgive Grandma or a rapist any different than you forgive a guy who cuts you off on the freeway. Ultimately, it's all an inner coming to peace with what is. So, my study had no criteria for what

kind of offenses a person may be reacting to. Most studies were looking at how you could teach people to forgive 'bad parents' or 'abusive spouses.' I wanted to show it was exactly the same.

The second idea is that I really wanted to demonstrate that forgiveness is entirely about the present and really had nothing to do with the past. It is simply mind stuff of now. I wanted to show how both the grievance and the forgiveness is mind stuff of now. So I never really encouraged people to tell their detailed stories about who had hurt them, even in the forgiveness classes, because it is about now. I basically started showing an alternative way of looking at an ages-old topic. I did successful research, received a lot of attention and publicity, and ultimately became somebody whose voice was asked for related to this topic. What started out as just a dissertation study, resulted in my becoming somewhat of a national spokesperson about forgiveness, an entirely unintended consequence of the project.

UE I appreciated the aspect of your work which included careful research in the domain of the heart, of compassion and forgiveness. Has there since been more promising research since you first published your book in 2002?

FL Sure, and the answer is two part. First, other people have done a few studies as well. However, most research is not outcome research. Very few people actually take people, teach them something and see if it works. Most research is correlation research; does this relate to that, etc. Our outcome-based studies really showed me that I was onto



something. We did three projects with people from Northern Ireland, where we worked with men and women who had suffered terrible losses. We brought people together, Catholics and Protestants, for week long sessions and we were able to show significantly positive gains for people who went through this. In my way of thinking, forgiveness can be used to help with the worst life can bring – the murder of your child, the murder of your parent, or your own incarceration in a hellish environment.

The second thing to say is that for the last five years, I have been involved in a research project where we're teaching people in work and business settings to forgive. I am moving into the most secular, normative environment where, again, it is not about one particular offense or situation. Instead, I am teaching people at work that forgiveness means that we don't need to react with negativity when normal life events occur. It could be your computer crashes, or your secretary screws up, or somebody cancels an order. In essence, it really is to teach equanimity. Through this business research, we have shown that forgiveness increases business productivity. We've done eight groups of American Express financial service advisers, and we've been able to show almost a 25% increase in sales. We're working with two more groups now.

These are the two poles that allowed me to know that what I came up with works; from business settings to the groups we conducted in Northern Ireland. It is an effective tool and it is very much in alignment, to me, with Buddhist psychology, where you always have some degree of choice as to how you react. The external world does not own your inner reactivity; it's passing. Both ends of this spectrum of research have been very affirming to me.

UE With regard to your research and experience of teaching forgiveness in a business context, I am reminded of a message I took from your work, that forgiveness is less about a particular offense and more a practice or way of being with life.

FL That's exactly right, and the research reveals the pragmatic relevance of this. The reason I believe this kind of work is so important, from a religious or spiritual point of view, is because of the nature of life. There is so much suffering and so much we cannot control, that if we don't learn a way to forgive the things that don't emerge the way we would hope, we will start to shut down and our ability to maximize our potential in life, in whatever area, will be compromised.

UE Would you speak to some of the most pri-

mary spiritual streams of influence in this work you have put together for a secular, clinical or business context. Do you have an affinity for one teaching in particular?

FL I have been a member of the Self-Realization Fellowship for over twenty-five years, which is Yogananda's group, the teacher who wrote *Autobiography of a Yogi*. That has been my specific spiritual path and a resource for meditative practices. I have been very influenced by a long-standing interest in Buddhist thought, specifically the teachings around non-attachment and a non-demandingness that life turn out the way you think it should. And my heart is very aligned with Jesus' message on the cross, "Forgive them; they know not what they do." So, my own particular meditation path is a Hindu, yogi-based path through Yogananda's teaching. The intellectual influences for me are largely where I try to make Buddhism accessible. And I am touched by the heartfulness of the message of Jesus.

The way I see it, all of these paths have value. There is a way to teach it to people that doesn't trigger anti-spiritual or anti-religious buttons. That way I can bring it into medical schools, law schools or business settings. I also don't try to be more than I am. I know my limitations. I didn't want to teach enlightenment, I just wanted to teach getting through your day! (Laughter) I leave the deeper, bigger stuff to the religious people, because I am not trained in that and I don't claim to be an expert. I have a bit of science around forgiveness and a psychological approach that is helpful to people.

UE You made a significant distinction in your research comparing forgiveness interventions with other kinds of coping methods. This discovery that while in many cases people arrive to a diminished sense of hurt in response to past offenses, the people you taught your forgiveness classes to were more emotionally and mentally equipped to handle future offenses compared to people not exposed to the work. Would you comment on that?

FL In life, we see that we get hurt or we get disappointed or we get frustrated or somehow we suffer. Among the many ways out of that, there are two main avenues. One is to simply lessen the suffering through modest growth and the passage of time, and perhaps some letting go. Another response is to learn or become aware of new skills which we can bring to bear on future problems. Let's say you get dumped by your lover. You can move forward from that with some degree of slight bitterness, and some degree of 'that's the way it is' and some degree of 'I

just gotta battle through this', and you'll get through it over time. Or, you can cultivate forgiveness or compassion, which gives you a greater efficacy and likelihood for handling more skillfully the next thing that comes down the pike. Instead of just handling something or muddling through, you become more skillful at dealing with the next experience.

That brings something else to mind. Fairly recently the media reported on that killing of children in an Amish community and how their community reached out to the wife of the man that killed those girls. The open heartedness of that is phenomenal. If there were more of that in this world, we would have so much less horror. But I had some concerns about the Amish being put out as a recommendation to everyone. Most people don't have such a unified, single focused religion, and they have to work through the grief and the pain before they can come to a release. In a place like that Amish community, you could say they are trained or learn to have certain experiences so they minimize their individual suffering. And while I admire the heck out of it, most people need to be angry and scared and anguished and crazy and then work through to a place where they realize, this anguish had its place but I better release this before it eats me alive. Being secular, my approach misses the glory of grace and faith, and the beauty of relying on a higher power to help one be open to God, so that too has limitations.

UE Do you ever feel limited by not explicitly including the spiritual domain in your work?

FL I don't. For instance, I am going to give a weekend class at Naropa University in the fall, a Buddhist oriented school. I know enough about Buddhism to be able to hear the questions that may come to me from that community. Having studied Buddhism I also know that it doesn't have detailed training on simply how to forgive. There is the Metta practice, which I love and often teach in my work. But, I know that this little secular add-on may help somebody who has a good meditation practice move through something pretty well. If they have a deep grounding in quiet, this helps them psychologically grasp what is going on. Many therapists send their clients to my classes, because it is an adjunct to therapy. I go into churches all the time, because Christ says to forgive, but does not necessarily leave a technology for how to do it. So I am happy to fulfill the niche that I fulfill, seeing that it has applicability in its limited domain almost everywhere.

UE Would you speak to a story of someone in particular that has inspired you in this kind of work?

FL I teach people all over the place and have encountered a lot of people who have a story of healing. And in almost every single case there is this question of incompleteness. I had a woman come through my class who was eaten alive inside by the fact that she and her husband had been quarrelling right before a serious traffic accident. The anguish she came away with was intense because he was



badly hurt and she was badly hurt. She would think things like, 'If I had only had self control.' She came to my class and in five weeks, really made peace with it and made peace with her ex-husband. Yet, I have had other people who bring much less but they call me a year later, and say, you know, I finally get it. So there is not one path, one defining story or one process that works for everybody. There is just this hope that each of us will stop being bitter at life so that we can love. Forgiveness removes the obstacles to that love.

UE What are some of the centerpieces of your teaching approach that would be helpful for health-care clinicians to know?

FL One centerpiece of teaching is simply to help people understand that unforgiveness is simply another form of stress, which is meaningful to the readers of *UnifiedEnergetics*™, no doubt. So many patients are struggling with the reaction of stress in their body from their objection to their own life. Whether it's that they didn't get the job they wanted, or the love they wanted, or the recognition they wanted, or whatever, they are often carrying that sense of unforgiveness or complaint with them. That is going to trigger stress, which is going to influence every cell in their body. Part of healing is to transform that into more productive emotions. A lot of what I teach is guided practice in doing that, which would certainly apply to a broad-ranging patient population.

I give helpful explanations of the harm of negativity on physical health. I talk about the lack of gratitude and compassion that contributes to someone being

in that position. I give a lot of guided practice. I have discussions and I answer questions that come up. What I don't do is allow for a joint sob session. That I have to say is where I draw the line. In the short term, it is absolutely legitimate for a human being to feel like a victim for a period of time, whether a piano falls on your head or you discover your lover has been lying to you. There is just a human reactivity of suffering that I'm not convinced is inappropriate until we get to very high spiritual places. It's the moving forward, after all, that is so problematic for people. And that is where forgiveness is so essential.

Another central piece to this is the clear distinction of forgiveness from reconciliation, condoning, and justice. The simple response to this is that reconciliation has to do with another person, and forgiveness is within one's self. You can't condone something and forgive it. You can only forgive something that is not okay; in essence, you forgive it because you deem it not okay to begin with. Condoning and forgiving are not the same. I believe it is better to forgive and seek justice, rather than seek justice out of resentment or rage. You want to have a forgiving heart and look for justice. Once you've forgiven, you'll have a better sense of what justice actually is; it can look quite different from a place of forgiveness versus a place of rage.

UE In your book you share a teaching story illustrating the difference between forgiveness and passivity as an important distinction in this work. Would you comment on that?

FL You can forgive something but you still have to

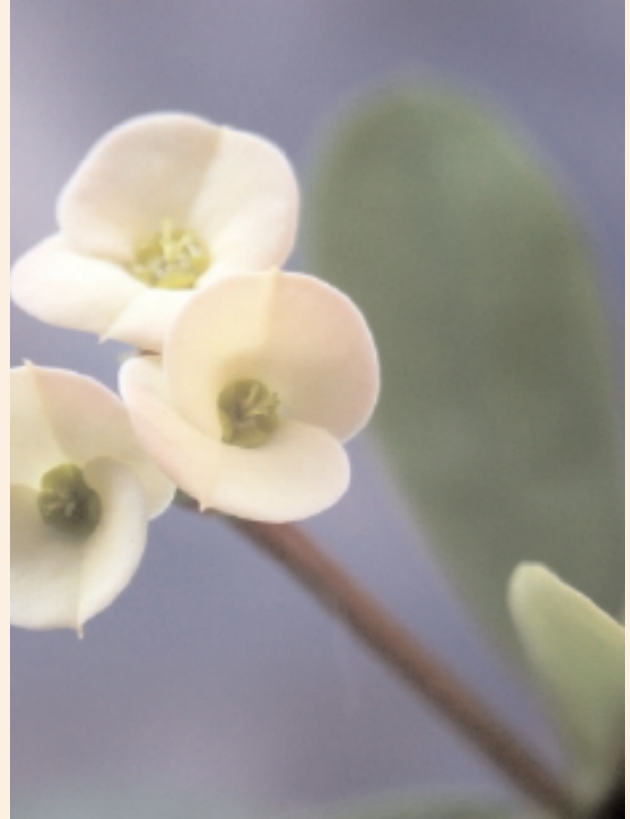


live your life successfully. Another way I have put this is that forgiveness is not the same as lobotomy. What you do is take away the venom from your heart, and you take away the entitlement and victimhood. But you still have to confront people; you still have to articulate yourself. You sometimes have to navigate through very difficult experiences. The essence of the story you're referring to is that while you know you don't want to hurt people, you have to stand your ground. That is something that people have a very hard time understanding.

There is a misconception – a rationalization – that if I forgive them, they'll walk all over me. Yet, they can walk all over you whether you're angry or not. But you can forgive and still do your best to make sure they don't walk all over you. The resentment and the negativity are kind of epiphenomena. They are not as meaningful or helpful as is one's capacity to simultaneously have a forgiving heart and successfully protect his or herself. While this is a simple technology, I do believe that the more people who teach it and share it, the better it will be for our world.

UE Thanks for your time, Dr. Luskin.

FL My pleasure. Thank you.



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