

109. Self-Forgiveness Part 1: A Step-by-step process to forgive and stop shaming yourself

Vanessa 00:00

Welcome to the Empowered brain, the only podcast using science, psychology and coaching to help you rewire your brain and create a life you love with your host, Dr. Vanessa Calderon, a Harvard grad physician, master coach, and mother of two.

Hello, welcome back to the podcast. I am so excited to be here with all of you today. And I am honestly sitting here today with so much gratitude. The podcast has had 1000 New downloads per month over the last few months. And it just really warms my heart to know that it's helping that many people that more and more people continue to listen. So I'm so grateful to have you all here. And I'm really, really happy that you are finding value in the podcast. And if you have some topics that you'd like me to talk about, find me on Instagram, @VanessaCalderonMD, I think the link to my IG is in the show notes. So find me on Instagram and let me know what topics you want me to cover. And if you are part of my John Muir family, so I work at a hospital in the Bay Area, or I will have worked at a hospital in the Bay Area until tomorrow.

Tomorrow's my last day there. I just want to share how grateful I am for all of your support. I keep hearing every time I'm on shift. They heard from the nurses and the techs and the physicians that they're listening to the podcast and that they're finding it really valuable. And I didn't even I never shared this with them. But one of the nurses found me there and said, Hey, is this you? And she pulled up the podcast on her phone? And I was like, Yep, that's me. She's like, Why didn't you tell me you had a podcast, and I never shared it with them? Anyway, they slowly started passing it around. And I just love you guys all so much. I'm going to miss you tremendously. Thank you for your support as you listen.

Yeah, so for those of you that don't know, I'm moving across the country. So we are leaving California on June 11, which is three days from today. And we are moving across the country to Atlanta, Georgia. And we are so excited about the move. And this is a big transition time for us. So this podcast probably won't be released for a few weeks, I'll probably already be in Atlanta by the time it gets released. So if you're in Atlanta, hit me up, we need new friends, we need a new community out there. So anyway, all that to say is that I'm sitting with so much gratitude, so much transition coming up for me in life. And a lot of people as the summer comes up there are also transitioning, you know, kids are out of school, people have to sort of think rethink their work weeks.

There are summer camps and all these things if you have school-aged kids. And so, I am here with you today to talk about self-forgiveness. And the whole transition topic. I will leave for another podcast episode, but I have another podcast episode coming up on life transitions, and how to process these emotions of what you think is sadness and what that actually is and nostalgia. Anyway, that's for

another time. That's a little sneak peek for you. But we are doing a self-forgiveness podcast today. And next week, you will have part two of this podcast. So today, what I'm going to do is I'm gonna walk you through the different steps of how to essentially process self-forgiveness and why that's so important. And next week, I bring on a very, very dear friend of mine, Dr. Melissa Parsons, and we will do part two of self-forgiveness where she and I will have a discussion that might bring up other different ways to process. So whether it resonates with you today or resonates with you the next time you listen next week, hopefully, you get some really good nuggets to practice self-forgiveness.

Alright, so let's just scale it all back and talk about why self-forgiveness matters. Self-forgiveness matters. Because when you hold on to a lot of the bullshit in life, you're essentially holding on to shame. It creates so much shame for you when you're holding on to something that you haven't forgiven yourself for. You know, when you don't forgive other people, it creates resentment. And forgiving other people is sort of a different topic here. But that creates a feeling usually of resentment or anger, a lot of emotions that we don't really need to hold on to, but when it comes to not forgiving ourselves, that feeling that we're holding on to is actually shame and shame is some low shit. Excuse me if you're listening with kids, but shame is some BS. Shame is always lying.

Shame is never the truth and shame is never helpful. So the biggest reason why it's so important to process and let go of stuff and really forgive yourself and move on is because when you don't you're holding on to shame and shame is like I've said this before, but shame is like this An electric fence that you can't move past it holds you there. And you can't move past that. And when you can't move past that you are essentially limiting yourself, you're limiting your potential and you're limiting your growth. And life really is always about being a better version of yourself every day. And when you don't forgive yourself, you're essentially stunting your growth, you're stopping right there at that moment, which is why self-forgiveness is so important. All right, so how do we do it?

So I'm gonna essentially walk you step by step through the ways that I have found to be the most helpful, and what has really helped my students when they process their own stuff. And first, I want to talk about a few different things in my own life that were really hard for me to forgive, I have really held on to them because it was hard for me to let go. So one big one. And you know what's so interesting about this is I realized that when I had the awareness that I was holding on to that I had so much shame that I had experienced, I was like this metacognition level of shame. And that's what I was unwilling to let go of. Alright, so that sounds a little abstract. Let me give you an example. One example is the racism that I had internalized. So I may, be five foot tall, about 100 pounds light-skinned Latina.

But I'm a Latina, and I grew up in a Latina community and my family. You know, not all Latino communities are similar. But my family were immigrants, we didn't have a lot of money growing up. I grew up not speaking English. English was my second language. I learned it when I was a kid, I was really young when I learned it. But I had internalized so much racism, so much of sort of the colonial eyes or way of thinking, white supremacist way of thinking. And if you want to learn more about this, I have an entire series on decolonizing your brain, there are three parts there, and I think it's early in the podcast, I think in the episodes in the 80s, I think. So go back there. And listen, if this is something of interest to you to do your own internalized racism, work and let go of that. But here's the thing.

So when I was I think the plane, I think was in college, when I finally had that realization that I had internalized racism, I felt inferior. But I didn't know what it was. And I was in college, and I still didn't know what it was what I was experiencing, I just knew that I felt inferior to white people.

It sounds so silly now when I say it, but I had internalized this. And then I was applying to medical school. And I remember having the same feelings. And it wasn't until way later, very recently, maybe like five or 10 years ago, that I realized those feelings of inferiority that I was holding on to it because I had internalized so much racism. And when that light bulb went on for me that the reason why I was feeling inferior was not because I was inferior, but because I had internalized all those systems of oppression. I had so much shame that I was holding on to that. I was like, Oh my gosh, because my ego was trying to tell me that I should be better than that. You should be better than that. Why are you holding on to that you should let that go? I can't believe that's bothering you.

Those that's sort of the voice in my head. And then I was shaming that part of me. And when you shame a part of you, it's so hard to process. So that was a big one for me that it was hard for me to let go. It was really hard for me to create peace around the fact that I had internalized racism, I had already sort of understood why I was feeling inferior. But then the second piece is like, I can't believe I internalized that racism, and not being able to forgive myself for internalizing the racism, like blaming myself, like it's my fault that I was raised in a society that was racist. That right there is what I've created so much shame around. And here's another big one that might resonate with you if you consider yourself a high achiever.

The second big one I had internalized was the association of achievement with worthiness, the more I achieved, the worthy I was, which meant the less I achieved, the less worthy I was, which meant that if I achieve more than other people, I must be better than other people. And that for me was like, oh, yeah, duh. Of course, achievement means worthiness. But what that also meant is that if I wasn't achieving, or if I chose to slow down, does that mean I'm unworthy? And when that light bulb for me went on in my head, this is also fairly recently, just a few years ago, when I realized that I had this huge attachment to achievement, which meant that if I failed, if I wasn't achieving, it would cause this deep feeling of disappointment and shame inside of me. Anytime I had perceived failure or perceived that I wasn't achieving fast enough, I had this huge sense of urgency like had to hurry up and keep going, I had to succeed faster. And they would create this huge sense of shame inside of me if I had ever perceived failure. Because shame again means I, guilt means you did something wrong, shame means you are wrong, which is why shame is never true, which is why shame always lies because you as a human being, and all of your beautiful, imperfect perfection are never, there's no bad part of you, there are no bad parts.

So when shame is trying to show up to tell you that there is a bad part, that's how we know it's a lie, shame is always lying. So for me, this big disconnection from achievement was a big one, it's so interesting because I was able to let go, and finally forgive myself for internalizing that racism. Because it was so interesting. When I finally brought light to that it was such a BS, it was so bananas that I was like, Oh, of course, I'm not inferior. And that was easier for me to let go of. But this whole story of achievement that came on at such an earlier age, before the racism stuff came on, that that story of

achievement that I had to achieve for success I had to achieve for worthiness, that was harder for me to let go of which still blows my mind.

Okay, so I'm gonna use that example of the achievement orientation, and its attachment to worthiness because I think it might resonate with all of you. And because it's, it's just for me, it was still so mind-blowing, that I was still so attached to it. Alright, so when I think about self-forgiveness, the way I like to think about it, and the way I sort of invite you to think about it is what you're actually forgiving. What you're actually doing when you're self-forgiving, is you're honoring a part of you, that got you to where you are today, you are honoring a part of you that got you to where you are, that you no longer need, that is no longer helpful for you. That's how I want you to consider it.

So for me, for example, I'll use this achievement poem, this achievement part, where did it get me if we're going to really honor that part of us that got us to where we are, where did this attachment to achievement get me? It got me to where I am today, someone that graduated with multiple degrees, including a degree from Harvard, somebody that became a department chief a year after graduating residency, someone that had a ton of leadership experience, someone that got dual degrees, someone that was able to create financial independence, someone that was able to, you know, pay off my student loans within like, three years, within, I think it was like two or three years graduating residency. That's where it got me. And so what you want to do, when you notice that you're holding on to a part of you that shame, is notice that it was there, and it actually served a purpose. Because when we hold on to these stories, there's usually some sort of payoff it's giving us.

So notice the payoff that it was giving you and really think about how can I honor that payoff. And so what you want to do is you want to just notice, reflect where it came from, and the way you reflect is by really sitting with curiosity, reflect where it came from, and sit with curiosity. So the entire process, ultimately, it's going to lead us to this beautiful process of forgiveness and honoring where this came from our honoring that it was there for us and that it served a purpose. And it starts by reflecting on where it came from. So the way you reflect on where it came from, is to really create space in your brain by asking yourself, why might I have done this? Like, why might have I created this attachment to achievement? Like where did that come from? And for a lot of high achievers, what usually happens is we are hardwired to be curious.

We are hardwired to be self-disciplined, we are hardwired to want to create in the world. But somewhere along the way, that hardwiring gets muddied with some other things. It gets muddied with this need for external validation with this thought that this is where love comes from. And so for me when I really scaled it way back, when I scaled way, way back, I realized that I have had this drive for achievement since I was like in the fifth or sixth grade. In fact, I remember in the third grade the first time I said I wanted to be a doctor. And you know what's wild about that is, in third grade, I was going to an inner city school. And in Los Angeles in East LA, where there were not a lot of doctors in like, there are no doctors in my neighborhood. There were no doctors in my family.

I had never even been to the doctor because I grew up without health insurance. So except for when I was born again US. So the thought that I had already decided I wanted to be a doctor, like where in the world did that even come from, you know? So when I think way back, I remember when I first told my

third-grade teacher that and I was like, I don't know, 5678 years old. Because I remember I also told people at the church, we were going to, I grew up going to a church. And I remember the people at church were like, Wow, and so amazed that I would say that, that I even knew Dr. The word and, and I remember, like my parents saying the same thing. And I kept noticing that when I had to strive for this ambition, when I would say that, it would really like to make people proud of me. And for me, that's, that's where it started getting muddled for me, where I started attaching ambition to external validation, ambition, to love ambition to, you know, some sort of, like, extra attention. And the thing is, like, I was good at school, so the better I was at school, the more attention I would get, the more external validation I would get. And so when you're a child, here's the thing, when you're a child, it's hard to discern the difference.

Now, as an adult, I can discern the difference between I love creating, but I don't think it's gonna give me any sort of value or worthiness. Whereas when I was a kid, you know, when you're a child, it's hard to discern those two things. In fact, that skill of discernment, you can't really even get good at until your prefrontal cortex is fully formed. And it doesn't even fully form until you're in your mid-20s, like 23, or 25. Which means a lot of that can be confusing when you're young. So for me, that attachment came from when I was a kid. And whenever you're able to create curiosity and notice where it came from, then you can say, Oh, I see. I see where it came from. And the reason why it's important to do that is because the next step, reflect on where it came from.

The next step is to create compassion for that part of you. Create compassion for that part of you. And how you create compassion for that part of you, is by first reflecting on how it served you. So we talked about this at the beginning, reflecting on how that part of you served you. So for me, I already shared that the achievement and ambition clearly served me I was able to excel really, really, really fast. And I was able to create a lot in my career really quickly. Before that age, I was 40. I had already done so much in my life. And so you reflect on how it served you. And then the second thing you want to do is create compassion for that part of you. By really getting curious and noticing like, Oh, no wonder no wonder I was so attached to achievement. Because look at all the attention I got, look at how all these people gave me, you know, all this external validation. So you create curiosity.

So step one, again, reflect on where it comes from. Step two, reflect on how it served you. Step three, create compassion for that part of you. So you create compassion for that part of you again, with curiosity, and really just saying, Oh, no wonder, no wonder it served me like this whole thing with the internalized racism, creating compassion for that part of me, was that a huge part of healing for me, I was like, no wonder I've always felt inferior. God, Vanessa, I love you so much. And I understand why you would feel that way. And the same thing with achievement like, Wow, no wonder Vanessa, no wonder you've been driven. And you've been working so hard. And there were times when you've worked yourself to burn out. No wonder, and I love you so much. And that's not something you have to do anymore.

So you create compassion for that part of you by really noticing that curiosity. And then you do that second part, or that next part, which is you think yourself, you think yourself for where it got you. And here, here we go back to that first part where you honor it for being helpful. So you thank yourself for that. And you just let yourself know. I appreciate you. I appreciate, your drive for achievement. Thank

you for how you served me. I no longer need you. I'm going to say goodbye. And I know that sounds a little ceremonial and a little serious, but it's really important for your brain to process that you are officially thanking it and saying goodbye to that part of you, and moving on. That creates so much forward momentum for you to be able to continue to excel expand and forgive yourself.

Okay, so here's the last part. Once you really create that gratitude, and you really thank yourself for that part of you and You really see how it served you, and you allow yourself to say thank you, I no longer need you, I love you, goodbye. Then you go on to the very last step here. And the very last part is you get to choose what you want to think and feel. Instead, you get to choose what you want to think and feel instead. So for me, what I ended up doing was, I noticed, and for the first part, when I was processing all this, this one was a big one for me, I had to work a few weeks on letting go of this attachment to achievement. And in the beginning, there was so much judgment, I thought that ambition was wrong, that I don't want it anymore, I shouldn't have to have it, I shouldn't feel it like ambition was trapping me it was crazy, you know, like, and I kept thinking all these thoughts. And I was like, hold on a second.

Those are also just thoughts, ambition, itself that that word, ambition is neutral. It depends on what I choose to think about it, achievement, achievement is neutral. It depends on what I want to think about it. And so I decided I was going to see ambition, the way I see a pencil as neutral, I have no negative thoughts about the pencil, I was going to see achievement, the way I see a cup of water, I have no negative thoughts about the cup of water. And if I start from that place of neutrality, what do I want to think about it instead? What do I want to think about, you know, achievement in my life or ambition in my life? And I decided for me that I was going to think really powerfully about it. Because I am so grateful that I was blessed with self-discipline, I am so grateful that I was blessed with the drive to be in service to always create and help other people. And so I decided that I was going to think about my ambition, and my drive for achievement that same way with so much gratitude. And for me to realize, like my purpose in life, is to continue to be in service and in contributing to making this world a better place by helping as many people as I can. And the way I get to do that is by continuing to create, but also continuing to do my own work, my own spiritual growth work, the more I grow spiritually, the more I can help and create other people.

So my ambition and achievement, that's the purpose, it serves. No more ego, you know, really what matters to me is impact and contribution, impact contribution and being in service, the more I can help people the better. So I freaking love my ambition. Now, I love my achievement. Now, I love that it fuels me to make this world a better place to create these podcast episodes to work with my students in the journey of my program, to continue to be a physician to continue to be in service to the people that I meet when I do you know, my public speaking events. I love my ambition and my drive for achievement. What it's actually, what I'm actually doing is using it as a tool for good. I no longer hold that attachment that I need to do it to be wording that I need to do it because it gives me some sense of validation. No, like, I'm 100% already. I'm 100% worthy. And I had to start from there and really let go of that attachment.

Okay, so let me review all of this for you. Because my invitation to you is to notice what you're still holding on to notice that attachment you're still holding on to. And the way you know you're holding on

to it with attachment is because there's something inside of you. There's some urgency, there's something driving you to always do this one thing. So for me, like when I think about the internalized racism, there was something always driving me to prove that I wasn't inferior, I had to be smarter, I had to do this, I had to like, you know, like, show that I was better. And when it came to achievement, I always had to achieve, I always had to be doing something I could never be stagnant. What else can I do next? So I want you to just notice that part of your life. And that is a really great indication of where you need to do this work to forgive yourself. Because you're holding on to attachment there, you're giving it some meaning. And when you do that, essentially what you're going to do, you're going to start by realizing that the entire process of forgiveness, is to really honor that which was so helpful that you no longer need and you can let go off.

And then you do step one, reflect on where it came from. Step two, reflect on how it served you. Step three, create so much compassion for that part of you. Notice where it served, you create compassion for that. And then the next step is really with gratitude and appreciation. Thank yourself for that. And from that space of gratitude, you can then let go and say thank you. I no longer need you. Thank you. I love you goodbye. And then you can choose what you want to think and feel instead.

All right, sweet friends. This has been a joy for me to be here with you and share all this. Do I hope you found this helpful? Hey, by the way, if you found this helpful, please share this podcast with your friends. Please rate the podcast that helps other people find us. And please, please, please leave a review and an actual review. You can go in there and quickly. Leave a few sentences, leave a few words, and just tell us how the podcast has helped you. It really helps the podcast grow and reach more people and it helps me be able to help more people. So thank you all for being here. I wish you all the best and I will see you next week.

Hey, sweet friends, if you love what you're learning, then you've got to join us on the journey. It's my all-inclusive program and the best community out there giving you the education you never knew you needed to help you create a life you love. Join us at VanessaCalderonmd.com/join. I'll see you there.