Myths Surrounding Forgiveness
By Tian Dayton

Following are some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding forgiveness that seem to give some people pause when contemplating it. When those whom I work with begin to consider forgiveness as an option, these are the sorts of thoughts that generally snag them.

If I forgive… my relationship with the person I'm forgiving will definitely improve.

Not necessarily. We may not even choose to continue to see this other person and they may not be able to accept our forgiveness or even care about it.

If I forgive, it means I'm condoning the behavior of the person I'm forgiving.

Not at all; in fact, quite the opposite. Forgiveness implies a clear headed recognition that we don't condone the behavior that we're forgiving. That's why we need to forgive it.

If I forgive, I'll no longer feel angry at the person for what happened.

In my experience, anger can still come up, but when it does, we remind ourselves that we've decided it isn't worth it to hold onto it any longer.

If I forgive, I am not allowed to have hurt feelings anymore.

We may still have some residue of hurt feelings should diminish over time, but they may not disappear all at once.

If I forgive, it means I want to continue to have a relationship with the person I'm forgiving.

Not necessarily; you're forgiving for your own inner growth and freedom, which is virtually always a desirable thing to do. However, reconnecting or staying connected may or may not be desirable, depending on the situation.

If I forgive, I have to try to have a relationship with the person I forgive.

Unsafe people have not earned the right to a close relationship. Tough love and boundaries are part of healthy relationships. Sometimes keeping a distant relationship is most loving.

If I haven't forgotten, I haven't really forgiven.

We do and should remember; after all, just because we're forgiving doesn't mean we want to set ourselves up for further hurt. It's more like we forgive and get out of the way; we forgive and set boundaries; we forgive and see more clearly where we need to protect ourselves.

I only need to forgive once.

Forgiveness is a decision to head in a certain direction. We may need to forgive many times, as the Bible suggests, "not seven but seventy times seven."

I forgive for the sake of the other person.

No, we forgive to free ourselves. We forgive so that we can stop defining our future actions based on our own or someone else's wrongful actions.

Forgiving myself is selfish or wrong.

As long as we look squarely at ourselves and recognize what we may be doing to add to a problematic situation, forgiving ourselves is a way of releasing both parties from the kind of shame that keeps us locked in self-defeating and negative patterns of relating.