

ACCOUNTABILITY, RESPONSIBILITY AND TRUE FORGIVENESS IN RELATIONSHIPS by DR. NOELLE C. NELSON

Forgiveness doesn't come easy for many of us. Forgiveness often seems like a giving in, a reluctant acceptance of unacceptable behavior in order to preserve our relationship. We feel that we must move on, with the hope that the "forgiven" won't have to be forgiven again and again, yet in our hearts, we fear that that is precisely what will happen.

Your husband, once again, has spent money on what you consider a frivolous expense - a new plasma TV, for heaven's sake! In this economy! What was he thinking? And so you engage in yet another battle royal, with him screaming that he has the right to get at least something for himself once in a while, considering that 99 percent of his paycheck goes to you and the kids, and you screaming that you're clipping coupons and giving up shoes, lunches with the girls and facials, for what? His amusement? And so it goes until he gives up and says "I'm sorry, OK? I'm sorry." Which you accept, grudgingly, exhausted from the fight, because you can't think of what else to do. After all, you're not going to divorce over a plasma TV.

Except that it doesn't really qualify as forgiveness, does it, because you bear a grudge, and keep an eye out for any untoward expense he may later incur. He feels your wariness, and accuses you of treating him like a child. You bite your lip, but you think what else are you supposed to do? You don't trust him not to go out and buy a pair of expensive sunglasses or high tops while you're scrimping. And with the lack of trust between you, your intimacy suffers. All because you never made it to true forgiveness. True forgiveness, you see, isn't based on apology. As soothing as apologies are, they are meaningless unless grounded in accountability and responsibility.

Accountability is your willingness to figure out which part of the problem belongs to you and which part to your mate. Now it may seem that in the buying of the TV, all of the accountability is on your mate. Tempting to believe, but not so. If you and your spouse had created a budget, where you'd agreed on what purchases were acceptable, when, how saved up for and so forth, his would indeed be the larger share of accountability - he blew the budget. But if, as with many people, there's been no such planning, then your accountability is in not taking the lead, in being proactive and saying "Hey, let's work out a budget."

Responsibility is your willingness and ability to respond to that for which you are accountable. Responsibility relies on your willingness to under-

stand, rather than judge or blame. You come to your partner not with "You done me wrong" even if that is your feeling, but rather with "I'm confused. Please help me understand why you chose to buy the TV."

Your job then is to listen with an open mind and an open heart. Your mate may say "I feel like I'm giving, giving, giving, all the time. There's no place for me. I agree I was wrong not to talk with you about it first. I figured you'd say 'no way' so I just did it."

Now when he says, "I'm sorry," there is something real behind it. You can cop to your responsibility by saying "I realize we've never talked specifics when it comes to budget, and I see now we need to do that." Now you can engage in a genuine discussion that will lead to better decisions for the future in your relationship. That is what forgiveness is designed to do. Allow a genuine letting go of the past in order to move into a better future.

But let's say that there was a budget, and he blew it. The accountability may indeed appear to be mostly on his end, yet the responsibility is still a shared one. At this point, it's up to you to say "OK, if the budget doesn't work for you, then we need to figure out a different budget. What ideas do you have?" You see, when you proceed on the assumption that your mate is not out to do you harm, you can look at issues from the perspective of those that need to be worked out, not daggers in the heart. You proceed from a desire to understand, which ultimately is the only way two unique individuals can arrive to that astonishing unity that is a couple.

When you consent to a medical procedure, you're asked to give "informed consent," meaning that you say, "Yes, I understand the purpose of the procedure and what the consequences may be." If consent isn't "informed," it's not consent-you don't know what you're consenting to. Think of discussions about accountability and responsibility as a way to arrive at "informed forgiveness." If your forgiveness isn't "informed," it may be difficult to feel that your forgiveness is true. Be willing to talk the situation through until both of you feel you have a solid understanding of what happened, and what steps need be taken to avoid similar problems in the future.

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