

Why we would all forgive one another in the end

People often imagine that psychotherapists see the worst of people and that our work must incline us towards cynicism, maybe to even despair at human frailty. In truth, the opposite is the case. When a person is able to talk to me honestly, especially about those aspects of themselves and their behaviour about which they feel ashamed, there is always more to be admired than there is to be found wanting.

I do not think I am naïve, or ridiculously optimistic in this view of people. For sure people behave badly on occasion. Most of us, when pressed, will sacrifice truth for self regard. Most of us will be violent when pushed beyond our limit. We are all capable of being cruel and callous. We are biological entities with inbuilt systems for nourishing ourselves, and keeping ourselves alive. In extremis, these systems tend to override moral codes and any sense of decency. This is a truth which survivors of disasters find very difficult to live with. Some of these folk will have survived by being prepared to push others aside. Afterwards they have to live with the knowledge that they survived because they put themselves first.

Much of my working life is spent listening to the stories of survivors. Some people have survived sudden, dramatic events in which their existence was threatened. More often the stories I hear are from people who have survived the less dramatic trials and tribulations of everyday life. People whose parents didn't seem to care quite enough, people who have never felt loved quite enough not to help them cope with being alone sometimes, and worst of all, people who stand so much in judgement of themselves that they are their own worst enemy.

Despite popular belief, I find that bad experiences do not generally make people better or stronger.

If there were some mystical place we went to after our deaths, where we would understand everything and have real insight into other people, including those who had treated us badly in life, I think we would understand them and forgive them. Just in case such a place doesn't exist, maybe we should start forgiving now.

Why is forgiving so hard?

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Comments and feedback on this article are warmly welcomed.