

The C&A Express

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Conflicting Advice: Should You “Hang in There” or “Let It Go”?

Eventually we know that it's bound to happen. The ubiquitous “Hang in There” kitten clinging to the branch is going to let go of that limb. What happens next? It's not something we like to think about.

And yet, we all wrestle with this conflict, some of us on a daily basis. Maybe we're hanging onto memories of a lost love or a former job. It could be an addiction, or a relationship that is going nowhere. Our friends tell us to move on to the next love, the next job, or the next 12-Step meeting, and perhaps we even agree that we need to let go. Yet like that infernal kitten, we end up clinging harder and trying not to look down.

Of course, certain situations do require persistence. Scientist Marie Curie stubbornly held on to the idea that radioactivity was something elemental and full of potential, burning her hands, forgetting to eat or sleep – but her vision was so strong that she “hung in there” and kept experimenting. Thomas Edison never focussed on any of the minerals that would *not* keep his light bulb going – he looked at each failure as bringing him one step closer to the solution. We rarely tell the parents of a sick child to “let go” until we – and they – are sure that there is no other acceptable outcome. We encourage them to “hang in there” and promise that everything will be all right, hoping fervently that we are correct. Sometimes there's a lot at stake in holding on.

When does persistence make sense?

The goal must be worth our patient efforts. Is there even a true goal at all, or are we mired in memories? Wishing doesn't make it so, the old saying goes. We must feel some reasonable hope that the payoff will really occur, and not by chance or magic.

Maybe everyone else thinks that your new love is a frog; you alone see the prince or princess inside. If you loyally hang in there, some day you'll prove them all wrong. ***Is this hope a reasonable one?*** Have you gone to counseling with your frog – er, friend? Are you moving steadily towards working things out in a mutually acceptable way? Then hang in there.

If, on the other hand, your partner has allowed you to do all the work in the relationship, it might be time to rock the lily pad! **You should be seeing progress and the goal should be worth it, even if the process is sometimes painful.**

Memories can be harder to release than an actual person, place, or thing. We have to learn when it's safe to bring them out of storage, dust them off, and enjoy them for awhile before putting them back in their proper place. It's OK to remember the good times as long as we have acknowledged and learned from the pain first. If we yearn for situations that were inherently harmful to us, like an abusive relationship or our old drinking days, we're hanging on to a brittle branch. It's time to see what happens when we let go. **New experiences will miss us if we insist on living in the past.**

In many self-help programs, support is gained from doing one's best thinking about the problem, sharing the wisdom of others, then “turning the problem over” to the group, to a higher or inner power, or simply to time.

The difference between you and that kitten is that you have a safety net (we are presuming that the kitten does not.) **The EAP is here for you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by calling 800-742-2858.** We can help you figure out what you sincerely want to hang on to in your life. We can also talk you through the often scary concept of what might happen to you if you finally let go. Once you have a friend on the ground, letting go is much easier.

Forgive and Forget? Forget It!

Are you holding a grudge?

It takes a lot of time and energy to seethe. A slow burn can make you feel pain longer than a quick flare-up that is extinguished quickly.

When somebody hurts you, it can be very difficult to let go of your anger. And why should you? Nobody's going to fool you twice! It's common sense to identify people and things that are bad for your mental or physical health so you can avoid them in the future – right?

Well, to an extent, that's true. Why should you set yourself up for more abuse? We avoid situations that have caused us pain in the past not because we are easily intimidated. We are for the most part just being smart.

If you burn your hand on the stove, you don't put your hand on the burner again, do you?

But here's the rub – You don't stay away from the stove, you just proceed with more caution the next time. **The stove doesn't change; your approach to it changes.** And that may be the way you have to deal with a hurtful person. Avoidance may not be possible, and besides, maybe they can actually learn from their mistake and become better for it.

Yet even if they do, it can be difficult to forgive them for the harm they've caused. Why is forgiveness so hard? There are a number of possible reasons.

You may be comparing the person who hurt you with yourself. You know that you could never forgive yourself for doing that to someone else, so why should you forgive them? You may need to work on being gentler with yourself first. If you saw a friend being rigid and merciless with someone who was trying to apologize, wouldn't you intervene? Sometimes you make mistakes, too, but you're still a worthwhile individual who can feel remorse, make amends, learn and grow. The person who hurt you should also be given that chance.

Perhaps the harmful action is simply not yours to forgive. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once was asked if he could ever forgive the Nazis for killing so many children. He said that he could not, because it was not up to him to forgive them, it was up to the children, and they, unfortunately, had been killed.

This also underscores the importance of righting wrongs as soon as possible, as it is difficult to absolve ourselves of blame or guilt when we cannot first apologize and be forgiven. Sometimes it helps to write a letter of apology to a person we have harmed even if he or she is no longer with us, if only to consolidate our own thoughts and allow us to move on at least partially.

No matter how we have been hurt, we can choose to stay negative or try a different, more positive approach. Either response may be "right". **But choosing resentment, it's been said, binds us to the person we resent like steel chains.** Mentally replaying an offense freshens the wound each time. We dislike the offender more and more. We are not interested in whether or not they have changed for the better, or if now we could have a productive relationship with them. We've missed the opportunity to role model for our children how to make peace with someone and move on. We might even become attached to our anger, enjoying the self-righteousness of it and stoking its fires with new insights or anecdotes.

If we choose to forgive, we cut the chain and open ourselves to the possibility of a fresh start. We give others permission to forgive us because we have forgiven someone else. And the children and adults in our lives can observe us on the high road and hope that they too, can be capable of peaceful coexistence with someone who has harmed them in the past.

If forgiveness is an important issue in your life, remember that you can talk it over confidentially with the EAP. Call 800-742-2858 to arrange a free assessment.