



Kim Book created Victims' Voices Heard, which works at state prisons such as the Smyrna Correctional Facility, to help people move on from traumatic events.

Letting Go

Forgiveness can improve your emotional and physical well-being.

by Mike Bederka

SUZANNE FORGIVES THE man who raped her, and she told him so face to face.

As part of the state's Victims' Voices Heard program, the 45-year-old Kent County resident had the opportunity to confront the offender in a controlled setting. Nervous, anxious and even excited, Suzanne asked him questions that had troubled her for the 24 years since the attack.

Why did he commit such a heinous crime? Why didn't he kill her? Did prison rehabilitate him?

And she wanted to tell him that she forgave him.

Afterward she felt empowered and overcome with happiness and gratitude.

"I began to feel like a butterfly who had just emerged from her cocoon," says Suzanne, who asked to go only by her middle name. "I felt like a new person, a young woman. It was a life-giving experience for me."

Victims' Voices Heard, the program that helped Suzanne, is the brainchild of Dover resident Kim Book. She created

the organization in November 2002 to help victims move past traumatic crimes, something she knows about firsthand. Book found herself on a life-altering search for forgiveness 12 years ago, after her daughter was stabbed to death. "Forgiveness does change lives," Book says. "I know what it has done for me."

Her daughter's killer is now serving a 38-year sentence for second-degree murder. He shows no remorse for the attack, but Book still forgives him.

"I knew that if I thought about him every day, then that would become a part of who I was. That would control me, and I would have no joy and no peace in my life," she says. "I'm happier today than I've ever been."

THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

Both Book and Suzanne have harnessed the true power of forgiveness. But the power of letting go doesn't just apply to survivors of violent crimes. Anyone can benefit from a little for-

giveness. Letting a friend off the hook for forgetting your birthday can have benefits for the mind, as well as the body.

"There's no separation of emotional and physical health," explains Dr. Joe Zingaro, clinical director of People's Place Counseling Center, in Milford, Dover, Smyrna, Millsboro and Seaford. "People separate it for purposes of discussion, but our bodies don't separate it in reality."

As an example, researchers cite depression and hostility as risk factors for heart disease, says Dr. Margaret Keenan, director of health psychology at the Preventive Medicine Institute at Christiana Care, Wilmington.

Have you ever felt so angry that the emotion becomes palpable? It's part of the body's reaction to stress. When that happens blood pressure skyrockets while lipid levels and the immune system can be knocked around.

Zingaro notes one clear distinction between physical and emotional health: No plastic surgery can fix the latter.

"When people are chronically angry, it tends to put them in a state of increased arousal," she says. "It becomes very hard to just relax and feel comfortable."

By forgiving someone, you shut off the valve that's furiously pumping out stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, Keenan says. In turn, the body can heal faster and return to normal more quickly.

HOW TO FORGIVE

Zingaro notes one clear distinction between physical and emotional health: No plastic surgery can fix the latter.

"You're going to have a scar," he says, "but we're going to create an environment where the healing can occur as quickly as possible and the scar can be as modest as possible."

He starts off by telling patients that forgiving doesn't equal forgetting, and it doesn't mean that whatever happened is OK. The injury cannot be undone. Rather, forgiveness puts the incident in a specific place in the past.

"The goal is to release yourself from those old hurts and resentments," Keenan says. "That can be a really healing

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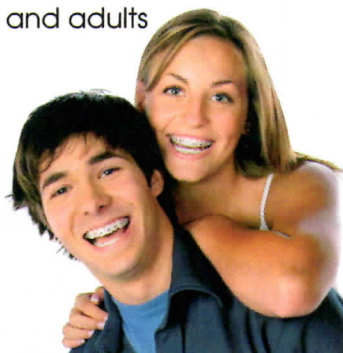
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experience."

Forgiveness shouldn't be taken lightly, either. It can't be a snap judgment or an overnight decision. "You just don't want people to have something terrible happen to them and right away they say, 'I forgive you,'" she says. "It doesn't mean anything. You haven't forgiven in the true sense of the word."

It's a process. People need time to rebuild trust and find a new equilibrium.

Some incidents will take more time for a person to heal from. Book says victims of violent crimes often need at least five to 10 years to "thaw out," if they decide to forgive at all.

The closeness of the relationship between the two people can dictate how long the process can take, Zingaro says. For instance, it might be easier to forgive a family member than a total stranger.

"A COURAGEOUS STEP"

Whatever the circumstances, forgiveness generally doesn't come easily, and individuals may have to conquer some natural instincts to achieve it.

"Everybody has a need for power and control. We're born with that," Zingaro says. "When people have something really awful happen to them, they sometimes believe they have more power and control by harboring deep resentment or anger toward the person who did it."

The opposite is true, he says. You increase your power and control by letting go of anger and resentment, because holding onto revenge or hard feelings takes energy. The more energy you exert doing that, the less you have for all the other aspects of your life.

Forgiveness can be liberating emotionally, freeing people from revenge fantasies and the burdens of anger, resentment and hurt.

"It is a courageous step to be the first one to offer the olive branch and say, 'Let's put this behind us,'" Keenan says. "If you can do something like that, the outcome is incredibly worthwhile."

Book says most of the people who go through the Victims' Voices Heard program agree. They often feel tremendously relieved after they meet their attackers face to face.

"It's like putting everything in a basket, shoving it to the offender, and saying, 'Here, I've been carrying this. Now, you take it.'" **HF**

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Program Helps Victims on the Road to Forgiveness

Moving on after a tragedy is an important step in recovery.

Nearly five years ago, Kim Book began Victims' Voices Heard, a program that helps victims of violent crimes meet with their offenders. The program, currently funded through the Administrative Office of the Courts and run by People's Place, gives victims the chance to meet their attacker in order to start the healing process. The statewide program is entirely voluntary.

Forgiveness isn't a requirement for participating in Victims' Voices Heard, but Book knows firsthand the power it can have. After her 17-year-old daughter was murdered, she forgave the killer.

"Yes, what happened to my daughter was horrendous. It hurt very much," she says. "[The offender] has never taken responsibility, never said he's sorry. But I needed to forgive him to move forward with my life. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be doing this program today."

Before the face-to-face meeting, Book

works separately for six months with the victim and offender to prepare. The victim goes on a tour of the institution, while the offender is expected to take a hard look at how the crime affected other people.

"It's hard to sit with me," Book says about the prep time. "I do hold you accountable."

As of April 15, 11 pairs of victims and offenders had successfully gone through the program. Suzanne, a program participant, was one of them.

"I faced the man who raped me," she says. "I looked him in the eye, asked most of my questions, heard his answers, and told him that I forgave him and that God would forgive him, too. I also got to hear that he was sorry for the pain he

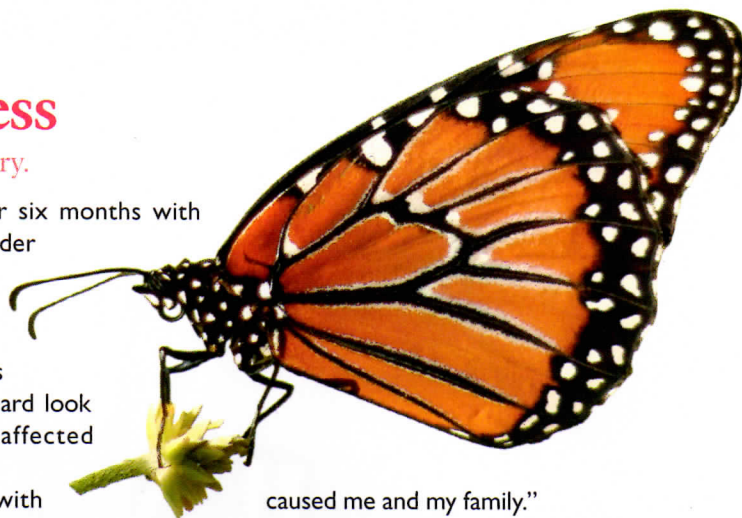
caused me and my family."

Suzanne recommends the program to others, even if they don't want to forgive the offender. Either way, it allows people to take back some of the power they can feel was ripped from them.

"It's not about closure. We never use that word. It's never over," Book says. "Meeting with your offender is not going to fix everything for you, but it does close a chapter."

For more information on Victims' Voices Heard, call 697-7005.

—Mike Bederka



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