

# WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



## To forgive and move on with Fred Luskin

**Jen Fisher (Jen):** Hi! WorkWell listeners. I'm really excited to share that my book *Work Better Together* is officially out. Conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you inspired this book. It's all about how to create a more human-centered workplace, and as we return to the office for many of us, this book can help you move forward into postpandemic life with strategies and tools to strengthen your relationships and focus on your well-being. It's available now from your favorite book retailer.

When we're hurt by others, we have the choice to forgive or hold onto a grudge. We often think of forgiveness as a gift we give someone who has done us wrong, but forgiveness is just as impactful to the giver. The act of forgiving is good for your health. It can lower blood pressure, improve mental health, reduce stress, and even help you sleep better. When you've been hurt, it can be hard to let go, but with the right tools, it's possible to learn to forgive and move on from things.

This is the WorkWell podcast series live from the World Happiness Summit in Miami, Florida. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, Chief Well-Being Officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

I'm here with Dr. Fred Luskin. He's one of the world's leading researchers and teachers on the subject of forgiveness, and the author of the best-selling books, *Forgive for Good* and *Forgive for Love*. He is the director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects, an ongoing series of workshops and research projects that investigate the effectiveness of his forgiveness methods on a variety of populations. He has helped people who have suffered from violence in Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone, as well as the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. He's also a senior consultant on health promotion at Stanford University and a professor at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology.

Fred, welcome to the show.

**Dr. Fred Luskin (Fred):** Thank you.

**Jen:** Tell us about yourself and tell us how you became passionate about forgiveness and wanting to research and teach people about forgiveness.

**Fred:** My name is Fred. I work at Stanford. I direct their Forgiveness Project. I have children. They feel like a decent person. Forgiveness emerged from me because of how miserable I was when I was badly hurt. It emerged from me because I completely couldn't do it and I suffered a long time very deeply and that deep suffering combined with a strong need to get out of my doctoral program made me take the

wounding that I had had and some of its resolution and try to turn that into a research project to help other people. That would be the nub of it.

**Jen:** Can you tell us what forgiveness is and what do people misunderstand about forgiveness because, as you and I were just saying, it's not something we talk about often? What does it mean to forgive?

**Fred:** It's a big challenge to the ego and it's a big challenge to our hoped-for sense with the center of the universe, since our consciousness is so located with us being central and hugely important and special. Things happen to us regularly and things happen to us that we don't want, that we can't control, and that hurt. It's very hard for people to enter into the vulnerable state where they can accept that and deal with it. Forgiveness is that process of moving from reactivity, pushing it away, negativity, dislike to come inside where you're capable of acceptance and kindness and goodwill primarily towards your own life, secondarily towards whomever it is or whatever it is might have hurt you.

**Jen:** We all here have heard that forgiveness is primarily good for us. I mean that the other person that you're forgiving...

**Fred:** They could be dead. It's probably not that important to them whether you forgive just yet.

**Jen:** ... or they may never know that you forgave them.

**Fred:** Often.

**Jen:** Why is forgiveness important for us?

**Fred:** There's a couple. The easiest answer is you're at more peace. The other answer, which is a little deeper than that, is that you're capable of appreciating the life you have. Unforgiveness is an argument with our own life. No, my partner didn't treat me right. No, I didn't get the job I deserve. No, I got sick. Whatever it is, it's an argument with how our life unfolded. Forgiveness allows us to stop arguing with our life. In that perspective, let's just say I walked in here with a sense that people who interview me aren't fair or they're not responsive. I'm going to walk in here with baggage. I'm going to bring that to this interpretation, and very often that causes me to 1) feel aggravated that I have to do it again, but 2) maybe pretty quickly jump into some kind of reaction to something you said because I carry this baggage with me. If I don't have that baggage, I just sit down and I'm ready to talk to you. I'm at peace. Then, depending on where you go, which is a metaphor of depending where our life goes, I just go there. If you ask a question that's not the right question, I might answer a different question, but I'm not stopped up in resentment towards something from my past that wasn't right. I'm not contaminating my present.

**Jen:** Is forgiveness, do we forgive ourselves or do we just forgive others?

**Fred:** You can forgive anything if you want. You can forgive that bottle if you want to. It's entirely up to you. Let's say the bottle leaked or blew up. I mean, you might want to take that bottle and forgive it. We forgive anything that we resent in the past for not being exactly what we wanted it to be. And so that agita that causes higher blood pressure, causes muscle tension, causes immune dysregulation, heightens the perception of pain. It does all that. When you release it, you give your body a chance to heal and you give your mind again the opportunity to actually be in your present life.

**Jen:** Other than the obvious, somebody does something that hurts us or injures us. How do we know that we need to forgive?

**Fred:** Have you ever tried meditating?

**Jen:** I have, yes.

**Fred:** Have you ever noticed when you're meditating, how annoyed and angry you are when you first start looking at your mind? That's one of the ways you know is when you quiet down a little bit, you see all these resentments and tightenings bubbling up. That's the internal metric. The external metric is watch your speech. If somebody asks you, and I'm just making this up, what do you think of your ex? You give a 30-second digression. Then, it's clear that you haven't forgiven, but if your digression isn't that harsh, but I don't know, we don't talk much, but you can feel the edge. Speech, body posture, internal dialogue, those are all indicators that you're still holding onto stuff.

**Jen:** Forgiveness, is it a practice that we should cultivate and do daily? Tell me what that looks like.

**Fred:** Isn't everything a practice?

**Jen:** I think so, yeah.

**Fred:** What you practice becomes easier to do the next time and becomes embedded in your nervous system so that it becomes normal. Let's say we all had some practice of bitterness about something. The more we practice that, the easier it is for the brain to retrieve and the more quickly that becomes the default and the less we notice it. Bringing it to consciousness or the mindfulness of it, that's a practice. What am I feeling? What am I saying? What am I doing? What kind of story am I telling about my own life? That would probably be the single metric of forgiveness. If you wanted one test of yourself, find something that not that long ago you resented. Now, watch how long it takes for your neck to tighten up as you start to talk about it, because you'll see how quickly you become adrenalized. When you forgive, it's like you're just talking about something, 'Oh okay, two years ago, they didn't do what I wanted.' It's not like it disappears, but it's no longer stored in an energetic that keeps it as a danger.

**Jen:** I'm processing all of this as you're talking about it. In some people's lives, there's huge things that happen that are seemingly unforgivable. As opposed to 'I don't like my ex.'

**Fred:** Yeah I understand.

**Jen:** I'm not trying to diminish some problems over others, but there are things that happen in life just seem unforgivable. How do we wrap our heads around that?

**Fred:** Everything is forgivable by somebody, just like everything is unforgivable by somebody. It doesn't exist in the event. It's in the interpretation and the processing of the event. Now, clearly if you take 100 people whose children were killed in a war, you're going to have a good number of them angry and victim feeling for quite a while. Yet if you take 100 people with hot water, you'll probably find fewer of them, but there will be somebody who just won't let that go and there will be somebody even in the worst of circumstances that not only is at peace, but is trying to teach other people how to be at peace. That's just the human experience is that there's no one response. One of the differentiators between deep insults and wounds and more trivial is that the deeper ones take more time. One as an aggrieved person would have to give oneself time to suffer to be able to forgive. If something really painful

happens to me, I need to know that maybe for months on end my life is going to be really painful. That's a permission, that's an emotional intelligence permission. Many people don't grant themselves that permission. They don't recognize that loss and change require time of suffering. If you allow that process to proceed, then you come to a point where the negative reactivity doesn't feel so good anymore. There comes to a point where everybody says at some point they mean I heed it, but I'm really tired of being pissed off. I'm really tired of keeping the covers over my head not coming out for air. It's been two years since they left. That kind of thing. That's the crucial moment, that's the moment that culturally we need to teach people that to not stay perseverative, on anger or self-pity, but to recognize there's a point where we don't need that information anyway. That happens in all insults. Some may take longer, some require more support, but having worked with people who have had immediate family members to murder, I've work with people who had family members killed at 9/11. I've worked with people in Sierra Leone. All over the world I've worked with people who have suffered the awfulest things, and yet there's a moment, where you meet them and you just look at them and you know that given the right nudge, they can choose that tomorrow morning when the sun comes up, they want to see it come up. They don't want to be stuck in not seeing it come up because of the pain. Everybody can get there. That's the human grief cycle. It takes longer. It may require more support for a devastating wound, but we will get there. People get over the death of their spouses. People get over the death of their children. These are huge life challenges, but they're not unforgivable. At least according for me.

**Jen:** In that moment when you no longer want to hold onto that anger and pain, how do leave that?

**Fred:** That's partly what we do.

**Jen:** You've developed a process for forgiveness. Can you talk us through that?

**Fred:** Let me ask you to just take a couple of slow deep breaths into and out of your belly, like just at very beginning of meditation. I won't do this for long. I know it's dead air, but let me just ask you that when you inhale, have your abdomen expand, the normal belly breathing, not your chest, but your abdomen.

Then, just bring an image to your mind. This is a very quick truncated of someone you love.

Just bring an image to your mind of someone you love.

While you're breathing and just notice that that can cool you down, maybe touch your heart for a moment.

We might tell people to start there. Right there, right now. You're in touch with something that isn't aggrieved. Now, do you want to stay there or do you want to go back to your grief? It's always practice and choice. It's just there is always an alternative response inside of us. Now, if somebody happened to your kid two weeks ago, that space is too small to touch, but if it happened two years ago, it's not too small to touch. That was a moment of it.

I'll tell you another moment we did on Stanford's campus where we brought people, mothers from Northern Ireland who had their children murdered. We brought them to one of the big windows of one of the buildings, and we had them face the sun. Everybody like put their arms up like this. This is California, hippie stuff I know. We put our arms up. We had the sun hid. We said feel the warmth and

just recognize that the same earth that birthed your son and killed your son is putting sunshine on you now. You pay attention to which of those you want. The sun feels good. Once you make that commitment to rejoining the world, so to speak, then you look for more situations where you relax and you open and you no longer define yourself quite as much by what happened in the past.

**Jen:** We talked about forgiveness is for yourself.

**Fred:** Sometime, yes.

**Jen:** Most of the time.

**Fred:** Most of the times.

**Jen:** Sometimes people may not even know or be around, but what about those that do know that they've been forgiven? How does that impact them? What does that look like? How does that show up?

**Fred:** You got to be really careful. Let's say you have a married couple and one of them cheated on the other and the person admits the infidelity. Then, the person's going, 'Uh, oh. Can I get over this? Do I forgive them?' Then, after a while, if they make peace with it, it's very therapeutic to come to the other part and say, 'I hated you for a while. I hated all of this, but we've stuck it out and now nine months later, I get it. It wasn't right, but I get it and I forgive you.' That's essential to share. If it's somebody you don't have an important relationship with, then it's kind of up to you. If it's somebody you're in an actual feud with, it's probably best to keep it to yourself because they might take it, what are you forgiving me for? I have about 12,000 things to forgive you for. You have to be both strategic and intelligent what you do with your both forgiveness and unforgiveness. The one thing I will say though is it's very important to recognize when you're holding too much negativity towards yourself and that you want to make careful, deliberate steps to release.

**Jen:** Talk to me about how you do that.

**Fred:** First, you have to admit that you did wrong, which is what keeps a lot of people from doing it. You got to say, 'my bad', and really mean that. Like not my bad this big, my bad. Second, that bad impacted you for the worse. My bad, your wound, my responsibility. I'm sorry. Part of it is saying a sincere apology, 'I'm sorry. Anything I can do to make it right?' That's like a thing. Then, you have undergone the inner process of 'My bad hurts somebody else. I make that connection either inside of me or to them. I see if there's anything I can do about it. Then, I ask myself, what can I do so this has a less likelihood of happening again?' If I follow those steps, actually do the work, this is a little sideways of 12-step programs, but it's not that far sideways. You have to do something. If you do that, then within a period of time, you can let yourself off the hook even if they didn't. When you've harmed yourself as opposed to harming the world, the two necessary things are articulate the wrong and your suffering and change if you need to. If you're an alcoholic, stop being alcoholic. I don't mean to sound so trivial, but it is. If you're a liar, stop lying. The forgiveness piece is not as important as the change in behavior.

**Jen:** Because that shows. You've worked with people all over the world. You were talking about that before. Are there stories that have struck you or stuck with you about forgiveness? Things that, I guess maybe you didn't think people could overcome.

**Fred:** I forgave my mother-in-law.

**Jen:** Okay...

**Fred:** That should be on The New York Times.

**Jen:** But just real atrocities.

**Fred:** No, I'm partly kidding. Many. I'll tell you two, one from real tragedy and one from just human decency. One of the groups that we brought from Northern Ireland, first group was mothers who had their children murdered on both sides of the conflict; the second group was a wider range of family members, who had had people killed on the violence, brother, sisters, grandmas, that kind of stuff. In the first session, we sent these people back to Northern Ireland. A couple of them came back. One of the women who was probably close to 60 at that time, her daughter came up to myself and my partner who were doing this and gave us a hug and said, 'Thanks for giving us our mother back.' That even though the kid, her son, had been killed almost 20 years earlier, she was dead to the present. We did everything we could to bring her from 20 years into now and basically we gave her the instruction along the line that was, 'You'll never get your kid back, but love the kids who still live. Just don't take a second more away from them, please. Love them with everything you got, because that's all you can do.' She did to the best she could. Her daughter came and thanked us. That was about as touching as I've had.

Another one was completely unexpected. In one of my first forgiveness classes, there was a woman there who was in chronic pain. I mean some kind of back thing. I got to know her a little bit after the sessions ended. It was done in group work. I got to know her after the sessions ended and she talked to me and she told me, 'Fred, I don't know you from a hole in the wall, but I took what your forgiveness stuff was. I thought about it. I recognized that the reason I came to the class was I was so furious because my husband and I had been in a motorcycle wreck and it threw me off the motorcycle and I hurt my back and I couldn't forgive him. We were doing badly and she said well and then, she explained a little more that, 'We were in a very bad space in our marriage or we were fighting and because we were fighting, he didn't pay attention to the road. His motorcycle slipped away and slammed into a tree. He had brain damage and I hurt my back.' She said though, 'But after the class and reflecting on it for a few months, I realized it wasn't just his fault. I didn't have to be screaming at him in his motorcycle either. We got divorced, but I made the decision that I was going to help take care of him because he hadn't fully recovered from his brain injury and it wouldn't happen without forgiveness.' I've heard enough of those. I don't take credit for it. It's forgiveness there. We created the capacity to forgive, but it's a very necessary capacity for all of us.

**Jen:** What about our children? I can speak for myself. I was told to say, 'I'm sorry.'

**Fred:** That's a good idea, especially if you did wrong.

**Jen:** Especially, if we did wrong. But as children, I don't remember being taught about forgiveness.

**Fred:** The most important demonstrator of forgiveness for your family is do you do it, not what you talk about. If you have a partner and you show your children that you forgive that partner, they will learn forgiveness. If you show your children that you battle your partner and that you bring up the past, that's what they'll learn. If they watch mom and dad arguing about what happened nine years ago, they learn to do that. If they watch mom and dad resolving grievances and treating each other as flawed people, that's what they'll learn. The other demonstration that you will do for them is how do you treat their mistakes? If kid doesn't clean up his room for two months, how do you handle that? Do you have any

understanding? Do you relate to the kids vulnerabilities and weaknesses? Those are, again, your demonstrations of whether you forgive. It doesn't matter what you say, at some level. That's the unfortunate part.

**Jen:** The fact that we were told to say, 'I'm sorry.'

**Fred:** Sorry is good. It's important to model it.

**Jen:** It is, but do you think we potentially overuse the word, 'I'm sorry' because we don't back it up with action.

**Fred:** 'I'm sorry' is essential. And 'I'm sorry' plus caretaking is when it becomes really powerful. If I do wrong with my girlfriend. And I say, 'I'm sorry.' That's great. But if I go, 'I'm sorry. Do you need to talk?' 'I'm sorry. Let's just sit for a minute.' 'I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to make it right?' That's where the power is, not just the words 'I'm sorry' because that sincere desire to make nice after you made not so nice, that's where the power is.

**Jen:** Tell me about the Stanford Forgiveness Project.

**Fred:** It started with my doctoral dissertation. We got a grant to replicate and expand it. We then did a whole series of research projects and then I did enough research to satisfy myself, even though I do a little bit now. Now, simply it's not that active. I go, I do some peacekeeping work. Recently, I made a couple of trips to Colombia to help them set up some forgiveness things. There's been situations like that. I'm training other people to teach forgiveness. We got a grant from the State of Hawaii to come in and train people in forgiveness. I don't do it so much anymore. I'm a little more interested all these years for this, a little bit broader definition of happiness. I've also started to do more teaching at Stanford for the Graduate School of Business because and after all these years, I like teaching happier, healthier people, not just people whose kids were killed. So, when the executive ed programs come in and I get to talk about this stuff, but not in such gritty terms, and it's just a component of how do you live an emotionally competent life. That's more I'm focused now.

**Jen:** Got it. How does forgiveness show up in the workplace since you are teaching graduate business students? Obviously, the same way it shows up in the rest of our lives, but as leaders, I guess how do we bring that to the workplace? Certainly forgiveness is not something that is regularly talked about in the workplace. In some in some ways, I think some of the cultures of competitiveness that we've created.

**Fred:** No question. We did one research project where we ran in for a couple of years and taught people a forgiveness-based emotional competence. We taught financial advisors in groups of 20. Forgiveness is a centerpiece, but you got to be emotionally competent. We tracked them for six months over a year and we were able to show that that training led to decreases in anger and stress and increases in positivity, but it increased sales. We focused on the capacity to forgive yourself when your sales went south or when something else, and to really limit the amount of discord that you have at work, to actively go into your workplace, accept that people will be difficult, and because you want to have a little more happiness, recognize that you need to forgive them, like almost a priority, to be at your peak efficiency. And we found in that project that their sales, I don't know, went up. It was a good market for everybody. Their sales went up about 25% during the year, I'm going to say, and the corresponding comparison sample went up about 10%. So, there's something about when you don't come into

situations with contempt towards yourself or mistrust towards others, you're more productive. That would be my short answer for that.

**Jen:** That's really powerful. I think that would get many business leaders' attention for sure.

**Fred:** No question because we waste so much time on interpersonal conflict. And we waste so much energy that could be spent more productively, at least to me.

**Jen:** I completely agree with you. Fred, thank you so much for this conversation. I was so excited to have you on this podcast to talk about this topic so that we can bring it to the business world because I think it's needed. Thank you.

**Fred:** Thank you very much.

**Jen:** Absolutely.

I'm so grateful Fred could be with us today to talk about forgiveness.

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