Session 22: Forgiving Others: Releasing What We Cannot Carry

Duration: 60 minutes • Recovery education group. Ensure all participants are seated and ready

Materials: Workbooks; the Session 22 handout (Forgiveness Worksheet); a basket or bin for anyone choosing to destroy their letter in the room

Learning objectives — by the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Define forgiveness as a decision to release a debt — distinct from trust, reconciliation, and excusing
- Describe the cost of carried resentment to recovery (the Session 6 and Weeks 1–2 links)
- Name an experience of harm you are beginning — not finishing — to release, at a pace set with support

Opening (3 minutes)

Newcomer bridge (60 seconds): This is Phase 3 — Rebuilding. The one idea today is that forgiveness means stopping carrying a debt never built to collect — not excusing, trusting, or returning to danger. You are welcome here without earlier sessions; everything you need for today is in this session. Forgiveness is the most misunderstood word in recovery. It does not mean it was okay, it does not mean you trust them, and it never means returning to danger. It means one thing: I stop carrying a debt I was never built to collect. Today we define it carefully and identify one debt we are beginning — not finishing — to release, at a pace set with support.

Check-in prompt (8 minutes)

Name, craving 0–10, one word for your week — then: "Who are you still mentally arguing with — rehearsing what you would say if you finally got the chance?" Log every craving score on the roster.

Passing is honored — you may pass any question, prompt, or practice without explanation, step out and rejoin, and choose a partner-only option where one is offered.

Teaching (20 minutes)

Resentment is the heaviest luggage in early recovery: we replay the injury, prosecute it nightly, and pay for the courtroom with our peace, our sleep, and eventually, for many, a relapse 'at' the person who hurt us. Forgiveness, taught carefully, is the decision to release the debt — to stop trying to collect what cannot be collected — while keeping every wise protection in place. Three distinctions keep it safe. Forgiveness is not excusing: the wrong stays named as wrong. Forgiveness is not trusting: trust is rebuilt by someone else's changed behavior over time, or not at all. Forgiveness is not reconciliation: some relationships should not resume, and forgiveness can be complete from a permanent distance. The pace matters as much as the definition: for deep wounds, forgiveness is usually a direction walked with a counselor or pastor over time — a decision renewed on the days the feelings argue — not an emotion achieved in one group session.

- **Forgiveness frees the carrier first** The person we refuse to forgive rarely feels our resentment; our own body, mind, and recovery pay its rent daily. Release is self-preservation before it is generosity.
- **Feelings follow decisions slowly** We decide, we declare it out loud, and the emotions re-train behind the decision — the same pattern as receiving forgiveness in Week 3.
- **Some debts get released in installments** A participant may release the debt of a parent's neglect this month and find a deeper layer next year. Installments are not failure; they are how deep work goes.

Sources & Evidence — Facilitator background — do not teach

A multisite randomized trial of the REACH Forgiveness workbook found increased forgiveness and reduced anxiety and depression symptoms across five countries (Ho et al., 2024). Key sources for this session: Ho et al. (2024); Worthington (2006). Evidence strength: Strong for the brief self-directed workbook at short follow-up; group adaptation untested. Spiritual practice: Forgiveness practice — correlates with REACH Forgiveness (Recall, Empathize, Altruistic gift, Commit, Hold on); evidence: Strong (Ho et al., 2024). Full citations: Appendix H. The session's Scripture material is in its optional handout (Appendix I), as theological foundation, quoted from the King James Version. The trial was a multisite randomized waitlist-controlled trial of a 2–3 hour self-directed workbook with 2-week follow-up; group adaptation is untested.

'Evidence strength' grades the correlated mechanism, not the spiritual practice itself

Pause midway through teaching: ask, "What part of that sounds most like your life right now?" Take two or three answers, connect them to the teaching, and continue. Teach in your own words — the bullets are your map, not a script to read aloud.

Discussion questions (10 minutes)

No names of other people aloud, and headlines only — the facts stay in your private letter.

1. Which distinction — not excusing, not trusting, not reconciling — most changes forgiveness for you?
2. What has carrying your biggest resentment actually cost your recovery so far?
3. Is there a forgiveness you have performed for an audience (family, church, this program) that your heart has not caught up to? What would honesty about that look like?
4. What support would you need to begin releasing one debt — counselor, time, safety, a trusted person?

Skill practice (12 minutes)

Private writing exercise: participants write a Release Letter on the Session 22 handout (Forgiveness Worksheet) — a letter they will not send — naming the debt in facts, its cost to them, and the decision in their own words: 'I release _____ from my personal collection. I am done carrying this debt. This does not mean it was okay and it does not reopen a door that should stay closed.' Letters stay in workbooks or are destroyed by the writer at the end — their

choice, stated as a choice. The facilitator reads the decision sentence aloud before the 12-minute writing block.

Personal application — homework (5 minutes)

This week, read your release decision once a day, in the plainest words you have. If the wound is deep, book the counselor conversation — making the appointment is this week's completed homework. Participants write it in their workbook before leaving. Facilitator: name the homework again at the door as people leave.

Facilitator notes and cautions

This is the session most likely to be misused by well-meaning pressure. Facilitators never urge a participant to forgive an abuser on any timeline, never suggest forgiveness requires contact, and never let another participant preach at someone's unreleased wound. If abuse is disclosed, the pathway is support, safety, and referral — forgiveness talk can wait months, and that is the facilitator's protective call to make without apology.

Closing (2 minutes)

Feelings follow decisions slowly — that is normal, not failure. Read your release decision once a day this week, and if the wound is deep, book the counselor conversation; the appointment is the homework. Next session: amends — preparation before contact.

Fidelity check for this session: objectives named at the start ☐ craving scores logged ☐ skill practice completed in full ☐ homework written down by participants ☐ session note filed today ☐