

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Edna -- an elderly widow just moved into our community. I have learned from another neighbor that she is estranged from her children and has no other family in the area. My husband and I want to include her in our traditional family Christmas gathering, but don't want her to think that we are feeling sorry for her because she doesn't seem to have any other place to go for the holiday. Should we invite her in spite of these reservations?

-- Anna

Dear Anna,

Of course you should invite your neighbor to your Christmas celebration. You don't have to even acknowledge that you know her children are estranged or that she has no family close by. Simply say, "You may already have plans for Christmas Day, but if not, we would love to have you join us." This gives her lots of room to make a decision without feeling as though she is the object of pity.

You've got the Christmas spirit, and, in spite of what the retailers and advertisers might think, that's what really matters at this time of year (actually throughout the year). If Edna accepts your kind invitation, and offers to bring something to the feast, by all means let her. It will be good for her to feel that she is a part of the group, and not just a "guest" at the gathering. If opening presents are part of your tradition, have something wrapped up for Edna. This need not be expensive, but rather, a small token of your friendship.

Edna is lucky to have neighbors like you. But, if Edna or her children are reading this, I would like to offer some small bit of holiday advice. Get over whatever is keeping you from a relationship and expressing your love for each other. I know, I know. It's hard to forgive. No one has ever had such an evil mother/son/daughter as your family has. The truth is that nothing is unforgivable. But, as English writer C.S. Lewis once said, "Everyone thinks forgiveness is such a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive."

Not forgiving is actually harder than releasing the anger and hurt you are feeling. I don't care what happened in the past, lack of forgiveness is like walking around carrying a cinderblock. You don't travel light when you're burdened by those awful feelings. I'm not being poetic here or even anecdotal. You may not be aware of this, but scientists have been studying the effects of forgiveness on a variety of physical and psychological problems. A new study demonstrates that among people who have chronic back pain, those who have forgiven others experience lower levels of pain and less associated psychological problems (like anger and depression) than those who have not forgiven. In the first study ever to examine how the brain functions when making judgments about forgiveness and empathy, researchers found that different regions of the brain are activated when a person makes judgments about forgiving. You can find out more about this interesting research at www.forgiving.org.

Somebody once said, 'forgiveness is not an emotion, it's a decision.' So make a decision about whether or not you will keep the estrangement going until somebody dies and you're weeping over his/her casket, wishing you had made a different choice. I assure you this will happen sooner or later unless you step up, open your heart, change your brain wave patterns and extend the hand of love and family. Make amends now before it's too late.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.