Okay, So You Messed Up Big Time

Now’s the hard part: Make amends and forgive yourself.

September 8, 2014 By Kate Ferguson

When Beth and her older sister, Jean, were younger, the two got into a silly argument that escalated into unexpected rage. During the exchange, Beth reacted by viciously pinching her sister’s arm. As an adult many years later, she was still bothered by memories of her mean-spirited actions. She’d never apologized to Jean, and she felt rotten inside.

According to recent findings published in The Journal of Positive Psychology, it’s much easier to forgive ourselves if we first make amends. Saying you’re sorry—even to yourself—can be healthy. In fact, admitting wrongdoing and expressing remorse can lead to mental and physical health benefits.

Conversely, being unable to forgive yourself can trigger depression and anxiety and can weaken the immune system.

“One of the barriers people face in forgiving themselves appears to be that people feel morally obligated to hang on to those feelings. They feel they deserve to feel bad,” explains Thomas Carpenter, a Baylor University researcher and author of the findings. “Our study found that making amends gives us permission to let go.”

By the way, after Beth apologized to Jean for her childhood anger—over the delicious meal she’d prepared—she felt immensely happy.

Says Beth, “It was as if a stone had been lifted off my chest.”

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