

Debi and Jared lost 30 pounds. Brooke shed 95 pounds and says, "The mirror is not my enemy anymore." Margaret lost 35 pounds, three dress sizes and 10 percent body fat. These are only a few testimonials of thousands that could be cited of the benefits of hiring a personal trainer. Working out with a personal trainer increases your fitness-goal success rate by over 30 percent, according to a study published in the *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*.

What does a personal trainer do? He or she motivates clients by setting goals and providing feedback and accountability. Trainers also measure their clients' strengths and weaknesses with fitness assessments -- assessments taken before and after completing the program. They also provide education about general health, diet and nutrition.

Now let's leave the world of *physical* training and think of *spiritual* training. If we want to be spiritually fit, whom would we want as a fitness trainer? Of course, mentors, pastors and trusted friends could fall into this category. *Yet who could be a better personal trainer than Jesus, a trainer who specializes in forgiveness fitness?*

Scarlett Lewis lost her 6-year-old son Jesse in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He was one of 20 children killed in that horrific attack in 2012 -- an absolute nightmare come to life. Parents such as Scarlett were devastated. At first, her anger sapped all of her energy and strength. Her rage was directed at the shooter and also at the mother who unwittingly armed him.

But then she made the choice to forgive. "Forgiveness felt like I was given a big pair of scissors," she told *The Forgiveness Project*. These scissors helped her to cut her tie to the shooter and regain her personal power. "It started with a choice," she said, "and then became a process." At her son's funeral, she urged mourners to change their angry thoughts into loving ones. She saw this shift as a way to change the world.

Forgiveness starts with a choice and then becomes a process. Jesus urges us to make this choice for ourselves when he responds to Peter's question about the number of times we should forgive. "Lord," asks Peter, "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Once ... twice ... three times ... "as many as seven times?" "Not seven times," says Jesus, "but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Other translations of this verse say "seventy times seven times" ... totaling 490 times (vv. 21-22).

However you count it, Jesus is saying that your forgiveness should be countless. Limitless. Numberless. He is like a personal trainer at the gym, urging us to increase our reps and get stronger every day. Make the choice to do it, and then turn it into a process.

Jesus, the forgiveness trainer. "Forgive a multitudinous number of times," he says.

But forgiving the people who hurt us can be hard to do. Still, Jesus recommends it because forgiveness is good for you. Forgiveness can enable you to regain your personal power, just like Scarlett Lewis.

Unfortunately, many people fail to forgive. Jesus tells the story of a servant -- let's call him Bernie -- who owes his boss several *million* dollars. Since Bernie cannot come up with the cash, the boss orders him to be sold, along with his wife and children and possessions. Back in those days, it was legal for the boss to do something like that. Bernie throws himself to the ground and begs to be given more time to pay. Out of pity for him, the boss forgives his debt.

Happy ending, right? Not so fast. As Bernie leaves the boss's house, he sees another servant who owes him a few dollars. He grabs the man -- let's call him George -- by the throat and says, "Pay what you owe."

George hits his knees and begs Bernie for more time to settle his debt. But Bernie refuses and throws George into prison until he can pay up. Although Bernie has been forgiven a debt of several million dollars, he cannot find it in his heart to go easy on George over a few days pay. Clearly, he needs forgiveness training (vv. 28-30).

When Bernie's fellow servants see what's happening, they're horrified. After they reported what they saw, the boss summons Bernie and asks him, "Should you not have had mercy on George as I had mercy on you?"

Bernie knows that he is so busted. The boss then has little patience with him. And so God will do "to every one of you," promises Jesus, "if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart".

You think your fitness coach is tough. Jesus is tougher. Jesus demands that we forgive other people, based on the fact that we have all been forgiven. He insists that we make the choice to forgive, day after day, and turn it into a process that makes us stronger and stronger.

Modern research is discovering that Jesus was right about the benefits of forgiveness. Dr. Robert Enright developed therapies for helping elderly women to forgive the people who had wronged them in the past. He created two groups -- one made up of women undergoing forgiveness therapy, and one made up of women receiving therapy for emotional wounds without a focus on forgiveness. What did he find? The forgiveness therapy group showed greater improvement in emotional and psychological health than the group that did not focus on forgiveness.

Similar work is being done by Dr. Frederic Luskin, a co-founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project. Luskin offers a week of "forgiveness training," delivered in a group setting. In it, he leads discussions and exercises that are helpful to people like Bernie, the unforgiving servant in the parable of Jesus. Let's imagine that Bernie is able to attend this training. At the start of the training, Luskin would challenge him to tell his "grievance story." He would let Bernie vent about George. Then Luskin would say to him, "Bernie, why are you taking the debt of your fellow slave so personally? It's just a few dollars. Why are you seeing yourself as a victim?" Bernie might reply, "But he owes me money. I need it." "True," the doctor would say, "and there is nothing wrong with holding him accountable. Give him the time he needs to make things right. Remember that plenty of people fall into debt -- didn't you owe your boss several million dollars?"

Unfortunately, Bernie is blind to this truth about himself. How differently the parable would have ended if he had realized that he was both a debtor and a person who was owed money. By seeing himself clearly, he could have let go of the pain and the blame, and found a way to forgive George who owed him a few dollars. But he didn't. Because he failed to forgive, Bernie remained stuck in his stress. He threw George into debtor's prison and continued to feel miserable (v. 30).

This is true for us all. Our failure to forgive leaves us with a chemical reaction known as "the stress response." This is when "adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine enter the body," according to Luskin. "Those chemicals limit creativity, they limit problem-solving ... over time, they lead you to feel helpless and like a victim."

So, what is the solution? Jesus captures it well: "Forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (v. 35). Luskin says that when you forgive, you counteract the stress response along with its chemicals that make you feel like a helpless victim. "When you forgive," says the doctor, "you wipe all of that clean."

Jesus wants us to get stronger and healthier by making the decision to forgive, and then turning that choice into a process. He acts as our forgiveness trainer, challenging us to make that choice repeatedly until it becomes a part of who we are.

Yes, forgiveness is difficult. Seeing ourselves as sinners who have received forgiveness from our loving Lord is also difficult. It is much easier to hold grudges than to feel compassion toward the people who have hurt us.

But Jesus knows that forgiveness is good for us -- body, mind and spirit -- which is why he commands us to offer it to our brothers and sisters. Sometimes we need to be challenged to forgive by Jesus, our forgiveness trainer.

And it's not like Jesus is a trainer whose motto is, "Do what I say, not what I do!" Remember, as he was dying on the cross, he asked his father to forgive those executing him. And not only them, but all those needed and still need his death and resurrection to begin to appreciate the depth of divine forgiveness. People like you, and me.

Really, the old saying is true. "To err is human, to forgive, divine."

And besides, it's actually good for you!

*Pastor Keith*