You can experience the greatest joys in family relationships but also some of the most acute pain. Sometimes the hurt is accidental and sometimes it is deliberate. The words from an old song, “We always hurt the one we love - the one we shouldn’t hurt at all,” are all to true.

Psychologist and family therapists are investigating how an individual should react when they are hurt by another. One of their answers is a familiar, age-old remedy - forgiveness. In the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (1997) Michael McCullough and co-researches report that psychological research on forgiveness has increased during the last ten years. There is evidence showing a positive relationship between forgiveness and marital adjustment, depression, hostile anger and anxiety.

They also report among mental health professionals that there is a positive attitude towards the act of forgiving. This may sound surprising, for as Roy Denton and Michael Martin point out in the Journal of Family Therapy (1998), there is a reluctance to use the word forgiveness in psychotherapy because of the word’s association with religion. But these researchers report that forgiving plays a “key part in psychological healing.”

If you are like most people, your first reaction to being hurt is far from forgiveness. In a book titled “What Predicts Divorce,” J.M. Gottman found that the first reactions are righteous indignation characterized by anger and contempt which leads to retaliation and withdrawal or estrangement. Forgiveness on the other hand, allows you to escape being trapped and bound by these negative emotions. Forgiveness provides a way out and a way to heal your emotional wounds in a manner that moves you toward positive relationships. So, how can forgiving your offenders benefit your life? Perhaps the story of Marietta Jaeger can help:

While on a family vacation, a kidnapper slit open the tent and Marietta’s seven-year-old daughter was abducted. It was more than a year later she learned that her daughter had been slain. During that year she daily practiced forgiveness. When she was finally able to speak with the killer she had forgiven him and went on to lead a productive life. But her husband was not so fortunate. Because he was unable to forgive, he continued to rage inwardly, developing bleeding ulcers and finally dying of a heart attack at age 56. She shares her remarkable story to help others who have been hurt.

Hopefully you will never face a tragedy like this but everyone will face countless smaller injuries and injustices even from those we most love and trust. The best way to successfully forgive others when the inevitable tragedies befall you is to practice the art of forgiveness when encountering the
small things of life.

Daily, in each family, comes the opportunity to forgive the thoughtless criticism, the missed birthday present, the failure to appreciate your efforts, the false accusation, dishonesty and a host of other inconsiderate acts. While not being blind to the reality of these actions, the forgiving person can confront the problem more directly and successfully. In this way, the forgiver is healed and the relationship is strengthened.

Children and spouses who are forgiven are not being condoned, rewarded or encouraged for their errors. Instead they can be confronted more effectively when you are known to be loving and forgiving. Furthermore, when you are forgiving you can also drop the burden of resentment and anger. It is a better way to experience each day.

The process of forgiving begins by first deciding what kind of person you want to be. Then you consciously replace the negative destructive feelings with positive emotions such as love and empathy. Finally, the process is sealed when you communicate these positive feelings to the offender.

In a family, small windows of opportunity come daily to “turn the other cheek and to respond with a soft answer, to overlook injustices. You might be inclined to say “why does it matter, they are but menial things.” Yet these small things do hurt and can grow into major problems if ignored. Coping with the lessor offense is the perfect training ground for forgiveness that will surely be needed for the greater injustices to come later in your life. Our imperfect world seems to be plagued with more divorces, more violence, amore physical and emotional abuse. So, now more than ever, the healing power of forgiveness is needed and within the family setting it is essential to health and happiness.

Larry and Janet Jenson – Larry is a research associate for BYU’s Family Studies Center. Janet is a mother of 10 and freelance writer.