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Word to Elin Nordegren: If you don't forgive, you'll never heal

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There are people in your life who've come and gone,
They let you down,
You know they hurt your pride.
You'd better put it all behind you, babe, 'cause life goes on.
You keep carryin' that anger,
It'll eat you up inside, baby

— Don Henley; The Heart of the Matter; released June 27, 1989

Elin Nordegren - or anyone who feels betrayed - would do well to heed Don Henley's words.

Recently divorced from famed golfer Tiger Woods, Nordegren told People magazine "my main focus is to try to give myself time to heal." She is working on forgiving Woods.

Healing is good. Anger causes stress, and long-term anger can "eat you up inside, baby."

Forgiving someone for a serious offense is difficult. Nevertheless, doing so is vital, according to Connie Ingram, a licensed mental-health counselor.

"'Unforgiveness' is like cancer and destroys from the inside out. In no way does forgiveness mean that the offender is off the hook for his or her actions. It simply means that the offender no longer has power over the injured party. Forgiveness is the pathway to healing - emotionally and physically."

There's yet another stressful aspect of the Nordegren/Woods divorce that most people don't face.

"Being in the public spotlight when something like this occurs is very upsetting," said Martin Thompson, director of behavioral health at St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach.

Not all stress is harmful

Of course, it's not necessarily bad when your heart races, your blood pressure rises, and your breath quickens - the usual, and normal, responses to stress. Such reactions provide you with extra strength that could, in an emergency such as a car accident, save your life.

But "stress" and "rage" are vastly different, explains Ingram, who owns Ingram & Associates Counseling & Consulting in Royal Palm Beach: "Stress is anything we think we cannot control: traffic, a flight that is not on time, meetings that start or end late.

"Rage, on the other hand, is usually person-focused. It can dominate our thoughts and behaviors, significantly reducing the quality of our relationships - even with those who are not the object of our rage. Managing rage is not enough; resolution is vital."

Chronic stress can suppress your immune system, leading to physical problems. For example, according to the Rochester Institute of Technology, a study conducted on students during exam time showed a decreased level of T-cells, which help to fight infections. In addition, the students reported an increased number of health problems,

including upper-respiratory-tract infections.

During her People interview, Nordegren said, "It's hard to think you have this life, and then all of a sudden - was it a lie? You're struggling because it wasn't real. But I survived. It was hard, but it didn't kill me."

Seeking help for unresolved anger is crucial for the health of those suffering from it, according to Pam Gionfriddo, chief executive officer of the Mental Health Association of Palm Beach County.

"The link between mind and body is very strong. Chronic stress and anger can lead to physical problems. Too much stress can kill," she said.

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SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

OF HOLDING A GRUDGE:

- Muscle and joint pain
- Inability to concentrate
- Irritability
- Generalized, negative sense of well-being (feels like a mild flu)
- Depression
- Inability to heal from medical conditions
- Anxiety and panic disorders
- Insomnia, with resultant fatigue

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

OF ANGER:

- Insecurity
- Low self-esteem due to feelings of rejection
- Fear (of the future, finances, custody issues, being alone)
- Promiscuity
- Loneliness
- Lack of trust
- Depression and other physiological or psychosomatic ailments
- Low self-confidence

Source: Connie Ingram, Ph.D.

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