

***Healing the Hurts We Didn't Deserve:
Recovering from Childhood or Adult Abuse***

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I. Introduction

- A. **Explain name change:** As you will notice, the name of this talk is a little different than that listed in the program. What I would like to talk with you about in this next hour is best captured by the title above, but obviously, that title was too long for Nancy to put in the conference brochure.
- B. The title "The Importance of Forgiveness" would also be an accurate title for this talk, for as you will see from the research I cite, one of the best ways to heal from the hurts we didn't deserve is to gradually work towards a place where we can forgive.
- C. One other note as I begin: I hope to save the last 15 minutes of our time for questions and discussion, so if you have a question or a point you would like to make, jot it in the margin of your notes so you can ask it or share it during that time.
- D. **The controversy:**
1. The majority of therapists believe that forgiveness is a helpful part of the process of healing from childhood abuse. However, this belief is not universally held. For example, in her book *Forgiving and Not Forgiving*, Dr. Jeanne Safer (1999), a psychotherapist for 25 years, asserts that sometimes actions constitute such a horrible betrayal or such a violation of common decency that forgiveness is neither a necessary nor appropriate response. She believes that it is possible to find a healthy psychological resolution of such memories in other ways than through forgiveness.
 2. Likewise some Gestalt therapists believe that resolution of past traumas can sometimes be healed through forgiveness, and other times be resolved by coming to the conclusion that one was wronged and the other person should continue to be held accountable.
 3. Probably there are a number of people in this room who would agree with this position. The abuse you experienced seems unconscionable and unforgivable.
 4. There are probably others here who have been able to forgive, and who believe that forgiveness was an important step in their process of healing.
 5. When I talk about forgiveness, let me clarify a few points:
 - a. Forgiveness does not mean condoning the transgression that was done. Child abuse, whether it was physical abuse as in the case of David Pelzer, or emotional or sexual abuse, is always deplorable.
 - b. People who commit child abuse can't demand that they be forgiven. If the recipient comes to a point where they *choose* to forgive, its always a gift.
 - c. When therapists encourage forgiveness, it is neither because they condone or minimize what was done nor because they believe the transgressor deserves it, but because they believe that often it will help the client experience healing.
 - d. However, timing is critical. There is a right time for each person to consider forgiveness, but this differs for each person. We should always respect each person's right to decide when they want to consider forgiveness (or even if they want to consider forgiveness).
 - e. If you have been abused and this doesn't feel like the right time to consider forgiveness, what I would encourage you to do is simply listen, accept the points that seem appropriate to you right now, then file the handout away to read again sometime in the future when you feel inclined to consider it.

II. Some Basic Concepts in this Discussion

- A. **Forgiveness has been affirmed by most of the world religions for many thousands of years**

1. Forgiveness is a central concept in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For example, there are approximately 120 references to forgiveness in the Bible, approximately 60 in the Old Testament and 60 in the New Testament. References to forgiveness are also found throughout the Koran. In each of these religions we are told that because God forgives us when we sin, we should also be willing to forgive each other.
 2. In Buddhism, the concepts of forbearance and compassion (both of which are related to forgiveness) are considered central and important.
 3. In Hinduism, those who wish to follow the path of dharma must practice forgiveness, compassion, and forbearance.
 4. Thus all five of the major world religions encourage us to forgive those who hurt us (Rye, Pargament, Ali, Beck, Dorff, Hallisey, Narayanan, & Williams, 2000, pp. 30-32).
- B. Forgiveness has been neglected until recently by psychological clinicians and researchers**
1. Despite the fact that forgiveness (and particularly the lack of forgiveness) shapes human development in significant ways, psychiatrists and psychologists have spoken little about this topic until the very recent past (McCullough, Pargament, and Thoreson, 2000, pp. 3-7).
 2. For example, although he was a prolific writer, Freud did not say a single word about forgiveness. Nor did William James, G. Stanley Hall, E. L. Thorndike, Lewis Terman or Gordon Allport.
 3. Piaget (1932) devoted only one page out of a 335-page volume to forgiveness: most other major theorists have said even less. Hardly anything is said about forgiveness by leaders such as Carl Jung, Karen Horney, Alfred Adler or Victor Frankl.
 4. There were a few psychological writers who wrote about it anecdotally in case studies between 1930 and 1980. A very few initial studies on forgiveness appeared in the late 1980s. Mauger, Perry, Freeman, Grove, McBride and McKinney (1992) and Hebl and Enright (1993) were some of the first to publish any *empirical* research on forgiveness.
 5. Thus the empirical study of forgiveness only began in the last 10 to 15 years.
 6. However, thanks to the Templeton Foundation, there are now several centers conducting empirical research on the process of forgiveness and how clinicians can help encourage it within their clients. I will attempt to summarize some of what has been discovered.
- C. Understanding the Process of Abuse and Unforgiveness**

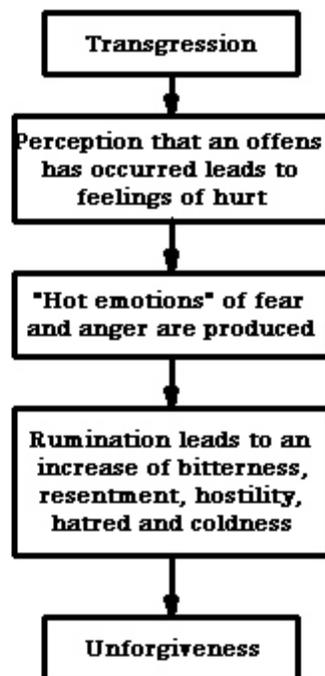


Figure 1: Adapted from Worthington, 2001, pp. 23, 113

D. Controversies regarding the definition of forgiveness

1. Does forgiveness entail only the letting go of negative feelings toward someone, or does it go further and include regaining positive feelings toward that person? [The approach the majority of those who have studied this for some time is that full forgiveness includes letting go of negative feelings towards someone, and the resumption of positive caring for them as a fellow human being.]
2. Does forgiveness include reconciliation, or is reconciliation a separate concept and process from forgiveness? [The majority of writers and researchers seem to agree that these are two related but separate processes. Sometimes people may forgive but reconciliation is impossible because the offender has died, has Alzheimer's disease, cannot be located, or is unwilling to reconcile. In some cases it may not be wise to reconcile (e.g., in the case of an unrepentant abuser, etc.).]
3. Are there differences between the process of forgiveness for less serious offenses and forgiveness for serious life-changing traumas? [There does seem to be a recognition sometimes a transgression is so traumatic that it changes a person's core beliefs, i.e., one's basic beliefs about oneself, others, and one's relationship to others. When a transgression causes unhealthy changes in one's core beliefs, the recovery process will be need to include treatment processes that allow for the re-transformation of those core beliefs in addition to forgiveness of the person as an individual.]

E. Defining forgiveness and differentiating it from related concepts

1. Forgiveness should be differentiated from the following (adapted from McCullough, Pargament, & Thoreson, 2000, p. 8):
 - a. *Pardoning*, which is a legal or governmental process
 - b. *Condoning* or *excusing*, which involves finding justifications for the offense
 - c. *Forgetting*, which means the memory of the offense decays and no longer is part of conscious awareness,
 - d. *Denying, distracting oneself, or repressing the memory*, which involves using various cognitive methods to deny or distract oneself from the fact that an offense occurred, or
 - e. *Reconciliation*, which involves restoration of the relationship, and, if it occurs, usually does not occur until after forgiveness has occurred.
2. Worthington (2001): "Forgiveness is defined as the emotional replacement of (1) hot emotions of anger or fear that follow a perceived hurt or offense, or (2) unforgiveness that follows ruminating about the transgression, by substituting positive emotions such as unselfish love, empathy, compassion, or even romantic love" (p. 33).
3. Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998) define forgiveness as "a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her" (pp. 46-47).
4. Enright and Coyle (1998) believe genuine forgiveness has taken place when "one who has suffered an unjust injury chooses to abandon his or her right to resentment and retaliation, and instead offers mercy to the offender" (p. 140).
5. Pargament and Rye (1998) say, "forgiving is an attempt to shift from a life devoted to avoiding further pain and the memory of injustice to one dedicated to pursuing peace" (p. 63).
6. Worthington (2001): "Reconciliation [in contrast to forgiveness] is reestablishing trust in a relationship after trust has been violated" (p. 33).

F. Five factors that affect the process of forgiveness

1. **The depth of the transgression:**
 - a. Worthington talks about "nickel wounds" (those minor offenses that can easily be forgiven with the passage of time), "five dollar wounds" (those humiliating situations that remain in our memories for many years, although with the passage of time we can often laugh about them),

- “fifty-dollar wounds” (those actions that change our lives forever), and “five-hundred dollar wounds” (those actions that cause deep pain, such as repeated physical abuse or sexual abuse).
- b. Clearly the depth of the transgression affects a person’s ability to forgive.
 - c. As we counsel with clients, we need to be sensitive to the difference between the difficulty involved in forgiving a “five dollar wound” and a “five hundred dollar wound.” Otherwise we may be guilty of trivializing deeply hurtful experiences with superficial, quick-fix interventions (Thoreson, Luskin, & Harris, 1998, p. 176).
 - d. On that note, probably there’s no experience in most male’s lives that enables them to truly understand how devastating it is to have been sexually abused as a young female child. There’s nothing in typical male experience that has a similar emotional impact. Therefore as husbands and therapists we (males) can strive to be respectful and caring, but its often hard for us to understand fully the pain and residual effects of such abuse, or to understand the length of time that healing often takes.
2. **The relationship with the offender:** If the offender is an intimate acquaintance, it is both harder to forgive as well as harder not to forgive.
 - a. It is harder to forgive because we believe an intimate acquaintance should have been aware of how much their offense would hurt us. The fact that they harmed us feels like insensitivity, but even worse, feels like betrayal. These two factors make it harder to forgive them.
 - b. But because they are intimate acquaintances, it also make it harder not to forgive. We often have daily contact (sometimes multiple times a day). It takes effort to keep up one’s guard and a wall of hostility. Therefore we feel pressure to forgive and be done with carrying such an arduous burden day after day.
 3. **The intentionality of the offender:** An offense is harder to forgive if it seems that it was done intentionally than if it was done by accident.
 4. **The lingering harm done by the transgression:** Some transgressions cause a single moment of pain and then are over. Other transgressions cause continuing pain, because the nature of the offense affects us in a personal way for days or months or even years (for example, a parent’s decision to leave the family may cause the spouse and children to feel pain for years afterward). Offenses that cause harm that lasts over a long period of time are harder to forgive than those that cause a single episode of pain.
 5. **The cognitive habits of the abused person:** some people are more quick to forgive and let go of an offense. Others may be more likely to interpret the behavior of others as offensive, and to ruminate on those perceived offenses (see Figure 1 above):

G. Unforgiveness may have at least five negative effects on our lives

1. Fritz Perls, the originator of Gestalt Therapy, asserted that maintaining resentment and bitterness consumes a great deal of adaptive energy—energy that could be available for more constructive tasks.
2. Unresolved resentments cause us to develop expectations that others in the future will harm us as we have been harmed by people in the past. This can cause us to erect defensive walls that protect us, but that also prevent us from developing the deep friendships we all need in order to be healthy
3. Unforgiveness keeps us from being reconciled to significant others in our lives: Dr. Safer’s unforgiveness kept her from seeing her father for the last several months of his life, even though she knew he was dying and he begged her to come. Though he has been dead 20 years, she has never visited his grave once.
4. Unforgiveness can cause us to feel guilty for not being willing to let go of our resentment and bitterness.
5. Unforgiveness can affect our children, for we are their most significant models.

- H. **Why Are People Sometimes Reluctant to Forgive?** Exline and Baumeister (2000, pp. 143-149) suggest six possible reasons, depending on the person and the situation. They include:
1. **The depth of anger or hurt the person is experiencing**
 2. **The cost of canceling a debt:** Offenses have sometimes been viewed as actions which cause the offender to owe something to the victim. Forgiveness means cancelling that debt, often with no assurance that the victim will receive anything in return.
 3. **Fear that the transgression will be repeated if one forgives.** Sometimes victims believe that if they do not forgive, this gives them some leverage in keeping the perpetrator from repeating the offense. Particularly if the perpetrator remains unrepentant, they may believe they need to maintain this leverage for their own protection. [Note: As therapists you may want to explore the belief that unforgiveness gives the victim additional leverage in the relationship, and that this is a healthy way of maintaining control. Depending on the personality of the offender, lack of forgiveness may not increase one's control over the other, and may even increase the chances of further offenses (because the person resents not being forgiven). Even for those persons for whom unforgiveness may provide some leverage (because the offender feels guilty), you may want to help the client look at whether being unforgiving is a healthy way to have influence in the relationship. Generally there are healthier ways (e.g., assertiveness) of having influence on or protecting oneself from the other person than not forgiving.]
 4. **Fear of appearing weak:** Some people equate forgiveness with co-dependency. Since they do not want to appear weak or co-dependent, they are unwilling to forgive.
 5. **Belief that justice will not be served:** Especially if the perpetrator remains unrepentant and has not suffered any negative consequences for his or her offense, some people fear that if they forgive the demands of justice will never be met.
 6. **Loss of benefits of victim status:** Being seen as a victim may be an effective way of eliciting sympathy and support from others, and some people may be unwilling to give this up.
[**Counseling note:** When people are unwilling to forgive, it may be helpful to explore whether any of the following beliefs (or others) are behind their unwillingness to forgive. Socratic questions may be used to help them see that, while each of the above reasons has an element of truth in it, holding onto unforgiveness may have more physical, emotional, and relational costs than they have been aware of.]

III. **Research Findings That Confirm What We Intuitively Know About Forgiveness**

- A. More thorough apologies generally lead both children and adults to be more willing to forgive (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Exline, & Baumeister, 1998).
- B. As children and adults get older they usually grow in their ability/willingness to forgive (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Mullet & Girard, 2000).
- C. Taking responsibility for the offense, making a public confession, and making a confession before one has been found out and accused of wrongdoing all increase other people's willingness to forgive (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas (1991).
- D. Self-justification or refusal to accept responsibility generally leads to harsher judgments of offenders and a greater desire to punish them (Exline and Baumeister, 2000, p. 137).
- E. Forgiveness has been associated with increased mental health and marital satisfaction, whereas blaming and revenge have been found to correlate with poorer mental health, criminality, poor recovery from bereavement and poor health outcomes (Exline and Baumeister, 2000, p. 134).
- F. The willingness to forgive one's spouse has been found to significantly predict the level of marital adjustment (Rackley, 1993; Woodman, 1992).

IV. **Research Findings that Teach Us New Things About the Process and Importance of Forgiveness**

A. **Stages of Forgiveness Model**

1. Enright and his colleagues developed a stages of forgiveness model based on Kohlberg's theory of the development of moral reasoning (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992). Each stage in Enright's forgiveness model corresponds to one stage in Kohlberg's moral development model. Those are:
 - a. Stage 1: *Revengeful Forgiveness*. I can forgive someone who wrongs me only if I can punish him to a similar degree to my own pain.
 - b. Stage 2: *Conditional or Restitutional Forgiveness*. If I can get back what was taken from me, I can forgive.
 - c. Stage 3: *Expectational Forgiveness*. I will forgive if others expect me to do so.
 - d. Stage 4: *Lawful Expectational Forgiveness*. I forgive because my philosophy of life or religion demands that I do so.
 - e. Stage 5: *Forgiveness as Social Harmony*. I forgive because it restores harmony or good relations in society. It is a way of maintaining peaceful relations.
 - f. Stage 6: *Forgiveness as Love*. I forgive because it promotes love. Because I must truly care for each person, a hurtful act on her part does not alter that sense of love. This kind of relationship keeps open the possibility of reconciliation and closes the door on revenge (Adapted from Mullet and Girard, 2000, p. 115).
2. To test Kohlberg's theory as it relates to forgiveness, Enright and his colleagues gave a series of vignettes to people of various ages and analyzed their responses according to the six stages above. They found that the average 9 to 10 year old was at Stage 2, the average 15 to 16 year old was close to Stage 3, the average college student and adult was in Stage 4. Only a few adults reached Stages 5 or 6.
3. Enright and his colleagues studied several Asian cultures and found similar forgiveness patterns.
4. At a practical level, this means that most adults who do forgive do so because they believe their philosophy of life or their religious beliefs call them to do so.

B. **An important reason why forgiveness and reconciliation are so hard to achieve:**

1. Several investigators have conducted research that has found the following (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998, p. 83): When an objective offense is committed, victims tend to exaggerate its severity, and perpetrators tend to minimize it. Neither sees the offense objectively. Thus perpetrators often tend to deny the seriousness of what they have done, and believe that they need not apologize or they give apologies which their victims see as inadequate. Victims often demand apologies or reparations that perpetrators view as excessive.
2. In this situation, victims may not forgive because they view the perpetrator as inadequately repentant.
3. In marital or family situations, the victim's response to the initial offense may seem disproportionate to the perpetrator, so the perpetrator may become defensive and self-justifying. The victim may become angry, thinking the perpetrator is minimizing and justifying the offense. Thus each interaction escalates the conflict.

C. **Two approaches to encouraging people to forgive: The self-benefit approach versus the empathy approach** (Worthington, 2001, pp. 11-14)

1. In the self-benefit approach, people are encouraged to forgive because of the benefits it will bring to them, e.g., the health benefits of lowered stress, lowered blood pressure, less anger, less hostility. The idea is: forgive so you'll feel better.
2. In the empathy approach, people are urged to forgive by appealing to their altruistic motives, e.g., we all stand in need of forgiveness by someone, sometime: so does the perpetrator. By forgiving, you give the gift that they need most. Empathize with the one who hurt you until you can identify with his or her humanity, with his or her failings.

3. Findings:
 - a. Worthington compared the two approaches to forgiveness with a one-hour forgiveness group and an eight-hour forgiveness group.
 - b. In one-hour groups, the self-benefit approach produced more forgiveness than the empathy-based approach, but there was no increase in forgiveness from one hour to eight hours of treatment. However, encouraging one to forgive based on self-benefit produced only modest levels of forgiveness.
 - c. In the eight-hour groups, the empathy-based approach produced much more forgiveness after eight hours than after one hour. Also, compared to the self-interest group, it produced three times as much forgiveness.
 - d. Six weeks later, those who had experienced the self-benefit approach had only retained half the level of forgiveness that they had at the end of therapy. Those who had experienced the empathy-based approach retained the level of forgiveness that they had at the end of therapy.
 - e. Conclusion: *Forgiveness does benefit clients, but they will experience deeper levels of forgiveness, and retain that forgiveness longer, if we base it on them achieving empathy for their abuser than if we base it on them forgiving in order to receive psychological benefits for themselves.*

D. Unforgiveness toward previous persons in our lives can affect our present relationships: Holeman (1994) found a significant correlation between female incest survivor's level of forgiveness of their childhood perpetrators and their current marital adjustment. Lack of forgiveness was associated with poorer marital adjustment, and forgiveness was associated with more positive marital adjustment.

E. Most people who forgive use spiritual resources to help them do so:

1. Rye's doctoral dissertation (Rye and Pargament, 1997) compared the efficacy of two forgiveness interventions, one of which included religious elements and one of which did not. Subjects were women at a secular university who had been wronged in a romantic relationship. Both groups noted significant improvements in hopefulness, religious well-being, existential well-being, and three measures of forgiveness. Both groups did not significantly differ from each other at the end of treatment.
2. However, in follow up interviews Rye asked the women in both groups how they went about the process of forgiving. In both groups, the first and third most frequently used method was a religious practice of some kind. The most common method for both groups was that the women asked God for help in forgiving their former partner. The third most common practice was to pray for the person who had wronged them.
3. Thus even when spirituality is not formally included within the forgiveness intervention, people apparently turn to religious methods. It may be wise, when attempting to help a person forgive, to encourage them to use their religious beliefs (if they have them) to help in the process.

F. Forgiveness can be facilitated in individual counseling: Several empirical studies demonstrate that forgiveness can be facilitated in individual counseling (McCullough, Exline & Baumeister, 1998).

G. Forgiveness can be facilitated through psychoeducational groups explicitly designed for that purpose: Worthington, Sandage and Berry (2000) summarize the literature in this regard:

1. Groups are most effective if they are developed with the explicit information that they are being conducted for the purpose of helping group members forgive (can be either individual offenses or multiple offenses)
2. One to two hour interventions produced little forgiveness, and sometimes were harmful, for they led people to reflect on their hurts without adequate time to help them forgive. Based on research from a number of studies, they recommend that forgiveness groups last at least six hours.

3. Although empirical data on this point is limited, based on their experience thus far they recommend that groups sessions be spaced rather than massed (e.g., meeting once a week for several weeks rather than in a marathon group session).
4. People who have suffered severe offenses (those offenses that caused change in their core beliefs about themselves, others, or their relationship to others) will probably need longer and more powerful interventions than those who have suffered less severe hurts.
5. Having *couples* who need to forgive each other together in the same group is riskier than having groups composed of unrelated individuals.

H. **When people forgive they often experience other psychological benefits as well:** Several research studies have found that people who forgive also generally experience increases in hope and self-esteem, and decreases in anxiety and depression (Enright and Coyle, 1998, p. 154).

V. **Worthington's REACH Model of Forgiveness:** (This five step model may be more generally useable for clients and therapists than Enright's model (described in the Epilogue), even though Enright's model probably helps us see more completely all the steps that are involved.)

A. **R: Recall the hurt:**

1. Almost every forgiveness research study that has been done affirms that forgiveness must first start with recognizing the depth of our hurt. Denying and minimizing it prevents us from effectively beginning the process of dealing with it.
2. We now know that when people are hurt, they tend to perceive the hurt as greater than it objectively was. In order to get a more objective picture of the hurt, try to visualize exactly what was said and done.
3. While recalling the hurt, breathe deeply. Deep, relaxed breathing in, followed by full, relaxed exhalations tends to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping us become less angry.
4. If the person who hurt you caused you numerous hurts, the accumulation of offenses is likely to cause you to see that person as an unloving or untrustworthy person. In order to forgive it is not necessary to deal with each "five dollar wound." There most likely are specific memories that symbolize a certain type of wound from that person. It probably will be helpful to visualize each symbolic scene and work through the forgiveness process for these significant scenes one by one.

B. **E: Empathize:** A second common factor among the forgiveness researchers is that in-depth forgiveness involves learning to see things from the offender's point of view. This does not mean we agree with that point of view or that we justify what was done, but we come to understand how that person, in their humanity, committed the act that they did. Steps that may help a client to develop the ability to understand the offender empathically include:

1. Imagine as vividly as possible the event as it was experienced by the person who offended you.
2. Three levels of empathy:
 - a. Understanding the point of view of the other person
 - b. Thinking and feeling *with* the other person (emotional identification).
 - c. Feeling compassion as well as emotional identification (compassionate empathy).
3. To forgive, attempt to reach the level of compassionate empathy.
4. In perceiving the offender with empathy, "one sees the other as having acted in a way human beings do, out of his or her own needs and perceptions" (Rowe, Halling, Davies, Leifer, Powers, & Van Bronkhorst, 1989, p. 242).
5. Soft emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, dependency) often hide behind hard emotions (anger, aggressiveness). To achieve empathy for the perpetrator, search for the soft emotions within them that may be hiding behind the hard emotions that provoked the offense.
6. Remember that people sometimes do hurtful things because they are being forced to by people whom they fear or people they believe they must obey

7. People sometimes do hurtful things because they are conditioned by their past (e.g., they also may have grown up in an abusive family) (e.g., David Pelzer eventually discovered that his mother had also been severely abused by her mother).
 8. Some people find it helpful to write a descriptive letter as if they were the person who hurt them. The letter can explain the offender's motives, thoughts and feelings (this will often have to be based on supposition).
 9. Another possible method is to write a letter of apology from the perspective of the offender.
 10. For those who spend a great deal of time at the computer, writing an e-mail related to 8 or 9 may be easier than writing in long hand.
 11. For those for whom writing is difficult, making an audiotape of either 8 or 9, then listening to it back, may help them develop empathy for their offender.
 12. Use the Gestalt empty chair technique (see Epilogue for a description)
 13. Listen to the transgressor's story: In both Rwanda and South Africa, a great deal of healing and forgiveness has occurred through structured settings where people from each side were invited to share their stories and listen to each other's hurts. The same has occurred in organizations such as One by One, where first-generation survivors of the Holocaust and first-generation family members of Nazis have been invited to meet together to hear each other's stories. Worthington says: "Meetings are risky for both sides. When people are vulnerable, they can be hurt easily. If they can get past being defensive, if they can listen—really listen—they can feel empathy. One by one, they can begin to consider forgiveness" (p. 83).
- C. **A:** (Offer the) **Altruistic gift of forgiveness:**
1. Worthington and his colleagues found that those who did forgive, whether they were in the self-benefit group or the empathy group, did so because they were able to empathize to some degree with the offender. However, there were some who were able to empathize, but still did not forgive. It seems that empathy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for forgiveness to occur. This led to the question: What else is necessary?
 2. The answer they developed is one that is not commonly used by psychologists: In order to forgive, in addition to empathy, clients also needed to have a sense of humility.
 3. Worthington and his colleagues defined **humility** as *the recognition that each of us has the capability of offending against other human beings and causing pain*, even as we are suffering pain. We might never transgress in the same way a parent did to us: we may never have betrayed our children or our spouse in the way they betrayed us or to the depth that they betrayed us. Humility means recognizing that we all have the potential to hurt those we love, whether in small ways or in larger ways.
 4. For some people this recognition, this humility, comes from their religious background: they believe that even as God has forgiven them, so they should also forgive others.
 5. For those with or without a religious background, they are asked to remember a time when they did something seriously wrong, and were forgiven by the person (or persons) whom they had wronged. They are asked to remember how good it felt to be forgiven, and then to use those good feelings to extend the altruistic gift of forgiveness to the person who has wronged them.
 6. The steps in the therapy process are:
 - a. Remember an instance when you did something that was wrong even though you knew it was wrong, yet the person whom you offended granted you forgiveness. (Usually when asked people can come up with *several* such instances.)
 - b. Describe your feelings when you know you had been forgiven. (Sometimes people are forgiven with no strings attached. At other times they feel like there are some conditions attached to the forgiveness. Such kinds of "forgiveness" often feels manipulative and causes people to feel angry rather than free.) Clients are asked to remember how they felt when one of the first kinds of forgiveness (forgiveness with no strings attached) was granted. Usually their feelings are

- ones of a weight being lifted, feeling released from bonds of hostility, feelings of gratitude toward the person who forgave them.
- c. Clients are asked to remember their feelings of gratefulness, and then encouraged to offer that same gift of grace to their offender.
 7. For persons who don't feel ready to forgive it may be helpful to try forgiveness on an easier issue. [Considering forgiveness to be like any new skill (in this case a cognitive skill). Try it on easier cases first, and then gradually build up to more difficult cases.]
 8. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."
 9. Not from Worthington: Offering the altruistic gift of forgiveness is probably the crucial step in helping a person leave the victim role.
 - a. Before forgiveness the primary picture one remembers is being abused—being victimized—being a powerless victim.
 - b. When one offers the gift of forgiveness they become the more powerful one in the picture. By choosing to forgive they are doing something even more powerful than what their abuser did. Their abuser created the first picture, the picture in which they were a victim. But they created the picture that replaced it (i.e., the picture of extending forgiveness to their perpetrator). In the new picture good becomes more powerful than evil; grace becomes more powerful than aggression.

D. C: Commit publicly to forgive

1. People may wonder whether they have forgiven when they see the offender again, or are hurt similarly by someone else, or are under high stress, or are hurt similarly by the person again
2. Its important to remember that forgiveness doesn't replace hurtful memories—it replaces the negative emotions attached to the memories.
3. Forgiveness means replacing the old cognitive habits that kept the resentment alive with new cognitive habits

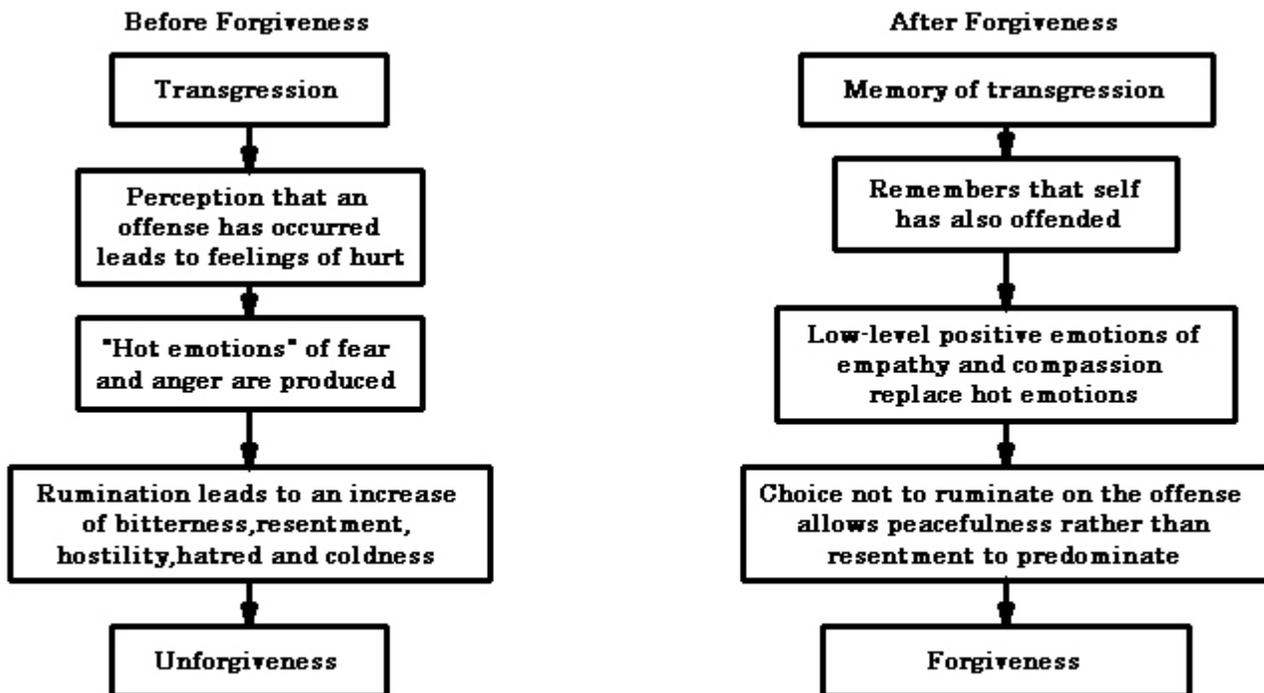


Figure 2: Adapted from Worthington, 2001, pp. 23, 113

4. Other ways to replace the old cognitive habit (Worthington, 2001, pp. 114-124)
 - a. Look at a picture of the person who offended you each day (or visualize him or her if you have no pictures). Then think about forgiving rather than condemning him or her.
 - b. Stop the habit of criticizing that person, either in your mind or with your words.
 - c. Describe the positives of that person (perhaps write out a list of their positive qualities or of good things he or she has done). (Several of the following can work well in a forgiveness group)
 - d. Have people write out the transgression in ink on their hands, then go and wash their hands until all traces of the ink is gone.
 - e. Write out the transgression on a piece of paper, then burn the paper.
 - f. Write out a Certificate of Forgiveness (sample follows). “On [date], I decided to forgive [name of offender] for [description of offenses committed]. I acknowledge [the part I played in the situation, if any] and hope that eventually we may be reconciled. For now, though, I hereby declare that I forgive [name of offender], and I lay down the weight of my unforgiveness to the best of my ability. [Signature]” (Adapted from Worthington, 2001, p.120). The certificate may be placed somewhere where the person can read it and remind themselves of that decision from time to time.
 - g. For those who journal, they may write an entry describing their decision to forgive.
 - h. For those so gifted, they may choose to write a song or a poem about forgiveness.
 - i. Say out loud to yourself that you have chosen to forgive.
 - j. Tell a trusted friend about your decision to forgive.
 - k. Write a letter to the offender saying that you have forgiven them (you may or may not send it depending on the situation).

E. **H: Hold on to forgiveness:** Six actions to take to hold on to forgiveness

1. *Realize that the pain of a remembered hurt is not unforgiveness.* Ruminating on vengeful emotions is.
2. *Don't dwell on negative memories.* [However, remember that people generally cannot not think about something. It's better to have them think about something instead. In this case, it may be to think about good traits of the offender, good things he or she has done, or life experiences that may explain why he or she committed the offense.
3. *Remind yourself that you have made a decision to forgive the person.*
4. *Seek reassurance of your decision to forgive from a friend to whom you have confided this.*
5. *Use the documents you created.*
6. *Review the five steps of the REACH model again*
 - a. **Recall** the hurt
 - b. **Empathize** (understand the world of the offender)
 - c. [Offer the] **Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness**
 - d. **Commit** publicly to forgive
 - e. **Hold on** to forgiveness

VI. **Summary/Conclusions**

- A. The research that has been done on forgiveness suggests the following benefits that usually accrue to the person who forgives:
1. Holding onto resentments consumes a great deal of adaptive energy. Forgiveness releases this energy so it can be used to more fully experience and enjoy the present
 2. Unforgiveness of childhood abuse is correlated with poorer marital adjustment. Forgiveness of childhood abuse is associated with more positive marital adjustment.
 3. People who are unwilling to forgive experience more anger and hostility. People who forgive generally experience increases in hope for the future, in self-esteem, and in existential well-being.
 4. People who forgive experiences decreases in anxiety and depression.

5. People who hold onto resentment tend to have poorer physical health. Forgiveness is associated with decreased blood pressure and better physical health.
 6. Forgiveness allows for the possibility of being reconciled to those with whom we are presently estranged.
 7. Forgiveness allows us to model grace to our children. Unforgiveness causes us to model legalism and other less positive traits.
 8. Forgiveness allows us to replace our identity as victims with a new identity as victor: grace triumphs over the evil that was done to us.
- B. If you've suffered severe abuse and haven't yet forgiven your abuser, I hope that, in light of the research on the benefits that can come *to you* as a result of forgiving, you'll consider starting on that process.
 - C. As you will recall, most people who were able to forgive successfully used their spiritual beliefs to help them do so. Therefore if you are considering forgiveness, you may find it helpful to ask God (as you understand Him) to help you.
 - D. Perhaps you're not at the stage of being ready to forgive, but you'd be willing to let God help you become ready. If so, I'd encourage you to simply ask Him to help you become ready.
 - E. **Recommendation:** If you only have time to read one book on forgiveness, suitable for both therapists and clients, I would recommend Everett Worthington's *Five Steps to Forgiveness* (2001). It was published in New York by Crown Publishers and is available on-line as well as through local bookstores.
 - F. Comments or questions?

VII. **Epilogue for Therapists: Additional Methods for Helping Facilitate the Process of Forgiveness**

- A. **Summary/Review of the Empty Chair Technique as a Method of Facilitating Forgiveness** See Worthington, 2001, p. 63-68 for example.
 1. "Unfinished business" is a Gestalt concept associated with Fritz Perls (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951). It refers to currently felt unresolved negative feelings one person holds toward another. These feelings many times are what we have been referring to as unforgiveness.
 2. A technique that Fritz Perls developed to work with such feelings is the empty chair technique. This section will summarize the empty chair technique and apply it to the topic of forgiveness. For those who use empty chair frequently and already familiar with the method, you may wish to scan this section quickly and move on to the next one.
 3. The use of the empty chair technique usually leads to one of two types of resolution (Greenberg & Foerster, 1996). In some cases it leads to forgiveness, and in other cases it leads the person to an assurance that they were indeed wronged and the other person should be held accountable.
 4. The empty chair technique usually involves the following processes (adapted from Malcolm and Greenberg, 2000, pp. 185-193). (To make the description less cumbersome, the client will be designated female and the imagined other designated male):
 - a. The client is asked to imagine the person with whom the unfinished business occurred in an empty chair located within the same room.
 - b. The client is asked to express to the imagined other the feelings she has just been expressing to the therapist, speaking to the imagined other as if he were actually there.
 - c. Usually the initial comments blame or accuse the imagined other.
 - d. After the client has completed her initial accusations or statements, she is asked to move to the empty chair and respond as she expects the imagined other would.
 - e. There may be several interactions, with the client moving back and forth between chairs. Often intense feelings are brought to the surface, expressed, and differentiated. Memories long buried may be recalled.
 - f. Gradually the therapist invites the client to express the core feelings or needs that the client was hoping to have met through the imagined other, which did not get met because of the transgression. (Conceptualizing this from the standpoint of emotion-focused therapy, this step

invites the client to express the “soft feelings” that lie below the “hard feelings” that were initially expressed (e.g., wanting to be loved, affirmed, validated).

- g. During this process a sense of entitlement (in a positive sense) often emerges. The client expresses the belief that she was entitled to receive love, affirmation, validation, not be abused, etc., and that in failing to give this, the imagined other was wrong.
- h. During the empty chair process the client often (not always) comes to understand the imagined other’s behavior in a more complex, empathic way. She often may become aware of the humanity and the pressures facing the other person. She may perceive that the person responded the way he did without intending to hurt her, or without an awareness that his actions would be as hurtful as they were. Or she may perceive that he is truly repentant for the way that he responded. If this occurs, the empty chair interaction often results in forgiveness. The client is able to view the imagined other with compassion and empathy. She often ends with a sense of closure with regard to the event and a sense of optimism regarding the future.
- i. In some cases the person may feel too wounded to completely forgive the imagined other, but the above process may serve to soften the client’s anger toward that person. However, the client may continue to view the other as accountable for what he did and as blameworthy. By verbalizing such thoughts, the client experiences herself as more powerful (than in her previous memories of the event), and the imagined other becomes less threatening.
- j. Either of these outcomes can leave the client in a healthier place psychologically than they were before the therapeutic intervention, although only the first of the two would probably be considered forgiveness.

B. An Extensive Model of the Process of Forgiveness: Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1996) have developed the most comprehensive description of the process of forgiveness, drawing from the work of a number of writers and researchers. All researchers in this field affirm that forgiveness does not always happen in a predictable stepwise fashion (i.e., people do not always take the steps in the same order, or may not do every step, etc.), but most indicate that there are identifiable steps that occur in the process for most people. The twenty steps identified by Enright and his colleagues include (adapted from Enright and Coyle, 1998, pp. 143-147):

Uncovering Phase

- 1. Examination of psychological defenses that one has employed to protect oneself from the pain of the offense
- 2. Confrontation of anger: the point is to recognize and release, not harbor, the anger
- 3. Admittance of shame or embarrassment, when this is relevant
- 4. Awareness of how much emotional energy has been spent as a result of resentment about the injury
- 5. Awareness of how often one engages in cognitive rehearsal of the offense
- 6. Insight that the injured party may be comparing oneself with the injurer (e.g., viewing the injurer’s life as being free of the harm that the injury has caused in the injured party)
- 7. Realization that oneself may be permanently and adversely changed by the injury
- 8. Insight into a possibly altered “just world” attitude (e.g., awareness that one has become cynical or bitter)

Decision Phase

- 9. A change of heart/conversion/new insights that old resolution strategies are not working
- 10. Willingness to consider forgiveness as an option
- 11. Commitment to forgive the offender

Work Phase

- 12. Reframing, through role taking, of who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context. Questions that might be asked at this point include:

- a. What was it like for the person as he or she was growing up? Did the offender come from a home in which there was conflict or even abuse?
 - b. What was happening in the person's life at the time he or she hurt you?
 - c. Can you see the person as having worth simply by being a member of the human community?
13. Empathy and compassion toward the offender. Answering the above questions may help produce empathy and compassion for the offender.
 14. Acceptance/absorption of the pain. In this step the injured person is asked to consider absorbing the pain (like a sponge absorbs water) to prevent the pain from being transmitted to the offender and to innocent others.
 15. Giving the moral gift of forgiveness to the offender

Deepening Phase

16. Finding meaning for oneself and others in the suffering and in the forgiveness process. As persons forgive, they often discover that they experience healing themselves.
17. Realization that oneself has needed others' forgiveness in the past
18. Insight that one is not alone (universality, support)
19. Realization that oneself may have a new purpose in life because of the injury. He may find that he has become a more compassionate person toward those who have been similarly hurt. Some may choose to pursue a new career (e.g., a counseling career) as a result.
20. Awareness of decreased negative affect and, perhaps, increased positive affect, if this begins to emerge, toward the injurer; awareness of internal, emotional release.

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