The benefits of forgiveness and gratitude

Evidence suggests that embracing these attitudes has positive implications for a person's physical and mental health

By Lynne Shallcross

When Willie Nelson crooned "Forgiving You Was Easy" in the mid-1980s, the song briefly reached No. 1 on the country charts. Despite the tune's appeal, however, even Nelson's biggest fans would probably be lying if they claimed to agree with the sentiment expressed in the song's title.

People struggle with hurts both big and small throughout their lives, and some counselors contend that what stands between many clients and a happy life is the often-elusive process of forgiveness.

Although the act may not come naturally to all of us, research through the Stanford Forgiveness Project has shown that learning to forgive lessens the amount of hurt, anger, stress and depression that people experience. Frederic Luskin, a senior consultant in health promotion at Stanford University and director of the forgiveness project, writes on his website that people who learn to forgive also "become more hopeful, optimistic and compassionate. … Forgiveness has physical health benefits. People who learn to forgive report significantly fewer symptoms of stress such as backache, muscle tension, dizziness, headaches and upset stomachs. In addition, people report improvements in appetite, sleep patterns, energy and general well-being."

Despite all the potential benefits, forgiveness is something with which many clients struggle, says Sandy Walker, a member of the American Counseling Association who runs a private practice in Miami. In her years as a lay counselor before earning a master's degree in mental health counseling, Walker says she found again and again that the "blockages" people struggled with in their lives were linked to some sort of issue for which they needed to forgive someone. "The process of forgiveness is very often the key that unlocks that obstacle or removes it," says Walker, who self-published the book *Freedom Through Forgiveness: The Power of Forgiveness Can Change Your Life* in September.

Sandy Walker

Whenever clients are carrying negative emotions or a negative self-concept, Walker tries to help them get to the root of it, and very often, she says, those feelings are tied to an issue of forgiveness. But what's interesting, she says, is that clients rarely realize that to be the issue. For that reason, Walker included specific exercises in her book to help clients tap into the information or memories needed to uncover the real source of their hurt.

Mary Hayes Grieco

Mary Hayes Grieco, director and lead trainer of the Midwest Institute for Forgiveness Training, has taught the process of forgiveness to counseling professionals in the United States, Ireland and Germany. Grieco and her colleagues offer three programs: a general workshop open to the public, a daylong professional training and a nine-month self-mastery program open both to mental health professionals and the public.

Grieco says it's important to note that forgiveness isn't about the other person or about making someone else apologize or change — it's about setting yourself free. "It's about releasing the impact of a loss or a disappointment or an upset, releasing it from ourselves so we can go forward and not be continually reminded or triggered about this upsetting thing," says Grieco, author of *Unconditional Forgiveness: A Simple and Proven Method to Forgive Everyone and Everything*, which was published by Simon and Schuster in December.

Walker agrees. "Not forgiving creates an emotional prison," she says. "It ties you to a person or an event that usually you'd rather forget [but] you're unable to. So you think in your mind that you're holding a grudge or making them pay, but in effect, once you finally forgive, it's like you're unlocking that prison door and you realize the person being released is you, not the other person. When you carry a grudge, they don't suffer — you suffer."

By practicing forgiveness, Grieco says, people are better able to accept and love life as it is and accept others as they are. "It's a life skill and a health habit that I think everyone needs because we will regularly be disappointed by people and circumstances," she says. Learning to forgive means developing resilience instead of adopting a conditional approach to life in which we can only be happy if certain things happen, Grieco says.

"In fact, life is going to do what it does. We don't have control over a lot of things," Grieco says. "We have to be able to roll with things as they are. It's not to say we don't have to try to have boundaries and create what we want, but sometimes we don't have control. Forgiveness gives the ability to say, 'I was expecting this, but this happened, [and] I have to release that expectation in order to have a happy day.'"

When people don't forgive someone or something, it keeps them "stuck," according to Grieco. She says she often hears something along the following lines from Midwest Institute clients: "I'm just so sick of this story. I'm so sick of being mad at this person." Not forgiving keeps alive a level of stress in people's systems and invites physical symptoms that include stomachaches and backaches, Grieco says. Walker adds that people who don't forgive often deal with tormenting thoughts as well.

Grieco recalls one client who was going through a divorce and finally decided to forgive her ex-husband. She had been suffering with a digestive tract issue for 16 years, which was exactly how long she'd known the man. The day after she forgave her ex-husband, she was surprised to find that her chronic symptoms seemed better by half, and during the next six months, the symptoms cleared up completely. Until that happened, Grieco says her client had not connected her physical symptoms with the anger she harbored against her ex-husband.

Letting go

Both Walker and Grieco use multistep forgiveness processes designed to help clients let go of hurt, forgive, and find peace and happiness in their lives.

Walker's process, which she developed, consists of three steps. First, clients acknowledge the pain they feel. Next, they recognize who was responsible for causing that pain. She suggests that clients say out loud who did what to them and how it made them feel. If clients feel emotional at this point, Walker encourages them to let those emotions out. Finally, Walker says, clients must choose whether to offer forgiveness as an act of their own free will.

The process Grieco uses, which was first developed by her mentor, Edith Stauffer, and then refined by Grieco, involves eight steps. First, clients must decide to make a change and, second, have to let their emotions out. The second step might take clients 10 minutes or it might take them a few sessions, Grieco adds. Third, clients release the expectations they had and, fourth, restore their boundaries. The fifth step involves clients opening up to the universe to get their needs met in a different way, she says, which leads to the sixth step: receiving healing energy from a "spirit" or higher power. In the seventh step, clients send unconditional love to the people who injured them and "release" them from the unrealistic expectations that the clients held for them. This also involves clients releasing the unhealthy attachment they previously maintained concerning how the other person behaves. The last step, Grieco says, involves recognizing the good in the person or situation.

Both Grieco and Walker emphasize that the process must start with the client's will to forgive and let go. After completing the process of forgiveness, Grieco says clients often feel more content, more tolerant, more at ease, less in need of control and more like their old selves. Walker concurs, saying her clients regularly report a sense of relief, peace, calm and lightness. "It seems to have lasting change," says Walker, who follows up with her clients. "No one has called me and said, 'Oh, I feel bad again. It didn't last.'"

As for whom or what clients are attempting to forgive, each situation is different. Oftentimes, Walker says, the person in question is someone who was close to the client once upon a time but then ended up hurting the client. Sometimes, clients are actually struggling to forgive themselves, Walker says. And in still other cases, clients are wrestling with a need to forgive God. For instance, she says, if a child prayed to God that his sick mother would be healed but she still died, the person might hold God at fault, even into his or her adult years.

In some cases, the person the client needs to forgive is already dead. Even so, Grieco says, it's important for the client to offer that person forgiveness so the client can release the negative feelings that remain on his or her mind. If the person is still alive, Grieco says, clients must decide whether to

continue the relationship or even to restore a relationship with that person. "Is it worth it? That's what the person has to decide," she says. In an ongoing relationship, Grieco says, forgiveness can often improve the dynamic. The client might choose to communicate his or her boundaries and wishes to the other person, Grieco says, but then let it go and be prepared to forgive the person again down the road if need be.

Grieco doesn't subscribe to the idea of forgive and forget. Instead, she contends, we need to forgive and remember. "Remember who people really are, remember what we can and can't expect of them, and remember how stuck we feel when we hold on to unrealistic expectations," she says.

Walker emphasizes to clients who are in ongoing relationships with the person they've forgiven that trust and forgiveness are two different issues. "Forgiveness doesn't magically make everything better," she says. "Forgiveness is for the client's benefit. It's for them to feel better, to let go of the emotional baggage and the turmoil. Just forgiving doesn't instantly give you the ability to trust [the other person]. Trust is something that takes time. It's basically the accumulation of positive experiences with that person that allows you to trust them."

If forgiveness truly offers such positive benefits, why do people so often hold out on granting it to others? "The misconception is that you are somehow hurting the other person by holding on to [a grudge or hurt], that you're making them pay," Walker says. "Once people realize that, 'You're right, it's hurting *me*,' that usually lowers their resistance, and they're willing [to forgive]."

Grieco says people don't know how to forgive until they learn, which should offer hope to counselors and their clients. "Forgiveness can be taught like any other life skill," she says. And the best news is that once this life skill is mastered, it can help clients to move on and find fulfillment in their lives.

A grateful heart

Thanksgiving is Ron Cathey's favorite holiday. Not because he loves mashed potatoes or pumpkin pie, but because for the past 40 years on that holiday, he has taken time to think about someone who has made a difference in his life. And each year, he writes a note to let that person know how grateful he is for his or her influence.

Cathey, the director of counseling and career services at Louisiana Tech University, was president of the Louisiana Counseling Association in 2008-2009. Each president picks a theme for his or her year in office, so Cathey chose gratitude. As part of the LCA conference that year, he asked Robert Emmons, a psychologist who researches the effect that gratitude has on people, to deliver the keynote address.

What began as a theme to Cathey's presidency transformed into a gratitude project that's still ongoing. Cathey's idea was to approach gratitude from the perspective of how it could improve clients' lives, counselors' lives, the profession of counseling and the community at large. During his year as LCA president, a task force was formed that subsequently put together a PowerPoint presentation for the LCA conference. The presentation included information about how the practice of gratitude benefits health, attitude and relationships, as well as guidance on how to build gratitude in a person's life. Cathey encouraged members to take the presentation home and use it in their work.

Cathey also worked with LCA members to develop a format for leading a gratitude group. Designed as a five- to six-week group, counselors have since offered gratitude groups in prisons, nursing homes and schools statewide. The groups are ongoing, and Cathey is still receiving evaluations and feedback from counselors who have led the groups.

LCA still maintains an ad hoc committee called the Gratitude Project, Cathey says. The committee's future plans include creating a Spanish-language version of the original presentation, adapting another version geared toward elementary-age children and looking into the possibility of running a gratitude ad campaign on TV or billboards in Louisiana.

Gratitude shouldn't be shrugged off as a superfluous, feel-good idea, says Cathey. He points to research showing that gratitude can improve physical health, mental health, life longevity and interpersonal relationships. Cathey isn't just spreading the message to other counselors, either. He says he's taken the focus on gratitude personally and tries to incorporate it into his own life and work.

Ron Cathey

One change Cathey has instituted is that he now makes a point of visiting each counselor in the counseling and career services office almost every week to tell them how much he appreciates something they have done or contributed. This doesn't require a long, drawn-out process, Cathey says. "I can do it in 10 or 15 seconds sometimes," he says. "It doesn't have to be beaten into the ground." Even so, Cathey has noticed this action has made a noticeable difference in his relationship with each counselor and in the overall atmosphere among the staff.

'Watch for an opportunity'

To put gratitude to use in their work with clients doesn't mean that counselors ignore client issues and problems, Cathey says. "But at some point in time, after I've built the relationship [with the client] and I think he or she knows I will encourage, love and support him or her, one of the things I might do is ask, 'How are things with this particular issue? What about the relationship is getting better?'" Or he might prompt the client by saying, "When you think back on this past week, tell me three things that you're thankful for."

"It's amazing the conversation we move into," Cathey says. "And it won't be unrelated to their life or problem." At times, he even asks clients how something or someone they're thankful for made a difference in their ability to solve a problem or get through a hard time. "I don't push it down every client's throat, but I try to watch for an opportunity," he says.

Recently, while working with a client who was suspended from school over a university judicial issue, Cathey asked if the student saw anything for which to be grateful as the result of an otherwise difficult experience. The student told Cathey he was grateful for the friends, some of whom he hadn't even realized he possessed, who stepped up and supported

him. He also expressed gratitude for maturing through the experience and learning to think more before acting. "And now, being out of school for two quarters, it made him hungry to come back to school with a different attitude," Cathey says.

Gratitude can go a long way with couples and families as well, Cathey says. For example, he says, counselors might suggest to couples that each night before they go to sleep, they make a point of sharing one reason why each partner is grateful for the other. In doing that, Cathey points out, their perspectives shift because they are actively looking for and taking time to notice something good their partner does each day. "The other person is going to try to feed that, doing something good so that the other has something good to say. Just a little thing like that can shift the dynamic in relationships," he says. "It's not a cure-all, but it's one of those things that can begin to shift the system a little."

Cathey also runs a leadership group with young men in the fraternity system and is working to teach them how to use gratitude in their leadership. "I'll ask them, 'Who are three people who have gotten you to where you are today? Who helped you be successful and influenced you?' And then I'll ask, 'Will you be that for someone else, and how will you do that?'"

But practicing gratitude isn't just meant to make a difference in clients' lives, Cathey says. Being grateful can also improve counselors' personal relationships and well-being and help them focus on looking for and embracing the uniqueness of each client. In fact, Cathey credits a focus on gratitude with helping him become more client-centered in his own work. He says cultivating gratitude opens counselors up to appreciating what each client has gone through, searching for each client's strengths and acknowledging the courage each client displays in choosing to sit and share his or her story with the counselor.

Cathey is a believer that everyone can benefit from weaving gratitude into his or her life in almost any situation. As he advises his student clients, gratitude can even have an impact on something as seemingly unrelated as a job interview. "I tell them, in an interview, if you don't know what to say, stick out your hand and say, 'Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.' It might break the ice. It might turn your whole attitude around, and it might turn the attitude of the interviewer around," Cathey says. "An expression of gratitude is never wrong, and I don't think it'll ever hurt you."

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