

Forgiveness

An ancient concept becomes the cutting edge in psychotherapy

Forgiveness is an important but troublesome concept that challenges our understanding, and yet refuses to go away. It is an issue of universal human concern because hurts, betrayal and injuries of one sort or another are universal human experiences. Typically viewed as a virtue, forgiveness has been advocated by major religious and spiritual traditions for millennia. Relegated to the purview of theologians and clergy, forgiveness received virtually no attention within psychology and psychotherapy -- until recently (McCullough, Pargament & Thorsen, 2000). As central as the experience of forgiveness *should* be in a field dedicated to the healing of the psyche, chances are good that most therapists reading this article never took a course in forgiveness when they were studying psychology. Today, this topic enjoys a renaissance of new inquiry in society and in the field of psychotherapy, and the thorny questions about forgiveness are being asked and discussed with new vigor. *What is forgiveness? How is it accomplished? Should we forgive abuse and injustice? When is it appropriate to introduce the idea of forgiveness to a client who has been suffering because of these things? Can we facilitate the (spiritual) experience of forgiveness in a secular setting?*

The current proliferation of research about forgiveness

Over the past two decades forgiveness has become an important area of scientific psychological research and forgiveness interventions have been applied in many clinical settings for a wide variety of mental health concerns (see, Lagaree, Turner and Lollis, 2007; McCullough & Pargament, 2000; Worthington, 2005 for major reviews). Since the first empirical intervention study in 1993 (Hebl & Enright, 1993), there has been mounting evidence of the psychological benefits of forgiveness. In their review of 18 correlation and empirical studies of forgiveness, Toussaint and Webb (2005) reported that all 18 found decreases in depression and anxiety and a concomitant increase in a sense of well-being and overall mental health. A recent meta-analytic review by Lundahl et al (2008) reports similar findings. There is a growing body of research that suggests that forgiveness has physical health benefits as well, or at the very least, that the stress associated with a chronic state of resentment and unforgiveness can lead to negative health outcomes (Lawler et al, 2003; Lawler et al 2005; Sapolsky, 2005; Witvleit, 2005; Worthington et al, 2007).

Despite the intense interest in forgiveness within the mental health field and the ever-growing body of supportive scientific research, no one definition or model of forgiveness has emerged. Sterlan and Covic note that “virtually every psychological article published on forgiveness begins by acknowledging the debate over a definition...” (p 1061). Most authors note that it is easier to describe what forgiveness is *not* (e.g., excusing, condoning, reconciliation) and that it does *not* preclude seeking justice. These are

important topics for therapists to consider when discussing forgiveness with clients (Cosgrove & Konstan, 2008).

Even though there is a lack of consensus regarding definition and process, Wade, Johnson and Meyer conclude nonetheless:

“Forgiveness-promoting interventions can be useful to some, perhaps many, clients... Not only do many clients want to discuss forgiveness with their therapists, many can benefit from these discussions. The benefits are also not just limited to achieving more forgiveness but appear to generalize to the kinds of outcomes many therapists are seeking, such as reduction in depression, anxiety and interpersonal problems, as well as increased hope, social functioning and self-esteem” (p. 100).

This article is an introduction to one model, Unconditional Love and Forgiveness, which was developed by Dr. Edith Stauffer, PhD., between 1970-1990, and advanced and refined by me and my colleagues at The Midwest Institute for Forgiveness Training in Minneapolis, MN. This work is based in the transpersonal psychology of Dr. Roberto Assagioli, which offers a model of human wholeness as a basis to the methodical approach to forgiveness, a spiritual experience that is sometimes sought after in secular settings. This model assumes as a resource, unconditional love (*a refreshing universal energy that restores us to wholeness.*) and the active involvement of both the client’s and the therapist’s Higher Self in the therapy process.

What is forgiveness? “Forgiveness is the act of releasing an expectation that is causing you to suffer.”

When we forgive another person, we let go of any expectation, condition, or demand that prevents the free flow of healthy energy within us, and the unobstructed extension of unconditional love (good will and some amount of positive regard) between myself and another person. We release the attachment in the mind that we are holding on to, dissolving a correlating physical tension in the body. How does one let go of a painful emotional wound that is rooted in a disappointed expectation? It is accomplished with a facilitated, methodical process that addresses the issue step-by-step through all the parts of one’s being: physical, emotional, mental, energy boundaries, and the spiritual connection to the Higher Self, or soul. This complete and holistic approach yields real and permanent relief from a troublesome issue.

The Eight Steps of Forgiveness of Another Person

Preparation period: Gather your intention and make a space in your life for self-healing work

1. State your **will** to make a change in attitude and move on.
2. Express your **emotions** about what happened - freely “venting” your emotions (crying, blaming, physically discharging anger or rage).
3. **Release each expectation(s)** you are holding in your **mind**, one by one.
4. **Open up to Spirit** (Higher Self, Soul, etc.) to get your needs met in a new way.
5. Restore the **boundaries**: give others responsibility for their actions and take yours. Visualize a healthy ego space/field of protection around you.
6. Receive healing energy from Spirit (visualized as light and love entering the crown of the head) into the levels of personality: body, emotions, and mind.
7. **Extend unconditional love** (visualized as light or energy, and/or good will) to the person you are forgiving.
8. **See the good** in the person or situation.

Integration period (avg. 3 days) Extra rest, reflection, practicing new attitudes and behaviors

How do you know your client is ready to forgive?

A key question for a discerning therapist is, “How will I know when it is time for my client to forgive the person who hurt them?” Here are some indicators that they may be ready: 1) they have vulnerably touched the emotional pain of their wound, and shared it with you honestly; 2) they have grown tired of the story and its archaic patterns in their present life, and they literally ask you, *Now what? How do I move on from this?* 3) they have examined and gained insight about decisions they made, or limiting beliefs about life, self, or others that they took on because of this wound. Now the client is ready to be invited into a process of forgiving, and educated about what forgiveness is and how the method works to bring completion to an issue. Before starting the journey into and through the Steps, they need to be able to believe in and work with some form of a Higher Power, a spiritual source of healing and renewal.

Using the Forgiveness Method with Your Psychotherapy Clients

Sometimes we have to do some preparatory work with a client to help them “make friends” with the concept of forgiveness. For some people, *Step One: Use your will to forgive*, is the biggest challenge of all, because they first have to work through their prior attitudes about forgiveness. It is helpful if they can hear or read about inspiring examples of the empowering relief of forgiveness, in order to understand that forgiveness is something they will do for their own sake, so they are free to move forward. We must kindle their faith in a modality of healing that has helped many people find permanent relief from a painful issue, and invite them to a joyful vision of themselves, free and happy again. We need to support their growing faith that they have the power to step into this new freedom in the foreseeable future.

Once the client has successfully integrated Step One, the client-therapist team may choose to work through the issues in a systematic way - make a list, do some preparatory homework, and clear through each issue one, by one, from easiest to most difficult - or in an organic fashion, working through the parts and pieces of issues as they present themselves, session by session (Steps 2 and 3). Eventually the client will have the confidence to bring themselves to healing the painful core of their worst story, utterly transforming their self-concept and their capability to choose and create a different and better future.

There are two imperatives for the therapist who intends to make our forgiveness method a potent and reliable tool in their therapy tool box. First, they must be comfortable with seeking a shared understanding of the client’s own spiritual framework, agreeing on the spiritual imagery and language that will be used. Together, the client and therapist must be able to appeal to the presence and help of a Higher Power, a spiritual Source that will assist the client in transforming their past, present, and future (Key in Steps 4, 5, 6, and 7). Most clients are willing to utilize the imagery of light and love coming from a Source that is beyond them which is sending healing energy down into their personality through the crown of the head. This transpersonal energy restores their boundaries, cleans out the debris from the old expectations, and brings them into right relationship with self, other, and life itself. This transformation enables them to “see the good” in their story, because they can now access the wisdom inherent in the journey from being wounded to becoming whole again (Step 8).

The second imperative for success is the therapist’s personal familiarity with the experience of unconditional love and forgiveness, because they have successfully used this method to resolve their own persistent issues a number of times. This experience informs their skill and intuition as facilitators of forgiveness, and inspires faith and confidence in the client who is seeking the resolution of a long-held inner conflict.

There is little that is more rewarding or more of a privilege than to be the facilitator of the experience of forgiveness for another person. At a certain point in the journey through The Eight Steps, there comes a pivotal moment of change, when the former struggle

melts away, and the psyche becomes newly established in the “now,” with all of its fresh possibilities. This moment is a bonding and liberating experience for client and therapist alike, and a significant turning point in the therapy process.

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