FORGIVENESS: Tools to Transform Suffering into Wholeness

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CESP is a program of Institute on Aging, San Francisco. It is an accredited crisis intervention hotline/warm-line telephone program.

CESP’s PRIMARY service is the 24-hour Friendship Line, which began in 1973.

- (800) 971-0016 Nat’l Line – 24/hr Friendship Line for people 60+ and younger disabled adults
- Grief Services for people of any age
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History of Forgiveness in Psychology and Social Sciences

1932 to 1980

• Many theoretical papers; modest empirical work
• Freud wrote nothing about forgiveness
• Mental health leaders gave little attention to forgiveness

1980 to Present

• Intense and serious consideration given to concept of forgiveness by researchers and mental health professionals
Academic Study of Forgiveness Neglected Because . . .

• Traditionally forgiveness linked to religion; social sciences avoided religious matters.

• Difficulties in gathering reliable data about forgiveness.

• 20th century was the bloodiest and perhaps most unforgiving century human history.
Older Adults and Forgiveness

Reasons to study forgiveness in older age:

• Ability to forgive might be subject to developmental changes across the life span

• Forgiveness might carry a different significance in old age

• Forgiveness might be helpful for reflecting on and understanding life

Allemand et al (2013)
Unforgiveness and Physical Health

• Unforgiveness has been consistently related to poorer health in published research
• Unforgiveness is a common stress reaction that is detrimental to well-being
• Older adults may experience many interpersonal transgressions that can be stressful particularly when responded to with unforgiveness
Unforgiveness, Older Adults, and Mental Health

• Depression is one of the most common sources of suffering for older adults

• Understanding the factors that contribute to depression in older adults is important as we seek to prevent or remediate these symptoms of depression

• An older adults’ inability to forgive themselves may result in enduring ruminations that lead to or exacerbate depressive symptoms
What does forgiveness mean to you?
Definitions of Forgiveness

• Researchers have not been able to achieve a shared goal of establishing a unified definition of forgiveness
Definitions of Forgiveness

• Love’s revolution against life’s unfairness...we release ourselves from our own painful pasts
  (Smedes, 1984)

• Intra-individual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context
  (McCullough, Pargament & Thoreson, 2000)
Forgiveness involves . . .

- Conscious effort
- Letting go of resentment, anger, and revenge
- Understanding the person and feeling compassion
- Emotional relief for the person who was hurt; it’s not about the person who did the hurting.
Forgiveness Continued

According to Butterworth (*Life is for Loving*): “We cannot endure without love and there is no other way to the return of healing, comforting, harmonizing love than through total and complete forgiveness: If we want freedom and peace and the experience of love and being loved, we must let go and forgive.”
Forgiveness Continued

According to Hooks (All About Love):
“Forgiveness is an act of generosity. It requires that we place releasing someone else from the prison of their guilt or anguish over our feelings of outrage or anger. By forgiving we clear a path on the way to love. It is a gesture of respect. True forgiveness requires that we understand the negative actions of another.”
“Forgiveness demands every mental, moral, and spiritual resource you have. Like love, it never stays the same, never ends, and deepens over the years. Forgiveness is hard, painful work that can take a lifetime.”

— Safer, 1999
Forgiveness is NOT. . .

• Forgetting what happened
• Condoning or excusing the behavior
• Reconciliation with the person
Forgiveness also is NOT. . .

- Pardon, legal mercy, leniency
- Justification
- Balancing scales
- Becoming disappointed
- Self-centering
Common Colloquialisms Confused with Forgiveness . . .

- Forgiveness is a quick fix
- I’ve accepted what happened
- I accept what happened, knowing that God will punish him/her
- I have moved on
- I have the satisfaction of not letting the person get to me
Thinking That May be Accurate But Incomplete

• Letting time heal the wound
• Abandoning resentment
• Possessing positive feelings
• Saying “I forgive you”
• Making a decision to forgive
According to Simon (1991)

Many people awaken in the morning and fill an enormous suitcase with pain from the past. We stuff it with grudges, bitterness, resentment, and self-righteous anger. We toss in self-pity, envy, jealousy, and regret. We add every injury and injustice that was ever done to us. Then we shut that suitcase and drag it with us wherever we go.
Why consider forgiving a person who has hurt you?
The decision to forgive can be prompted by. . .

- Religious conviction
- Personal morality
- Psychological distress
Benefits of Forgiveness

• Decrease in anxiety, depression, and hostility
• Increase in hope, self-esteem, and well-being
• Helps keep relationships steadfast
What is Forgiveness?

“What Forgiveness is the accomplishment of mastery over a wound. It is the process through which an injured person first fights off, then embraces, then conquers a situation that has nearly destroyed him/her.”

Flanigan, B. 1992 *Forgiving the Unforgivable*  
New York, Macmillan
Arguments Against Forgiving

• It’s dishonest because it denies reality.

• It’s wrong because it contradicts human nature. Our nature is “to get even.”

• It glosses over the enormity of evil and stifles the call from the bowels of the earth for just vengeance.

— L. Smedes, The Art of Forgiving
Not Forgiving . . .

• A fairly new concept

• It’s not avoiding forgiveness or retreating into paranoia. It’s a legitimate action in itself.

• To withhold forgiveness for the right reasons is a decision as hard-won as to grant it.

• Intent is the critical factor in determining whether forgiveness is possible or justified.

• Sometimes people need permission not to forgive, to feel what they feel.
An Unforgivable Injury... 

- Starts with a singular event that signals a betrayal 
- Initiated by intimate injurers, not strangers 
- Moral wounds 
- Assaults a person’s most fundamental belief systems 
- Deeply personal 

— B. Flanigan, *Forgiving the Unforgivable*, 1992
Friends & Co-Workers

Unforgivable injuries by co-workers can wound as deeply as those of our children, spouses and parents.
When a person asks us for forgiveness . . .

- The person is also asking for permission to forgive him/herself.

- We seek forgiveness for:
  - What we did
  - Specific things we did not do
  - Wrongful things we did for which we deserve blame
  - What we blame ourselves for

L. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving*
Therapeutic Role of Forgiveness

• There has been a lot of interest from researchers recently regarding forgiveness as a therapeutic tool
• Forgiveness interventions can have the capacity to improve general positive affect as well as self-esteem, which is sustained in the long term
• Some studies have suggested that forgiveness is associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, anger, and perceived stress
Models of Forgiveness

• **Motivational Model** – Focuses on forgiveness within the context of interpersonal relationships – individuals work towards forgiving a transgressor out of consideration for the health of a relationship rather than out of self-interest
Models Continued

• The REACH Model – An emotion-focused coping strategy – Emotional forgiveness refers to the cessation of feelings of hurt, resentment and hostility arising from a transgression – it is an “altruistic gift” to the transgressor

• Recall the hurt; empathize with your transgressor; altruistic gift; commit; hold onto your forgiveness
Models Continued

• **The Process Model** – Forgiveness is a voluntary and unconditional act whereby one relinquishes negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors while fostering feelings of compassion, generosity and love towards an undeserving transgressor – this model requires the spontaneous development of loving feelings for the transgressor as an essential facet of the construct
Six Steps of Forgiveness

1. Recognize the injury
2. Identify the emotions involved
3. Express your anger and hurt
4. Set boundaries to protect yourself
5. Cancel the debt
6. Consider the possibility of reconciliation

Stoop and Masteller, 1991
Step 1: Recognize the injury

- Whom do you need to forgive?
- How have they hurt or injured you? Describe what happened.
Step 2: Identify the emotions involved

• List feelings you have about what happened.
  – **Hate and Love:** Hurt people feel hate along with love.
  – **Sadness:** Important to acknowledge the extent of one’s sadness and to grieve
  – **Self-blame:** In unforgivable injuries is to be expected.
  – Competing emotions weary the wounded.
Step 3: Express your anger and hurt

• If I could say what I wanted to this person(s), I would say . . .
Step 4: Set boundaries to protect yourself

• List what you can do to protect yourself, both now and in the future

• Take the time to talk with someone you trust about what you have written or will write

• Ask them to help you to be thorough in steps 1-3 and realistic in step 4

• Take time before moving on to the next step
Step 5: Cancel the debt

• When you have released the other person from your own expectations, you are ready to forgive – to cancel the debt

• Write down something you can do to symbolize your willingness to forgive
Step 6: Consider the possibility of reconciliation

- Why do you want reconciliation?
- If you approach the other person(s), what do you think will be the response?
- Can you accept the worse possible response?
- How can you check to see if the other person(s) is open to working through their part of the reconciliation process?
Forgiving Ourselves

Four questions to consider:
1. Does it make sense to forgive ourselves?
2. Who gives us the right to forgive ourselves?
3. What do we forgive ourselves for?
4. How can we go about forgiving ourselves?
Obstacles to Self-Forgiveness

- Individuals who have committed a transgression believe they are not forgiven by the people whom they have hurt
- Individuals believe that "God" does not forgive them
- An inability on the part of an individual to accept their own imperfections or change their own unattainable standards
Five Tips to Self Forgiveness

According to Smedes:
• We tell it to ourselves – “I forgive me.”
• We repeat it
• We keep it to ourselves
• We act like it even if we don’t talk about it
• We do something extravagant
Unforgiveness as a “Cold Emotion”

• Unforgiveness involves feelings of resentment, bitterness, and even hatred
What is Hate?

• Throughout history artists, poets, and writers have been interested in the nature of hate. Scientists from a variety of disciplines have also attempted to unravel its mysteries. Yet in spite of abundant theorizing and research, most modern scholars still complain that little is known about this complex emotion.

Aumer-Ryan & Hatfield (2007)
HATE: What is it?

- Our instinctive backlash against anyone who wounds us wrongly
- Our natural response to deep, unfair pain
- Elemental inner violence that drives people apart
- It’s not the same as anger. Hate does not want to change things for the better

“When we deny our hate, we detour around the crisis of forgiveness; we do not dare to risk forgiving the person we hate.”
Impact of Hate . . .

• Hate focused on people is very hard to heal.

• When we hate people who do us wrong, the hate stays alive long after the wrong they did is dead and gone.

• Unchecked, hate will do us in.

• Hate can be fatal when it grows to enormous size within us.

None of us want to admit we hate someone. We deny our hatred. We disguise and suppress it. We hide it from ourselves.
Forgiveness is love’s antidote to hate
Signs of Genuine Forgiveness

- Able to use anger constructively
- Is no longer controlled by anger or fearful of its expression
- Experiences genuine positive attitudes toward the person forgiven
- The ability to ask for forgiveness from others, even when the other refuses

—Vitz (1997)
Gratitude and Older Adults

• Older people risk an insidious slide into low mood, exacerbated by age related risk factors – neurobiological changes, stressful events, social isolation, poverty, insomnia, suicidal ideation

• It’s important to look at cost-effective ways in which the psychological wellbeing of older adults can be maintained and enhanced
Gratitude and Grit

• A study by Kleiman et al (2013) suggested that individuals with gratitude and grit (the pursuit of goals with perseverance and passion) showed the greatest reduction in suicidal ideation over time.

• Although both gratitude and grit needed to be present, gratitude emerged as the more important factor in reducing suicidal ideation.
Gratitude and Older Adults

• Gratitude may be important in terms of helping older people attain the final stage of adult development and resolve the integrity vs despair stage as described by Erik Erikson

• Older people may view gratitude as a positive, rewarding, experience
What Is Gratitude?

• The quality or condition of being thankful; an inclination to return kindness. The Latin roots of the word come from gratia meaning favor and “gratus” meaning pleasing. The word favor reflects a sense of appreciation for something out of the ordinary and the word pleasing describes the essential positive emotion that gratitude creates.
Gratitude

• Professor Lyubomirsky “Grateful thinking promotes the savoring of positive life experiences. By relishing and taking pleasure in some of the gifts of your life, you will be able to extract the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from your current circumstances”
Gratitude

• Professor Robert Emmons “Gratitude is an affirmation of the goodness in one’s life and the recognition that the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside of the self”
• In the space on the next slide, create 3 lists of people and things that you are grateful for. In the first column, you will include the people and things you are most grateful for; in the second column... the people and things still important but a little less so. In the third column other people and things that you are also gratitude for.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>MOST GRATEFUL</th>
<th>MORE GRATEFUL</th>
<th>GRATEFUL</th>
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</table>
• Think about your lists... Is your list filled with people or things? How do you express your gratitude— in similar or different ways across your lists? How frequently do you express gratitude? Is it fleeting or a common occurrence? Keep these lists handy as a reminder of all that you have to be grateful for in your life!
Gratitude Intervention

According to Killen & Macaskill (2015):

• Gratitude diaries may be a cost-effective method of producing beneficial improvements in wellbeing for older adults

• Older subjects kept a diary (for 14 days) where they recorded three good things that seemed positive to them and why they viewed them positively
Gratitude Intervention

• The strength of this study was that it provided support for an inclusive and effective approach towards improving and maintaining optimum levels of wellbeing as aging progresses.

• Findings suggested that the three good things gratitude diary can enhance a sense of meaning and reduce perceived stress in an older adult population.
“When you haven’t forgiven those who’ve hurt you, you turn your back against your future. When you do forgive, you start walking forward.”


References


References


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DVD

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