Thriving Through Past Hurts: A Primer on the Benefits of Interpersonal Forgiveness
Presenters

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Presentation Questions

- What is (interpersonal) forgiveness?
- What does scientific research tell us about forgiveness?
- Is forgiveness different for multicultural students and students of faith?
- Can students learn to forgive? What is the path to forgiveness?
Story of Schopenhauers’s Porcupines
Cautionary Views of Forgiving

Doesn’t discussion of forgiveness …

… communicate condemnation to the victim?

… invoke moral/religious imperatives?

… usually fail because the offender doesn’t apologize or accept responsibility?

… encourage return to dangerous relationships?

… reduce the likelihood of positive social change by stripping away the motivational force of anger?
What is Forgiveness?

• Forgiveness is not:
  - Minimizing
  - Condoning / tolerating
  - Justifying
  - Pardoning / excusing
  - Forgetting
  - Reconciling

• Forgiveness is:
  - An intrapersonal process
  - Freely chosen
  - Decrease in negative / antisocial feelings
  - Increase in positive / prosocial feelings
Forgiveness Defined

• A multifaceted process (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, motivational) …

… in which unforgiving (e.g., vengeful, hostile) attitudes toward an offender are reduced …

… and are replaced by increased prosocial (e.g., empathic, compassionate) attitudes.

• An intrapersonal process regarding interpersonal relationships
How Forgiveness Works

• “Note that forgiveness does not erase a transgression. It does not change the nature of the transgression to somehow turn a wrong into a right. When we forgive, we change the emotional attachments to the transgression. That reduces negative emotions and increases positive emotions.” (Worthington, 2003)
Benefits of Forgiving

Positive correlations:
- subjective well-being
- meaning in life
- positive emotions
- life satisfaction
- health habits
- task coping
- immunity

Negative correlations:
- depression
- sadness
- anxiety
- anger/hostility
- aggression
- grief
- stress hormones
- drinking / smoking
- blood pressure
- cortisol reactivity
Types of Hurts Reported by College Students

- Romantic betrayal: 30%
- Friend betrayal: 16%
- Unclassifiable: 13%
- Family betrayal: 12%
- Teasing: 10%
- Passive disassociation: 6%
- Criticism: 5%
- Active disassociation: 4%
- Missing: 3%
- Taken for granted: 2%

Source: Goldman (2009)
## Cultural Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Individualistic worldview</th>
<th>Collectivistic worldview</th>
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<tr>
<td>View of Self</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Interdependent</td>
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<td>Primary face concern</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
<td>Other-face &amp; self-face</td>
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<td>Forgiveness &amp; reconciliation</td>
<td>Distinct</td>
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<td>Central goal of forgiveness</td>
<td>Personal well-being</td>
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<td>Primary tools for forgiveness</td>
<td>Psychotherapy, self-help resources</td>
<td>Rituals, narratives, communal healers</td>
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*Adapted from Sandage & Williamson (2005) and Sandage & Wiens (2001)*
Forgiveness in the Context of Religious Meaning Systems

- As a meaning system, religion would be expected to influence individuals’:
  - Beliefs
  - Emotions
  - Actions
Forgiveness is commanded by God in scripture.

God has forgiven us. Therefore, we should forgive others.

 Forgiveness is obligatory only if the transgressor:
  – Expresses remorse
  – Compensates the victim
  – Promises to never repeat the offense.

Reconciliation is not required.
Christianity

- Similar to Judaism, we are to forgive because God first forgave us.

- God and Christ serve as role models of forgiveness.

- Does not require reconciliation.

- Unlike Judaism, forgiveness is not conditional upon transgressor’s repentance.
Islam

• The Qur’ān, as interpreted by some scholars, teaches that the search for forgiveness is more virtuous than the search for justice.

• God gives a special blessing to those who forgive rather than seek revenge.
Buddhism

- Compassion.
- Forbearance.
- Interconnectedness of all things.
- Karma.
Hinduism

• Forgiveness is one of the concepts necessary to follow the path of *dharma*, or righteousness.

• Lack of forgiveness in this life will be repaid with negative outcomes in a subsequent life.

• All people have the power to forgive, because each person has divinity within his or her being.
Practical Implications

How do we apply this information to the students we work with?

• Assess for forgiveness-justice orientation.
• Work to highlight centrality of forgiveness in particular religion.
Forgiveness Intervention Research

Intervention Models:
- Enright’s Process Model (Enright et al., 1991)
- Worthington’s (2001) REACH Model

Meta-analyses on forgiveness intervention studies:
- Worthington et al. (2000): $d = .43$
- Baskin & Enright (2004): $d = .82$ (group); $d = 1.66$ (individual)
- Wade et al. (2005): ($ES = 0.57$ vs. $ES = 0.43$ for comparison tx)
How Do People Forgive?

• Pyramid Model to REACH Forgiveness
  (Worthington, 2001)

• Recall the hurt
• Empathy for the offender
• Altruistic gift of forgiveness
• Commit to forgiveness
• Hold on to forgiveness
Images of Forgiveness

Holding a grudge is like …

… grasping a hot coal w/ the intent of throwing it at someone else

… swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to die

… being stung to death by one bee

Forgiving is like …

… gathering up all the garbage that’s been cluttering the garage and disposing of it

… washing your hands clean of germs that have been making you sick for a long time

… finally finishing a marathon you’ve been running for a long time
Using Art

I'm sorry your father didn't love you more
Using Art

you're Not A
MONSTER
to me
any more
Final Thoughts on Forgiveness

• People often want to forgive, so don’t be afraid to discuss forgiveness.
• Forgiveness occurs within the hurt person, and does not require anything on the part of the offender.
• Attitudes toward forgiveness are influenced by cultural and religious factors.
• There are many paths to forgiveness.
• Forgiveness takes time.
Forgiveness Meditation

• FORGIVENESS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE HURT OR HARMED YOU: There are many ways that you have been harmed by others, abused or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word or deed. Let yourself picture and remember these many ways. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this past and sense that you can release this burden of pain by extending forgiveness when your heart is ready. Now say to yourself:

I now remember the many ways others have hurt or harmed me, wounded me, out of fear, pain, confusion and anger. I have carried this pain in my heart too long. To the extent that I am ready, I offer them forgiveness. To those who have caused me harm, I offer my forgiveness, I forgive you.

-- Jack Kornfield
Additional Resources

- [http://www.learningtoforgive.com/](http://www.learningtoforgive.com/)
- [http://thepowerofforgiveness.com/](http://thepowerofforgiveness.com/)
- [http://www.forgiving.org/](http://www.forgiving.org/)
References


