

THE CONCEPT OF FORGIVENESS

IT'S PLACE IN OUR LIVES AND ITS IMPORTANCE AS A
THERAPEUTIC GOAL IN COUNSELLING

Eric Crowther, M.S.W., RSW

Child and Family Therapist

Intensive Support and Supervision Program

Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca

North Bay, Ontario

ecrowther@handstfhn.ca

www.thefamilyhelpnetwork.ca

Presented at The **Fifth North American Conference on Spirituality and Social Work**
held from June 17-19, 2010, in Calgary, Alberta, at the University of Calgary.




Abstract:

This workshop explores the need to examine one's own spirituality and of the need to study the meaning of forgiveness. First, the concept of forgiveness is described through examination of the Hebrew and Christian conceptions of forgiveness. Participants are then led through a series of exercises that help them reflect on what forgiveness means to them and the place that it occupies in our personal lives. The importance of forgiveness as a therapeutic goal in counselling is then discussed.

Biography:

Eric Crowther is a therapist at a children's mental health centre in north-eastern Ontario, with a special interest in the spiritual aspects of social work, especially the issue of forgiveness. He has taught part-time at Nipissing University, Canadore College and Northern College. Profoundly influenced by Jean Vanier, Eric was invited to give a series of lectures and workshops entitled "Integrating Spirituality and Life: The Model of Jean Vanier" by St. Thomas University in 2003. Eric is an active Board Member of L'Arche North Bay and the Canadian Society of Clinical Hypnosis, Ontario Division. Eric maintains a small private practice specializing in the treatment of adults suffering from anxiety.



This presentation is intended to encourage you to introduce the concept of forgiveness into the therapeutic process as a goal.

Value Clarity

- Ed Canda and Leola Furman developed a number of principles to help guide social workers in the helping relationship. Canda and Furman referred to their first principle as being *value clarity*. (*Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice*, 1999)

Value Clarity

- demands that the worker “be clear about his or her feelings, opinions, beliefs, and moral commitments that shape the approach to practice.”
- requires self-reflection, openness to explore one’s values, morals and ethical understandings of oneself.

History & Context

- **My journey...** At some point in the mid-1990s when the Balkan war was at its height, I was travelling to southern Ontario and I picked up a faint, fragmented radio signal. What caught my attention was the topic – forgiveness. What really captured my attention was the fact that the interviewer was not talking to a religious leader, she was talking to a psychologist. And the psychologist had either had just come from Sarajevo or was on his way to Sarajevo!
- **Robert D. Enright, a psychologist from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.**
- **He had been working on the social scientific study of forgiveness since 1985 and had started the International Forgiveness Institute.**

International Forgiveness Institute

- “dedicated to helping people gain knowledge about forgiveness and to use that knowledge for personal, group, and societal renewal.”
- offers two courses on forgiveness. One is a continuing education course and the other is a University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension course.

History & Context

- Ellen Bass and Laura Davis wrote their influential *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* in 1988. One of their chapters was entitled “*Forgiveness?*”

Ellen Bass & Laura Davis

- “When talking about the stages in the healing process, the question is inevitably raised: What about forgiveness? The only necessity as far as healing is concerned is forgiving *yourself*. Developing compassion and forgiveness for your abuser, or for the members of your family who did not protect you, is *not* a required part of the healing process. It is not something to shoot for. It is not the final goal.”

Ellen Bass & Laura Davis

- “To find out exactly what forgiveness is, we looked in the dictionary and found these definitions: (a) to cease to feel resentment against an offender; (b) to give up claim to requital from an offender; to grant relief from payment.”
- “Trying to forgive is a futile short-circuit of the healing process...No one forgives by trying.”

History & Context

- The Rainbow nation starts here. Reconciliation and forgiveness start here. Forgiveness liberates the soul and removes fear.

Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman) in Invictus

History & Context

- “What is good? – All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? – All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? – The feeling that power increases – that a resistance is overcome. Not contentment, but more power; not peace at all, but war, not virtue, but proficiency...The weak and ill-constituted shall perish: first principle of our philanthropy. And no one shall help them to do so. What is more harmful than any vice? – Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak – Christianity...”

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ

History & Context

- “While the pundits differ as to whether Michael Vick should be forgiven, they all predict he will be...This infatuation with forgiveness smacks less of Christianity than it does of New Age mushiness. Forgiveness is a win-win situation. The malefactor feels good about himself for being forgiven, and we feel good about ourselves for having forgiven him. Not that we deserve self-congratulation, forgiveness of this sort being so cheap, but go around making this point and you won’t soon be forgiven.”

Clifford Orwin, The Globe and Mail, Sept 8, 2007

In referring to Michael Vick the star football player who had been accused of being involved in an illegal dog fighting ring.

History & Context

- Robert Enright and Joanna North published a volume of essays on forgiveness in 1998 where they noted some fascinating (and disturbing) facts. (*Exploring Forgiveness*)

Enright and North

- “In the academic world...many scholarly and learned articles and books are written concerning the origins of war, the psychology of aggression, and the social and psychological effects of violence. Yet, if one were to attempt to find all the articles and books on the topic of interpersonal forgiveness that have appeared in or been translated into English, starting with St. Augustine’s writings in the early fifth century and ending in 1970, how many works could be gathered?”



1 1 0

What is forgiveness?

- How we define a word and what our beliefs are about the word or concept can have a significant impact on what we choose to explore with our clients and what we recommend.

History & Context

- **HEBREW words for forgiveness and their basic meaning:**
 - ▣ nasa (*naw-saw'*): to bear, take away (Gen 50:17)
 - ▣ This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly. Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.

History & Context

- **HEBREW words for forgiveness and their basic meaning:**
 - salah (*saw-lakh'*): forgive, pardon, spare (Num 30:5)
 - kaphar (*kaw-far'*): to cover (Jer 18:23)

History & Context

- **BIBLICAL GREEK words for forgiveness and their basic meaning:**
 - **aphiemi** (*af-ee'-ay-mee*) – to cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, leave
 - **Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.**
Mt 6:12
 - **For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.** Mt 6:14-15

Universal in Nature

- “Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal column of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.”

Ernest Hemingway, The Capital of the World.

We all have been hurt by someone (or some people) and we all have hurt someone (or some people)

History & Context

- Forgiveness is the central experience of faith for Western peoples – the forgiveness of God to resolve human guilt, the forgiveness of other persons to resolve alienation...

History & Context

- Forgiveness, in Anabaptist thought and practice, is “the mutual recognition that repentance is genuine and that right relationships have been restored or are now achieved.” Forgiveness is thus seen as a reconciling, not an inner healing, event, as a relational process rather than an individualistic act, as reconstruction, not a private spirituality.

The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada webpage on forgiveness, 1999.

History & Context

- Charles Stanley from the Baptist tradition maintains that forgiveness is an act of the will that involves five steps. Stanley's fifth step involves reconciliation: "We must," Stanley writes, "make reconciliation with those from whom we have been estranged."

The Gift of Forgiveness, 1991.

Questions

- Do you believe that you forget when you forgive?
- Do you believe that you go through predictable stages when forgiving?
- If so, what are your stages?

What Forgiveness Is Not

Philosophers' Distinctions Between Forgiveness and Related Concepts

- Pardon, legal mercy, leniency (*a merciful judge is not the one hurt*)
- Condoning and excusing (*putting up with an offense or letting it go*)
- Reconciliation (*two people coming together again*)

What Forgiveness Is Not

Philosophers' Distinctions Between Forgiveness and Related Concepts

- Conciliation (*to appease, placate an offender*)
- Justification (*believing what the person did was fair*)
- Forgetting (*ceasing to remember the offense, possibly leaving one vulnerable to the offense again*)

What Forgiveness Is Not

Philosophers' Distinctions Between Forgiveness and Related Concepts

- Becoming disappointed (*one can be disappointed without being unjustly treated by another*)
- Balancing scales (*getting back in kind, punishing the offender*)
- Self-centering (*forgiving only for one's own benefit, focusing on oneself, and not the offender*)

What Forgiveness Is Not

Reductionistic Thinking That May Be Accurate but Incomplete

- Letting time heal the wound (*passive rather than active*)
- Abandoning resentment (*one can abandon resentment but have a cool, detached attitude toward the offender*)
- Possessing positive feelings (*one can have positive feelings toward people who have not been unfair*)

What Forgiveness Is Not

Reductionistic Thinking That May Be Accurate but Incomplete

- Saying “I forgive you” (*one can forgive without using specific words*)
- Making a decision to forgive (*decisions to forgive are part of but not all that is encompassed in the definition: i.e., one who decides to go to college does not received a degree until work is accomplished*)

What Forgiveness Is Not

Common Colloquialisms Confused With Forgiveness

- “Forgiveness is a quick fix” (*forgiveness can be a struggle that takes time*)
- “I’ve accepted what happened” (*one can accept an event while rejecting a person involved in the event*)
- “I accept what happened knowing that God will punish him or her” (*this could be cloaked in revenge*)

What Forgiveness Is Not

Common Colloquialisms Confused With Forgiveness

- “I have moved on” (*one can move on while rejecting a person*)
- “I have the satisfaction of not letting the person get to me” (*this may be cloaked in revenge*)
- “I like to let the person know how much he or she owes me” (*this may be a form of cloaked revenge*)

Enright's definition of forgiveness

- Forgiveness is a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgement, and indifferent behaviour toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him or her.

What forgiveness is

1. Forgiveness occurs only between people and not between a person and an inanimate object.
2. Forgiveness follows a deep, personal hurt from the other.
3. Forgiveness may co-exist with a sense of justice but forgiveness is different from justice.

What forgiveness is

4. Forgiveness takes time.
5. Forgiveness is a free, unconditional choice.
6. Forgiveness does not require intention or the realization of hurt on the part of the offender.
7. Forgiveness depends on the degree of hurt.
8. Forgiveness is contextual; that is, there is a specific event that can be identified as unfair.

What forgiveness is

9. Forgiveness is different from reconciliation. Forgiveness may be a part of reconciliation, but reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness.
10. Forgiveness is not forgetting; in fact, forgetting could perpetuate abusive contexts.
11. Forgiveness is not condoning; the injured is aware that his/her injury is unjust and undeserved.

Uncovering Phase

1. Examination of psychological defenses.
2. Confrontation of anger; the point is to release; not harbor, the anger.
3. Admittance of shame, when this is appropriate.
4. Awareness of cathexis.
5. Awareness of cognitive rehearsal of the offense.

Uncovering Phase

6. Insight that the injured party may be comparing self with the injurer.
7. Realization that oneself may be permanently and adversely changed by the injury.
8. Insight into a possibly altered “just world” view.

Decision Phase

9. A change of heart, conversion, new insights that old resolutions, 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, who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context.
13. Empathy toward the offender.
14. Awareness of compassion, as it emerges, towards the offender.
15. Acceptance, absorption of the pain.

Outcome/Deepening Phase

16. Finding meaning for self and others in the suffering and in the forgiveness process.
17. Realization that the self has needed others' forgiveness in the past.
18. Insight that one is not alone

Outcome/Deepening Phase

19. Realization that self may have a new purpose in life because of the injury.
20. Awareness of decreased negative affect and, perhaps, increased positive affect, if this begins to emerge, toward the injurer; awareness of internal emotional release.

Boiling it Down

- Keep it simple
- Remember we're clinicians
- Apply the research

Uncovering and Decision Phase

Decide to Forgive

When you're angry at someone, forgiving that person helps yourself and them.

It will always be remembered, and the person who hurt you is still responsible.

But, if you commit to forgive you don't get even or force the other to make it up to you.



Choose to forgive rather than getting even.

Anger to Hope

When someone hurts you it is natural to get angry. But what then?

Do you burn over the unfairness, blame yourself/others, or want to get even?

Do you go over and over the hurt in your mind until it is like a painful sore?



Don't let your anger damage you or others.

Turn destructive anger into something positive.

Decision Phase

Soften Your Heart

*Everyone has suffered from being hurt . . .
including the one who hurt you.*

*The person who hurt you may at some time
have suffered pain somewhat like your own.*

*You show compassion when you understand their pain
and care that they get better.*



Try to understand and feel their pain.

Work Phase

See with New Eyes

*When you commit to forgive you begin to see
the one who hurt you as part of a bigger picture,
a person under pressure, someone with
difficulties and pain.*

You begin to see a person who is imperfect just as you are.



Take another look at the one who hurt you.

Outcome/Deepening Phase

Soak Up the Pain

What good is it to pass the pain on to others?

*If you take on the pain, you stop it from going on to others,
even to those who didn't hurt you.*

You don't forget the hurt, but you remember it in a new way.

*Without demanding anything of the one who hurt you,
you give this person the gift of forgiveness.*



Give the gift of forgiveness to release your pain.

Case Study

- Discussion

Thank you.

- For a copy of this presentation, send an email to

ecrowther@handstfhn.ca