

Psychological Science of Forgiveness:

Implications for Psychotherapy and Education

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Abstract

Forgiveness as an research agenda in psychology was virtually unexplored until about 1985. In this presentation, I discuss the work which my colleagues and I have done on this topic. Four issues are examined. First, we explore what the meaning of the term *forgiveness* is. Forgiveness is a moral virtue in which an unjustly treated person offers mercy and love toward the one who did wrong. Second, we explore what forgiveness therapy is. A process model of forgiveness is described. Nine empirically-based studies of the process model are presented. Third, we examine what forgiveness education is. We discuss the preventive nature of forgiveness education, how forgiveness education is implemented in classrooms, and six empirically-based studies of the effectiveness of forgiveness education. Finally, we explore our latest idea in this area, the forgiving community. The features of forgiving communities are described and the potential benefits of preserving forgiveness as a norm within groups and communities are examined.

Psychological Science of Forgiveness: Implications for Psychotherapy and Education

When we listen to world news on television or read magazines and newspapers that discuss major threats to civilization, what issues dominate the discussions? I hear much about global warming dooming our planet, nuclear holocaust destroying humanity, and global terrorism eradicating Western culture. I have never once heard discussed that a lack of forgiveness could pose a threat to humanity. So, let me begin this talk by stating what for me, after 26 years of studying the topic, is now the obvious: Unless we begin to embrace forgiveness in our own hearts and communities, humanity's existence on this planet is at risk. The understanding and practice of forgiveness is just as important as sound ecological practices, nuclear deterrent, and the control of terrorism to save the human species.

In this paper, I will be taking a much more modest approach to forgiveness than my introductory remarks might suggest. The reason is that I am only one small person who has had the privilege of pioneering the study of forgiveness in psychology, starting in 1985. My focus has been on forgiveness in psychotherapy for the first 17 years of study, then on forgiveness education since 2002, and currently (together with psychotherapy and education) on what I am calling The Forgiving Communities. My work will not change the planet. Yet, if we can somehow find a way to systematically study forgiveness and persist in this study and its application for generations to come, with an ever expanding influence, then perhaps we will have played one small part in improving the human condition.

To begin this paper, I will start with the necessity of defining my term, *forgiveness*. From there I will outline a model of forgiveness therapy, along with the scientific evidence of its effectiveness for people's emotional health. Next we will turn to a discussion of forgiveness education for children and adolescents. I will end the talk by briefly sketching some ideas for the development of what I am calling The Forgiving Community.

What Is Forgiveness?

Let us begin exploring the definition of forgiveness by first examining its meaning within Sacred Scripture, starting with what I think is the oldest preserved account of the topic, at least in any detailed way. None of the ancient traditions actually defines forgiveness and so we must discern its meaning in the context of stories and instruction offered in the ancient writings.

Hebrew Views of Forgiveness

In Genesis 37-45, we meet Joseph, the consummate forgiver, who was badly mistreated by his 10 half-brothers and one brother, Benjamin. The story is a familiar one: The brothers were jealous of him and threw Joseph down a well. To alleviate their own guilt, they went back and rescued him. They apparently were not feeling too guilty because they then sold him into slavery, where he spent his days and years in Egypt, eventually rising to political power. Once in power, he found himself in the revengeful position of receiving his half-brothers, who do not recognize him, as they humbly begged for assistance following a devastating famine in their own land.

In this story, we can see that forgiveness tends not to unfold in a nice, neat, and predictable pattern, but instead is fraught with struggle, ambivalence, and anger. In the

initial meeting with his half-brothers, Joseph showed no mercy but instead accused the half-brothers of espionage and threw them into prison, an act of wrath, not forgiveness. He began to show some forgiveness, not behaviorally toward his relatives but inside himself as he wept over their imprisonment. Upon releasing all but Simeon, he exhorted them to go back to their homeland and bring Benjamin to Egypt, which they did. Upon seeing his brother, Joseph wept for a second time, but this was not sufficient to induce a true and deep forgiveness for what his brothers perpetrated on him years ago. The relatives were faced once again with a wrathful Joseph, who feigned altruism. He gave them much food and supplies to bring home, but stealthily concealed a silver cup in the unsuspecting Benjamin's sack. When the Egyptian soldiers advanced on the departing relatives, found the cup, and accused Benjamin of theft, we can only imagine the stress felt by the eleven. At this point in the story, Judah begged Joseph to take him, not their father's favorite, Benjamin, into captivity. Taking the role of the Christ-figure, as he willingly bore the suffering meant for Benjamin, Judah was instrumental in softening Joseph's heart, as he wept for a third and final time, embraced Benjamin and each half-brother, and then in an act of genuine forgiveness, sent them on their way with sufficient goods to survive the famine.

The story shows that forgiveness is achieved, in this case at least, only after a struggle with deep resentment. Joseph punished and wept, punished some more and wept some more, and finally, upon the third (a numerical symbol of perfection) weeping did he finally forgive. His forgiveness was so powerful that it helped to save the Hebrew nation. After all, if he had stayed resentful, the brothers would not have received the goods and the community could have perished.

Christian Views of Forgiveness

We see a consensus on the meaning of forgiveness developing in Sacred Scripture when we compare the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) with the Hebrew story of Joseph. In the familiar story of the Prodigal Son, an ungrateful son asked his father for his inheritance. In an act of altruism, the father consented to this, followed by the son's wanton living in a distant land. He became so impoverished that he even took a job tending swine, not a respectable profession for a Hebrew man to do. When the destitute son decided to come home and was on his father's land, the father, recognizing his son, ran to him, embraced him and loved him unconditionally, similar to Joseph's embrace of his brothers upon his third weeping.

Common to both stories is the unconditional nature of the forgiveness. In each case, the ones acting unjustly do not repent in the presence of the forgiver and yet those who forgive lavish love on them nonetheless. Forgiveness in both traditions appears to be an unconditional act of love poured out on those who have not earned (in the sense of justice) the love. Forgiveness is mercy, not justice, in the face of another's (or others') injustice.

The deepest understanding of forgiveness from the Christian perspective is that it is a process, dependent on Divine grace, in which the offended person redemptively suffers, through *agape* love, with Christ for the good of the offender. See Pope John Paul II (1984) and in the New Testament see Galatians 6:17, John 15:12-14, and Colossians 1:24 as examples of this idea.

Other Ancient Traditions

Muslim, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions all make room for forgiveness and see it as a morally worthwhile activity. In the Muslim Koran, for example, there is a book entitled, Joseph. Based loosely (not exactly) on the Genesis account, Joseph asked Allah to forgive the brothers. Joseph himself did not demonstrate the kind of lavish love seen in the Hebrew and Christian accounts, but mercy nonetheless is present.

Confucius in one memorable passage exhorted others to never remember old scores (Lau, 2000), opening the door to forgiveness. Although the word forgiveness does not appear in ancient Buddhist writings, the Dalai Lama has written a book on the topic (Dalai Lama & Chen, 2005). Ancient stories of injustice include the consistent theme of compassion toward the unjust. The logic of Buddhist arguments, when followed to their ultimate conclusion, renders forgiveness unnecessary. This is the case because the highest levels of Buddhism train the mind to view injustices as mistakes and mistaken people are to be understood and to be shown compassion, not viewed as having committed a wrong. One does not forgive unless there is an injustice and so if all injustices are re-framed as mistakes, then ultimately there is nothing to forgive. Nonetheless, a commonality of Buddhism and the other traditions discussed here is the challenge to rid oneself of resentment, develop compassion, with the end-point of greater harmony among people.

The Definition of Forgiveness

The essence of forgiveness is that it is a moral virtue, as is justice, kindness, and moral love (as examples). Forgiveness is part of the virtue of *agape* or moral love in which a person engages in self-giving toward others without any apparent reward to the

self. Forgiveness further is part of mercy (which is part of *agape* love), or the granting of a favor to those who have not earned the favor. (The word “earned” in the previous sentence implies that the offender has not engaged in a just response which now makes the merciful person’s action somehow a just reaction to the other. By “earned” I do not mean “deserved,” because, if all persons are made in the image and likeness of God, then all persons deserve mercy because this is an attribute of God.) The specific difference between forgiveness and all other virtues, including mercy of which forgiveness is a part, is that it is an act (and, of course, more than an act as we see in the next subsection) of goodness specifically toward a person or persons who have acted unjustly toward the forgiver.

Forgiveness differs from such concepts as excusing, forgetting, and reconciling because the latter three are not moral virtues. For example, reconciliation does not originate inside one person, but instead is a negotiation between two or more people for the purpose of mutual harmony in a relationship.

Because it is a virtue, forgiveness, like all other virtues, is not contingent on accidental external situations for its expression (forgiveness is contingent essentially on someone acting unjustly because such unjust acts by another are part of the essence of what forgiveness is). Examples of accidental external situations are the other’s repentance or apology, encouragement from others to forgive, the trustworthiness of the other, and the other’s willingness to reconcile.

In essence, then, we can say that forgiveness is a moral virtue, unconditionally expressed as an act of mercy toward those who have acted unjustly toward the forgiver. There are at least three end-points to forgiveness that I

am able to see: 1) to express agape love as an end in itself because this is a moral good regardless of what follows from its expression; 2) to help change the offending other's behavior so that he or she grows in the moral virtues (such as patience, kindness, and love); and 3) to unite in moral love with an offending other or others.

More detail on the term, *forgiveness*. Because forgiveness is a moral virtue, and because the moral virtues possess the following characteristics (as described by Simon, 1986), then forgiveness possesses these characteristics: Forgiveness is concerned with the good of human welfare; the one who forgives has motivation to effect the moral good (it does not just happen by chance or by mistake); at least to a limited degree, the one who forgives knows that the expression of forgiveness is good even if he or she does not articulate a precise moral principle underlying the forgiving act; forgiveness as moral virtue is practiced by the person (although forgiveness can be a one-time act, it usually is repeated when other injustices occur); the forgiver need not be perfect in the expression of forgiveness toward the other; different people demonstrate different degrees of the virtue; and the one who is practicing the moral virtue tries to do so as consistently as he or she can.

As a moral virtue, forgiveness is more than a skill, a coping strategy, or a commitment. Skills can be devoid of moral content (hitting a tennis ball well is one example), as can coping strategies (relaxation training as one example). A commitment with its dedication to action and conscious choice shares certain features of a moral virtue but lacks the follow-through of actually performing the behavior connected with the motivation and decision to act. To commit to working in a soup kitchen does not fulfill the requirement of going there and dipping the ladle into the soup kettle. A

complete moral virtue concerns understanding (at least to a degree) of the good, motivation to do the good (I desire to do this), the will to effect a good action (I definitely will do it), the commitment to focus that will (I will do it in a particular way with a particular plan), and the behaviors to fulfill the internal transformations toward the good (see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

What Is Forgiveness Therapy?

Forgiveness therapy (FT) is a process in which clients freely choose to attempt forgiving one or more people for unjust treatment. FT has as its goal the assistance of an unjustly treated person for the purpose of: restoration of emotional health of the forgiver and reconciliation with the other person or persons if the client wishes to reconcile and if there is no danger in reconciling. FT is distinctly different from traditional forms of therapy in that the focus of the therapy is deliberately not on the client but instead is on the offender(s). In other words, and as we will see below as I describe the FT process, the client attempts greater insight into: 1) the offender as both offender and person, 2) the circumstances surrounding the offense; and 3) what forgiveness is and is not, including how to go about forgiving. Details of FT, including case study examples, are in Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000.

The Forgiveness Process

Table 1 lists the sequence of guideposts used to help each participant forgive someone who hurt him or her deeply and unfairly. The preliminary work asks the participant to identify a particular person who was unfair and then to select one incident of unfairness. Next comes the challenging guideposts of confronting one's own anger to see how deep, abiding anger can complicate one's life. For example, participants

examine whether the abiding anger has affected one's health, often times in the form of reduced energy or even fatigue. The person examines his or her own worldview, or basic philosophy of life to ascertain whether it has changed as he or she lives with resentment. A typical pattern is a shift to a more pessimistic outlook (No boss can be trusted.).

The decision to forgive includes an examination of what forgiveness is and is not along with a commitment to try forgiveness as a way of dealing with the hurt and, when appropriate, to possibly repair the relationship. The work of forgiveness begins with cognitive exercise in which the participant tries to see the inherent worth of the injuring person. Inherent worth is the idea that any person, even those who act unjustly, are precious, not because of what they have done, but because of who they are.

Participants in practicing inherent worth thinking, try to see beyond the person's actions to his or her humanity. Compassion and empathy may then begin, even if slowly, to develop toward the offender. The next guidepost, "accept the pain," is not to quietly sink into despair about what happened but instead to proactively accept the fact that the injustice is now part of the historical record; one can courageously bear the weight of the injustice so that the pain is not passed back to the injurer or to anyone else. To "give the offender a gift" (see Table 1) does not necessarily mean that the forgiver gives a tangible gift wrapped in a box with a bow around it. Instead, it can take the form of a smile or a kind word.

Finally, in the discovery phase of the forgiveness process, the forgiver begins to learn more about oneself and the meaning of what was suffered, along with a reflection

on one's purpose in life having endured considerable injustice. It is at this point that we tend to see significant reductions in anger, anxiety, and depression.

The process can take many months to complete, but the results suggest that the effort is worthwhile. The sequence described in Table 1 does appear to be consistent with people's own descriptions of their own forgiveness processes when they have forgiven without professional help (Knutson, Enright, & Garbers, 2008).

Scientific Findings for Forgiveness Therapy with Adults

Table 2 presents a brief summary of the empirical studies with adults, in which we used the forgiveness process model. In all of the studies in Table 2, we employed the following procedures:

1. Participants were randomized either to the forgiveness group or to a control group. Some of the control groups were no-contact groups (no treatment) until after the original experimental group completed treatment (as in Freedman & Enright, 1996). Other control groups were treatments discussed in the literature as potentially helpful (as in Reed & Enright, 2006).
2. Participants were given a series of pre-tests, post-test, and follow-up assessments. The follow-up times varied across the studies from about four months (as in Waltman et al., 2009) to as long as 14 months (as in Freedman & Enright, 1996).
3. All therapists/educators were trained in the use of forgiveness therapy and whatever therapy was used (if any) in the control group. For most of the studies, the researchers audio-taped each therapist and had a graduate student, not involved in the research, rate the therapist's presentation for fidelity to the treatment protocol and

level of enthusiasm (to be sure that bias was not occurring with one group in particular).

Two of the studies are described more fully below.

People in drug rehabilitation. Fourteen men and women who suffered with drug dependence were admitted to a six-week treatment at a residential facility (Lin et al., 2004). About 90% of all drug rehabilitation in the United States is done on an out-patient basis. Typically, in-patient care is reserved for the clinically more serious cases. All fourteen participants entered the program with substantial psychological depression. Participants were randomized to one of two groups. The first focused both on the patient forgiving someone in their life for a very deep injustice as well as going through the typical program at the facility. The control group focused exclusively on the typical program at the facility, which included information on the effects of drug use on the body, strategies for avoiding stress, and social support. Each patient met individually with the counselor for about one hour twice a week for the six weeks.

Statistical analyses showed that those in the forgiveness group reduced more than those in the control group in depression, anxiety, anger, and vulnerability to drug use and increased more in forgiveness and self-esteem. These positive findings held at the 4-month follow-up testing. Those in the forgiveness group went from moderately to severely psychological depression to *non-depressed* and this held at the four-month follow-up. For those in the control group, they reduced in depression, but they *remained clinically depressed* at post-test and at follow-up testing.

One of the patients, Carol, worked on forgiving a man who sexually assaulted her years ago. Following that incident, her drug dependence increased markedly until she

ended up in the rehabilitation facility. During forgiveness therapy, Carol learned that the man who had assaulted her was, himself, the victim of sexual assault as a child. He was now doing to others what had happened to him. Carol realized during therapy that this man continued to have a great deal of power over her as she lived with a burning resentment daily toward him. Her forgiving him for this attack did not mean that she would be invulnerable to him or other attackers because to forgive does not mean to reconcile or to unquestioningly trust others. As a result of the forgiveness therapy, Carol went to non-depressed status and remained there at the four-month follow-up. One year after leaving the treatment facility, she was working for the state department of vocational rehabilitation and was doing fine.

Men with coronary artery disease. Seventeen men with coronary artery disease were randomized into either a forgiveness therapy group or a control group which focused on heart health (proper diet, exercise, dealing with stress). Each man met for approximately one hour per week for ten weeks with the counselor (Waltman et al., 2009).

The researchers focused on what the medical field calls “myocardial blood flow” through the heart in this study, which is assessed by a computer imaging technique. They focused on this issue for two reasons: a) those with coronary artery disease have less of this blood flow through the heart than people without this disease, and b) research has shown that anger tends to reduce this kind of blood flow through the heart. Thus, when people with coronary artery disease have been treated very unjustly by others and remain deeply angry (unforgiving), there is a tendency for even more blood

flow restriction to occur in the heart. This makes the person vulnerable to angina, sudden death, and other coronary complications.

The researchers first screened each patient to be sure that he had a significant interpersonal hurt and that he remained unforgiving. They then assessed the myocardial blood flow through his heart when he was at rest and then while he re-told his story of serious injustice against him. Only those who showed myocardial defects became part of the study.

Following treatment, the researchers found that those in the forgiveness group not only improved in forgiveness but also at the 4-month follow-up testing, they had less blood flow restriction in their hearts than they did at pre-test compared with the patients in the control group. In other words, when they recalled their story of deep injustice, their hearts functioned better than those in the control group and they functioned better than they did at the pre-testing.

Forgiveness can have a positive effect on the body. The researchers were not making the claim that forgiveness therapy actually restored the hearts to normal. The forgiveness therapy reduced anger and therefore helped the heart, in a small way, to function better than before forgiveness therapy.

Some Final Thoughts on Forgiveness Therapy

Over the years I have come to realize that the participants who forgive and experience considerable emotional benefits do not necessarily forgive at the very highest level. Instead, the key seems to be *improvement* in forgiveness, even to a middle level of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (Enright, 2004) at the end of

treatment. This finding is consistent with Aristotle's understanding of the virtues in that we are always in the process of growth in the virtues, rarely if ever reaching perfection.

Effective forgiveness therapy requires time for the participant to work through the issue of injustice. I do not recommend brief therapy for most clients. Instead, 12 or more sessions seems to be required for resentment to be reduced sufficiently for the client to experience emotional relief. Perhaps this next statement is too obvious, but I find that the most effective forgiveness therapists are the ones who have a love for this virtue and practice it consistently. In other words, a therapist who is unconvinced of the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy is unlikely to achieve the same level of success with clients as a therapist who has cultivated a love of the virtue.

What Is Forgiveness Education?

Our group began forgiveness education in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 2002, as a preventive approach to emotional and relational healing for people in contentious regions of the world. Our intent in the short-run is to reduce resentment, which can build up in children who are faced with continual injustices in their immediate environments. Our intent in the long-run is to equip students with such a deep knowledge and practice of forgiveness that they can and will appropriate forgiveness in their homes, places of worship, jobs, communities, and even the wider community which includes those with whom they are experiencing conflict. Might such deep knowledge and practice of forgiveness go far in mending conflicts, even those which have been entrenched in communities for centuries?

Such a preventive approach is consistent with the understanding of forgiveness as a moral virtue. If a person is to become proficient in the exercise of that virtue, then

he or she needs much practice expressing it. Starting in childhood then may be best as this affords for maximal practice. If a person is to grow in the expression of the virtue, then he or she might start with rudimentary expressions and then progress to more subtle and sophisticated expressions with age and practice, again pointing to the necessity of starting with children and advancing through the grade levels. If a person is to move as far toward the endpoint of that virtue's expression as possible, then he or she will need to be *educated* in the qualities of that virtue and by those who understand it and know how to teach it.

For all of these reasons, we thought it best to start with children by first training classroom teachers in the understanding and practice of forgiveness and to develop sound teacher curriculum guides so that each instructor has a common manual from which to work. In our case, we decided to begin in Belfast, Northern Ireland because of its long history of contention between Irish Catholics and British Protestants (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Enright, Knutson Enright, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007), its English-speaking culture (rendering translations of curricular materials unnecessary), and its religious traditions that made room for the concept of forgiveness.

We began with first grade (Primary 3 in Belfast) classrooms because from a developmental perspective it is here that children begin to think logically, in terms of causes and consequences, and simple deductions. We decided to extend the development of the teacher guides through the end of secondary school, a 12-year project. Our expectations were a reduction in anger in the short run and an ability to dialogue more effectively with "the other side" more deeply and effectively once the students became adults.

The Teacher Workshops

All instruction to date with our programs, which are now in Belfast, Milwaukee's central-city, and Madison, Wisconsin in the United States, has been delivered by the classroom teacher or the school's guidance counselor. We constructed the program in this way to preserve the cultural and religious nuances within each region in which we work. Classroom teachers attend a workshop that can last up to one full day in which they first explore the term *forgiveness*. Because this term is pervasive across religions and cultures, and at the same time is not necessarily discussed and debated on a community level, teachers come to the workshops with a wide variety of beliefs about forgiveness. For example, some equate it with excusing an offense, others with reconciling with an offender, still others with simply letting go of angry feelings without offering moral goodness to the offending person. The workshop allows the teachers the time to discuss the term with others and to see how philosophers, from ancient times to the present, have defined the term.

Next, the teachers are asked to think of a person who has treated them unjustly and who has hurt them emotionally. We then have what we call a "guided private reflection" in which each teacher begins the process of forgiving this one person for one incident. We use the book *Forgiveness Is a Choice* (Enright, 2001) as the manual in the guided reflection. Each teacher is given a copy of the book so that he or she can continue the forgiveness process following the completion of the workshop. The guided private reflection has no group discussion as we want the exercise to be private. Each teacher is free to discuss concerns with the workshop facilitators in a more private setting.

We ask the teachers to begin forgiving someone prior to teaching forgiveness to their students because we reason that those who have forgiven make the best teachers of forgiveness. Just as a school district would want each teacher of mathematics to have worked many arithmetic problems prior to teaching others, it seems reasonable to ask teachers of forgiveness to have practiced this discipline first as well. “First forgive, then teach about forgiveness” seems to be a reasonable approach.

Following the guided private reflection, we introduce the teachers to the various forgiveness curriculum guides and related materials. We turn to a description of one of those guides now.

The Forgiveness Curriculum Guides

To date, we have constructed teacher curriculum guides from pre-Kindergarten (age 4) through grade 8 (Year 10 in Belfast). A list of those guides is in Table 3. Only the grade one teacher guide will be discussed here. The teacher guide for this grade level lays a foundation for the children by introducing them to the basic moral foundations of forgiveness (Knutson & Enright, 2002; see Table 3). When a person forgives, he or she incorporates at least four moral virtues into the action and at least one central form of reasoning. The four virtues are kindness, respect, generosity, and moral love. The central form of reasoning is inherent worth, the idea that all people naturally possess infinite value, not because of what they do but because of who they are. Because each person is so valuable he or she does not have to earn kindness, respect, generosity, or moral love. Others are free to give these as they wish; it is their free moral choice.

Children learn about these five moral qualities through picture books and films. Dr. Seuss' books are at the center of the first-grade curriculum and his book *Horton Hears a Who* is the centerpiece of all of the materials. We chose Horton because of his oft repeated wisdom: "A person's a person no matter how small" because this idea captures well the concept of inherent worth.

The first-grade curriculum is divided into three parts. In Part 1, the children are introduced to stories which illustrate the five principles (inherent worth, kindness, respect, generosity, and moral love) apart from forgiveness issues. In other words, the children do not yet focus on injustices and the solution to them, but learn about the principles. In Part 2, the children are now introduced to story characters who have been treated unjustly. The students see how the characters apply inherent worth to the one who acted unjustly. They see how the characters exercise the moral virtues of kindness, respect, generosity, and moral love toward an offending person. In Part 3, the children are asked, but only if each chooses to do so, to think about one person who has been unfair to them. They are challenged, again as their free choice to participate or not, to apply the five principles toward the person who was unjust. The exercises in Part 3 are private, as they were in the Guided Private Reflection for teachers in their workshop. Students are encouraged to discuss any issue with the teacher if the student is uncomfortable or confused.

Throughout the curriculum, the children are repeatedly instructed on the difference between forgiving and reconciling. They are taught that they can exercise the moral virtue of forgiveness toward someone who is acting in a bullying way, but then they can and should take action, such as informing a teacher, of that person's hurtful

behavior. In other words, we build in protections for the children within the curriculum guides so that the students do not confuse forgiveness with related concepts. The children's safety is a primary concern in this curriculum.

Scientific Findings of Forgiveness Interventions with Children and Adolescents

Does this approach to forgiveness work? We must recall the short-term and the long-range goals. In the short run, it is our hope to reduce anger in the children. This we can assess. In the long-run, we are hoping to increase the quality of dialogue between previously contentious groups so that a deeper peace may pervade the society. This cannot be addressed for years to come.

Two studies in Belfast, Northern Ireland have been reported to date (Enright et al., 2007). In the first study, we randomized seven first-grade (Primary 3) classrooms to either an experimental condition in which the classroom teacher delivered the forgiveness curriculum (three classrooms) or to a control condition in which the teacher waited one year before teaching forgiveness (four classrooms). Thirty-six children participated in the experimental and 57 in the control condition. Both Irish Catholic and British Protestant schools participated. Using t-test gain scores on the level of the child (not on the level of the classroom), we found that the experimental group decreased statistically significantly more in anger than the control group, with a medium effect size. From a clinical viewpoint, the experimental group started above the clinical cut-off for anger (Beck, Beck, & Jolly., 2001) and went into the average range following intervention.

In the second study, we randomized six third-grade (Primary 5) classrooms to the experimental or control condition. Again, Catholic and Protestant schools participated.

Thirty-five children participated in the experimental and 49 in the control condition. We found that the experimental group decreased statistically significantly more in both anger and psychological depression (Beck, Beck, & Jolly, 2001) and increased more in forgiveness (Enright, 2004) than the control group. The effect sizes again were medium. From a clinical viewpoint, the experimental group started at the clinically mildly elevated level of anger and went into the average range following forgiveness education. The experimental group started in the high average range for depression and went to the average level after the forgiveness program.

Three studies in Milwaukee's central-city in the United States (Holter, Magnuson, Knutson, Knutson Enright, & Enright, 2008) have replicated these results with regard to anger reduction as has another study in a rural school setting in which the school guidance counselor successfully facilitated forgiveness counseling for academically at-risk adolescents (Gambaro, Enright, Baskin, & Klatt, 2008). Colleagues are just beginning to implement forgiveness education in Firenze, Italy and we are beginning discussions with educators in Israel and Palestine on the possibility of forgiveness education there.

It is worth noting that the effect sizes for the dependent variables in the school-based research were generally comparable to the average effect size for adult *group* forgiveness therapy (Baskin and Enright, 2004). Given that the interventions were delivered by classroom teachers and not trained psychological professionals, this is a cause for hope. Significant results can be obtained within classrooms by instructors who are teaching forgiveness for the first time. It is further worth noting that that the results were generally comparable to those obtained on highly motivated adults who

volunteered for their forgiveness therapy. In other words, even though the children gave their consent to be a part of these projects, we cannot expect them to be as motivated as adults who sought out the forgiveness experience and who approached the task with considerably higher cognitive complexity than the children.

The next section is not a description of empirically-based work but instead is my latest thinking on how forgiveness might be implemented beyond psychotherapy and education. The ideas have been emerging as I have followed the logical implications of the work on therapy and education since 1985.

What Is The Forgiving Community?

The idea of The Forgiving Community is one that begins to answer, perhaps in a small way, my opening challenge in this paper. I made the bold claim that forgiveness, properly understood and practiced, is necessary if humanity is to survive the treats of violence and utter destruction by the technologies and philosophies that now could make such destruction a real possibility.

The Forgiving Community is defined as a system-wide effort to make forgiveness a conscious and deliberate part of human relations through: discussion, practice, mutual support, and the preservation of forgiveness across time in any group that wishes to cultivate and perfect this virtue (alongside justice and all other virtues). The Forgiving Community is an idea that can become a reality wherever there is a collection of individuals who wish to unite toward a common goal of fostering forgiveness, developing the necessary structures within their organization to accomplish the goal, and preserving that goal for future generations. We will consider, as two examples, The School as Forgiving Community and The Church as Forgiving Community.

The School as Forgiving Community

As already described above, our group has been assisting with the implementation of forgiveness education programs in the Belfast, Northern Ireland schools (and elsewhere) since 2002. One of the schools in Belfast, because of the lead taken by the school's principal, is now known as a "forgiveness school." This means that the entire school is working together as a system to bring about the development of forgiveness in the students and staff. If each teacher gives forgiveness instruction to the students behind closed doors, they are acting independently, not as a cohesive unit. An entire symphony orchestra playing in harmony is a very different kind of music---group cooperation---than if each of these musicians played alone in a room behind a closed door.

When all or most in that school commit together to teaching forgiveness, they are establishing a norm. The principal and the teachers have agreed in this school that forgiveness is to be valued in the school. Their task is to teach forgiveness well at each grade level and then to:

1. Discuss forgiveness among themselves as professional educators to learn from and to support each other in the delivery of forgiveness instruction.
2. Bring forgiveness beyond instruction from curriculum guides (important as that is) and into the arena of classroom and school discipline. As an example, if two children are having an argument on the playground, a teacher may take them aside and talk with them together about what it means to forgive and reconcile. As another example, a teacher may have mercy on a child who is showing bullying behavior (by not giving

him or her the expected punishment) and then challenge that child to now go and have mercy on the one he or she has been bullying.

3. Encourage parents to implement forgiveness in the home. For example, there are notes home to parents, encouraging them to learn about and practice forgiveness, perhaps setting aside a forgiveness time once a week for family discussions. The point is to advance the development of this virtue in both school and home.

Forgiveness is brought into the important areas of the school well beyond just instruction. It pervades relationships and interactions and helps reduce resentments in the students, and between students and teachers. It becomes a part of the life of the community in that school.

This approach could be replicated elsewhere. If such a model for the community works in a school setting, why could it not work in family settings, at work, and in churches and others houses of worship, anywhere where individuals come together for a common purpose?

The Church as Forgiving Community

In the Our Father or Lord's Prayer, Jesus makes both a distinction and a connection between our receiving Divine forgiveness and our forgiving other people. Within the history of the Catholic Church, the emphasis has been on Sacramental Forgiveness, from God to people, more so than an emphasis on person-to-person forgiveness. Yet, there has been a shift within the past three decades to emphasize the crucial aspect of person-to-person forgiveness in the Catholic Church. For example, Pope John Paul II forgave his would-be-assassin as Mehmet Ali Agca in Rebibbia Prison in Rome and the world watched in wonder. His book, *Forgiveness: Thoughts for*

the New Millennium, shows Pope John Paul's conviction for encouraging people to put forgiveness into practice on both a deep and a large scale. This theme of person-to-person forgiveness was emphasized by Pope Benedict XVI in a Papal Wednesday Address on September 16, 2009 when he stated that one test of whether God dwells within us is our capacity to forgive. Perhaps it is time to take this counsel seriously by exploring the Catholic Church's role in bringing forgiveness to individual hearts and to the world.

The end point of The Church as Forgiving Community is fourfold:

1. to help local parishes incorporate the understand of and the practical application of forgiveness within the church community as a way to help individuals, families, and groups within the Church;
2. to help people begin to see the connection between Divine forgiveness and the person-to-person dimension of it, thus possibly reawakening the sense of importance of Sacramental Confession within local churches;
3. to be a foundation for growth in forgiveness across the world as pastoral workers use the practical ideas discussed in this paper to create Forgiving Communities within their parishes, with the commitment, for example, to then make contact with at least one other parish to help the people there form their own Forgiving Community;
4. to begin a dialogue that can be extended in university departments of Theology, Philosophy, and Psychology about how to create and sustain The Church as Forgiving Community.

Some Concrete Examples in the Church

In places of worship, pastors or other leaders could commit to coming together for even 15 minutes once a month to discuss how person-to-person forgiveness can be fostered in the church community. The laity who so choose could form a small group of members who get together monthly to discuss readings about forgiveness. These readings could be put on-line for easy access and allow for discussion through a dedicated Internet forum for those who are part of forgiveness group in a parish. Religious instruction for children could consciously and deliberately focus on person-to-person forgiveness for, say, 20% of the yearly instruction time. A commitment of, let us say for the sake of example, five sermons a year on the topic of person-to-person forgiveness could be considered. Creating forgiveness symbols within religious communities would seem to be one concrete way to visualize forgiveness for the church members. Just as in the school in Northern Ireland, forgiveness could be held up as a norm with the goal of preserving forgiveness in this religious setting (see Magnuson & Enright, 2008).

The overall purpose of the group's involvement would be to keep each individual growing in the virtue of forgiveness. The group effort supports individual growth. As certain individuals grow in the virtue of forgiveness, they then become the catalysts in the small groups to encourage sermons, religious instruction, and the persevering in forgiveness. Certain individuals in each generation, then, preserve the group norm and practice of forgiveness.

Some Final Thoughts

When I began to apply the principles of social science to the study of forgiveness in 1985, many of my professorial colleagues thought that I had lost my mind. The harsh judgments were many: How could you study such a soft, fuzzy, irrelevant topic as that within psychology? Poor Enright, he had such a promising career and now he is throwing it all away. Students, do not risk your careers by working with Enright. He will not help you advance in your profession.

To the credit of many of those colleagues, as our research group has persisted for more than a quarter-of-a-century in studying forgiveness and now has shown and published strong results, many of those colleagues have acquiesced, seeing the importance of forgiveness for emotional health. Yet, I am now seeing that such psychological improvement in clients is only a short-term goal to a larger end-point. As people begin to heal emotionally from grave injustices against them, many see that they now have an obligation to help others with their injustices.

Forgiveness does not leave us complacent and self-admiring. Instead, it is always challenging us to bring good to others to help develop a better world. Perhaps it is time for all of us to take seriously the challenge of my opening remarks. Perhaps it is time to begin fostering high levels of forgiveness functioning in communities, starting with young children, and then extending this growth in the virtues of mercy and forgiveness to schools, workplaces, places of worship, and communities. Perhaps it is time to develop models of peace that include forgiveness. Why could we not develop a grass-roots strategy of deliberately helping people, who are in contentious regions of the world, to become strong in forgiveness, and then to appropriate that forgiveness

alongside such historically normative “top-down” strategies as economic recovery, dialogue, and the forging of peace accords? After all, no peace accord has ever been able to restrain hatred in the heart.

We need not reserve the development of forgiveness only in hearts and communities where there is considerable animosity and obvious injustice. We all, even in the most seemingly peaceful communities, encounter the fallen nature of those around us (and within ourselves) which results in unjust actions in need of merciful responses. We already have explored in depth (and will continue to explore) the meaning of forgiveness and the way to foster it in psychotherapy and education. Perhaps our next frontier is to bring forgiveness into communities for good.

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Table 1
Forgiveness Process Model

preliminaries

Who hurt you?
How deeply were you hurt?
On what specific incident will you focus?
What were the circumstances at the time? Was it morning or afternoon? Cloudy or sunny? What was said? How did you respond?

PHASE I—UNCOVERING YOUR ANGER

How have you avoided dealing with anger?
Have you faced your anger?
Are you afraid to expose your shame or guilt?
Has your anger affected your health?
Have you been obsessed about the injury or the offender?
Do you compare your situation with that of the offender?
Has the injury caused a permanent change in your life?
Has the injury changed your worldview?

PHASE 2—DECIDING TO FORGIVE

Decide that what you have been doing hasn't worked.
Be willing to begin the forgiveness process.
Decide to forgive.

PHASE 3—WORKING ON FORGIVENESS

Work toward understanding.
Work toward compassion.
Accept the pain.
Give the offender a gift.

PHASE 4—DISCOVERY AND RELEASE FROM EMOTIONAL PRISON

Discover the meaning of suffering.
Discover your need for forgiveness.
Discover that you are not alone.
Discover the purpose of your life.
Discover the freedom of forgiveness.

R. Enright (2001). Forgiveness Is a Choice. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.

Table 2
Research on Forgiveness Therapy with Adults

Elderly women with a variety of injustices against them. The forgiveness group improved more in emotional health than a control group who discussed their emotional wounds without working on forgiveness in particular. (Hebl & Enright, 1993).

College students who, while growing up, had a parent who was emotionally-distant. Two studies were done. In Study 1, the participants in the forgiveness group were brought through only Phase 2 (see Table 1) of the forgiveness process. There were no differences between the forgiveness and control groups. In Study 2, the forgiveness group participants were brought through the entire forgiveness process and the results showed significant improvement in emotional health for the forgiveness group compared to the control group (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995).

Incest survivors. The participants in the forgiveness group became emotionally healthier than the control group after individual treatment lasting about 14 months. Differences between the groups were observed for depression, anxiety, hope, and self-esteem. The results were maintained in a 14-month follow-up. When the control group then went through the forgiveness process, they also showed significant improvement in emotional health (Freedman & Enright, 1996)

Men hurt by the abortion decision of a partner. The participants in the forgiveness group became emotionally healthier than the control group after a 12-week program of individual intervention. Differences between the groups were observed for anger, anxiety, and grief. The results were maintained at a 3-month follow-up. When the control group went through the forgiveness process, they also showed significant improvement in emotional health (Coyle & Enright, 1997).

Drug rehabilitation. The forgiveness group became emotionally healthier than the control group after a twice-a-week individual intervention lasting 6-weeks. The experimental participants' need for drugs declined substantially, relative to the control group. Results were maintained at a 4-month follow-up. (Lin, Mack, Enright, Krahn, & Baskin, 2004)

Emotionally-abused women. Results are similar to the above studies in terms of emotional health (decreased anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, and increased self-esteem). Treatment was on the individual level for 7.95 months (average per individual), with follow-up occurring 8.35 months after treatment (Reed & Enright, 2006)

Terminally-ill, elderly cancer patients. After a 4-week intervention, the forgiveness group showed greater improvement in psychological health (less anger, more hopefulness toward the future) than the control group. Physical indicators of both groups showed declines. (Hansen, Enright, Baskin, & Klatt, 2009)

Cardiac patients. Again, the experimental (forgiveness) group became emotionally healthier than the control group. At a 4-month follow-up, the experimental group had more efficiently functioning hearts than the control group. (Waltman, Russell, Coyle, Enright, Holter, & Swoboda, 2009)

Adult-children of alcoholics. Two group interventions were compared: forgiveness and conflict resolution centered on one member of the participant's family of origin who abused alcohol. After a 12-week intervention both groups improved in depression, anxiety, anger, self-esteem and relations with others. When the control group then went through the forgiveness intervention for another 12-weeks, they continued to improve in emotional health. The original forgiveness group maintained their initial emotional health gains (Osterndorf, Enright, Holter, & Klatt, in press).

Table 3
Forgiveness Curriculum Guides Currently Available

- Enright, R.D. & Knutson, J.A. (2010). *I can love!: A building block of forgiveness*. Madison, WI: International forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for pre-kindergarten children, ages 4 and 5.]
- Knutson, J.A. & Enright, R.D. (2008). *The heart of love as the building blocks of forgiveness*. Madison, WI: International forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for kindergarten children, ages 5 and 6.]
- Knutson, J.A. & Enright, R.D. (2002, revised 2008). *The adventure of forgiveness: A guided curriculum for children, ages 6-8*. Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for first-grade children, ages 6 and 7.]
- Knutson, J.A. & Enright, R.D. (2003, revised 2008). *Discovering forgiveness: A guided curriculum for children, ages 6-8*. Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for second-grade children, ages 7 and 8.]
- Knutson, J.A. & Enright, R.D. (2005, revised 2008). *The joy of forgiveness: A guided curriculum for children, ages 9-11*. Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for third-grade children, ages 8 and 9.]
- Enright, R. D. & Knutson, J.A. (2010). *Reaching out through forgiveness: A guided curriculum for children ages 9-11*. Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for fourth-grade children, ages 9 through 11.]
- Knutson, J.A. & Enright, R.D. (2006, revised 2008). *The journey toward forgiveness: A guided curriculum for children, ages 10-12*. Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for fifth-grade children, ages 10 and 11.]
- Knutson, J.A. & Enright, R.D. (2007, revised 2008). *Be your best self: A guided forgiveness education curriculum*. Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for sixth-grade adolescents, ages 11 and 12.]
- Knutson, J.A. & Enright, R.D. (2008). *Be your best self: Giving and receiving forgiveness*. Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for seventh-grade adolescents, ages 12 and 13.]

Flesch, A. & Enright, R. D. (2009). *Healing through the heroic gift of forgiveness*. Madison, WI:

International Forgiveness Institute. [Note: This is for eighth grade adolescents, ages 13 and 14.]

Note: These guides are available at www.forgiveness-institute.org.