

Forgiveness: An ancient concept becomes the cutting edge in psychotherapy

By Mary Hayes Grieco, Spiritual Teacher

Introduction

Forgiveness is an important but troublesome concept that challenges our understanding, and yet refuses to go away. It is an issue of universal human concern because hurts, betrayal and injuries of one sort or another are universal human experiences. Typically viewed as a virtue, forgiveness has been advocated by major religious and spiritual traditions for millennia.

Relegated to the purview of theologians and clergy, forgiveness received limited attention within psychology and psychotherapy – until the dawn of our present century (McCullough, Pargament & Thorsen, 2000). In the last 20 years, close to 6000 studies have been conducted about forgiveness and reported on in the fields of psychology and medicine. Clearly, forgiveness is a topic only now coming into its time, as it enjoys a renaissance of new inquiry in society and in the helping professions.

As central as the experience of forgiveness *should* be in fields dedicated to the healing of the psyche, the mending of broken relationships, and the reduction of stress for improved wellness in the body, its importance has not been emphasized enough. The chances are good that most therapists, doctors, and even clergy never took a course in forgiveness when they were studying in school for their accreditation. Forgiveness is now rising in our awareness as an important intervention, and the many thorny questions that remain about it are being asked and discussed with new vigor, such as:

- *What is forgiveness and how is it accomplished?*
- *Should we forgive abuse and injustice?*
- *When is it appropriate to introduce the idea of forgiveness to a client who has been suffering because of these experiences, often over many years?*
- *Can we facilitate the experience of forgiveness, which often has strong spiritual components, in secular settings?*

This article clarifies for practitioners some of today's new understanding about forgiveness, and offers a time-tested method which reliably dissolves old resentments and resolves the chronic stresses that burden our clients of the remainders of unresolved pain from difficult life experiences, past and present.

The current proliferation of research about forgiveness

In her groundbreaking studies, Kathleen Lawler was one of the first to show the toll that carrying resentments can have on physical health (Lawler, et al, 2003), and the unique contribution to

health of a forgiveness intervention (Lawler, et al, 2005). Since then, a variety of studies have explored the connection of resentments to many common physical health problems such as chronic pain, inflammation and immune disorders (Toussaint et al, 2016). Many authors point to a pathway of the salutary effects of forgiveness in reducing stress and improving both physical and mental well-being. See the excellent overview of research by Toussaint et al. (2015).

Vanderweele (2018) advances these ideas, suggesting forgiveness is a public health issue. He suggests that forgiveness, like recommendations for other healthy lifestyle choices, will become one of the next universal good-health recommendations. He summarizes his recommendations succinctly: *“Heal your resentments because they create disease - Forgiveness is good for you.”*

Research into forgiveness has grown rapidly, as have the numbers of approaches to accomplishing it, each with their own, somewhat unique definition of forgiveness. While there is no ‘gold standard’ definition, there is broad recognition of what forgiveness is and what it is not. It is now generally agreed that:

- Forgiveness is NOT the same as excusing, allowing, forgetting, justifying or condoning wrong behavior.
- It is NOT the same as reconciliation or mediation between the offender and the offended.
- Forgiveness IS an intrapersonal process, not interpersonal
- It fosters movement *away* from angry, hostile, vengeful thoughts and feelings and avoidance behaviors
- It fosters movement *towards* neutrality or positive thoughts and feelings such as compassion, empathy, and even love towards the transgressor.
- It may improve the interpersonal context.

Many experts agree that it is easier to describe what forgiveness *is not*, such as excusing, condoning, or reconciliation, than what it actually is: a spiritual experience of letting go of an emotional burden and knowing inner peace about a difficult story. Most agree that the well-being that comes with the healing experience of forgiveness does *not* preclude the need to seek justice. Seeking justice with a lawsuit or a settlement in court to change something that is unfair, is an independent social arrangement, which is distinctly separate from the healing neutrality gained by the intrapersonal experience of forgiveness. These are important topics for therapists to consider when discussing forgiveness with clients (Cosgrove & Konstan, 2008).

Wade, Johnson, and Meyer (2008, p. 100) have concluded that-“Forgiveness-promoting interventions can be useful to some, perhaps many, clients ... Not only do many clients want to discuss forgiveness with their therapists, many can benefit from these discussions. The benefits are also not just limited to achieving more forgiveness but appear to generalize to the kinds of outcomes many therapists are seeking, such as reduction in depression, anxiety and interpersonal problems, as well as increased hope, social functioning and self-esteem.”

In this article I introduce Unconditional Forgiveness, the practical, user-friendly forgiveness method developed by Dr. Edith Stauffer (1987). After working closely with her over a decade, and refining her model, this seminal work serves as the foundation for the trainings for professionals and the general public that are offered by The Midwest Institute for Forgiveness Training in Minneapolis, MN. This methodical, 8-Step approach reliably produces the spiritual experience and healing relief that accompanies true forgiveness.

Our working definition of forgiveness is:

“Forgiveness is the refreshing healing experience that comes with the act of releasing an expectation that is causing you to suffer.”

When we forgive another person –

- We let go of any expectation, condition, or demand that prevents the free flow of healthy energy within us.
- We open up the unobstructed extension of unconditional love (good will and some amount of positive regard) between myself and another person.
- We release the attachment in the mind that we are holding on to, dissolving a correlating physical tension in the body.
- We dissolve a stagnant block inside our body/mind that has externalized itself in our circumstances, increasing our sense of harmony and efficacy in life.
- We increase our vitality.
- We “turn our wound into our wisdom”.

How does one let go of a painful emotional wound that is rooted in a disappointed expectation? It is accomplished with a facilitated, methodical process that addresses the issue step-by-step through all the parts of one’s being: physical, emotional, mental, boundaries, subtle energy, and the spiritual connection to the Higher Self, or soul. This complete and holistic approach yields real and permanent relief from a troublesome issue.

The following summary of our method is elaborated in detail in my book, *Unconditional Forgiveness* (Hayes Grieco, 2011). This user-friendly book is based in transpersonal psychology and a universal spiritual framework that is adaptable to different faith paths as well as for people who have an eclectic, undefined form of spirituality. It explains what forgiveness is and isn’t, and teaches each step in detail. It addresses the issues of forgiving others, self, negative life situations, and even at times, the Divine Source itself. I have taught this method around the world: throughout the US as well as in Ireland, Germany, Kuwait, and Azerbaijan. It has been welcomed in church communities of all Christian denominations, as well as by Muslim audiences, and also in treatment centers, at health conferences, and in businesses going through painful restructuring. In 30 years of teaching Unconditional Forgiveness, I have yet to see it fail to bring transformation and relief to those who enter into it faithfully and complete each step. My colleagues at The Midwest Institute for Forgiveness Training (a dozen or so independent forgiveness trainers) report similar successes. More information about our work is readily available at www.forgivenessstraining.com

The Eight Steps of Forgiveness of Another Person

Preparation period: *Gather your intention and make a space in your life for self-healing work. Set up a private space with an empty chair, in which to visualize the offender and resolve the issue by processing aloud, as in gestalt psychology exercises.*

1. State your will to make a change in attitude and move on.
2. Express your emotions about what happened - freely “venting” your emotions (crying, blaming, physically discharging anger or rage).
3. Release each expectation(s) you are holding in your mind, one by one, by shifting it to a preference, not a demand.
4. Restore your boundaries: give others responsibility for their actions and take yours. Visualize a healthy ego space/field of protection around you.
5. Open up to Life in a new way to get what you need
6. Receive healing energy from Spirit (visualized as light and love entering the crown of the head) into the levels of personality: body, emotions, and mind and subtle energy system.
7. Extend unconditional love (visualized as light or energy, and/or good will) to the person you are forgiving.
8. See the good in the person or situation.

Integration period: *Extra rest, reflection, and practicing new attitudes and behaviors (average 3 days)*

How do you know your client is ready to forgive?

A key question for a discerning psychotherapist is, “How will I know when it is time for my client to forgive the person who hurt them?” Here are some indicators that they may be ready for this work:

- They have vulnerably touched the emotional pain of their wound, and shared it with you honestly
- They have examined and gained insight about decisions they made, or limiting beliefs about life, self, or others that they took on because of this wound.
- They have grown tired of the story and its archaic patterns in their present life,
- They literally ask you, *Now what? How do I move on from this?*
- They are able to believe in and work with some form of a Higher Power, a spiritual source of healing and renewal.

Now the client is ready to be invited into a process of forgiving, and educated about what forgiveness is and how the method works to bring completion to an issue.

Using the forgiveness method with your psychotherapy clients

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

Once the client has successfully integrated Step One, the client-therapist team may choose to work through the issues in a systematic way, such as making a list, doing some preparatory homework, and clearing through each issue, one, by one, from easiest to most difficult. Or they might approach it together in an organic fashion, working through the parts and pieces of issues as they present themselves, session by session (Steps 2 and 3).

With growing success in putting different parts of their story to rest with this process, eventually the client will have the confidence to tackle the healing of the painful core of their worst story. A forgiveness session on this level is utterly transformative, and the client can now change a long-held negative self-concept and catalyze a new capability to choose and create a different and better future.

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

The second imperative for success is the therapist’s personal familiarity with the experience of Unconditional Forgiveness. If a therapist has used this method a number of times to

successfully resolve their own persistent issues, they can speak with authority and inspire faith and confidence in the client who is seeking the resolution of a long-held inner conflict. Additionally, a therapist who is familiar with The Eight Steps, from the inside out, so to speak, will swiftly develop skill, insight, and a refined intuition as a facilitator of forgiveness.

Teresa's story of forgiveness

Teresa is a student of mine in an ongoing, year-long Self Mastery program, which includes a unit of learning how to forgive, experientially, with The Eight Steps. She volunteered to let me lead her through the forgiveness process because she was in a state of great stress due to her constant anger towards her mother. In recent times, Teresa's economic circumstances had changed, and she moved in with her elderly mother, having lived with her now for two years. This arrangement would seem to be mutually beneficial, but Teresa was experiencing more and more unrest. As her mother aged, she became more fragile and dependent on her daughter for various things and she required some special care and nurturing attention. Teresa found herself unable to generously serve her mother's needs - instead, she grew more resentful by the day. A slow, burning rage was building up inside her, and it expressed itself in the way she bickered with her mother over little things, being hostile and frustrated, and a little mean. *"I am so mad that I'm expected to be kind and thoughtful and keep her safe and anticipate her needs, but she was never there for me as a child. She didn't give me that stuff when I was little, and now I'm supposed to give and give to her, but I've got nothing inside me to draw from. I feel so empty inside."*

Teresa was the oldest of six children, and as it often happens to oldest daughters in a large family, her needs as a child were soon sidelined in favor of the more urgent needs of babies and toddlers. Soon, her childhood was over as she was incorporated by the family system as "Mommy No. 2." Teresa longed for attention and recognition and appreciation from her mother, but soon she became resigned to merely being her helper, in some ways invisible as a person. A perceptive and sensitive girl with a strong emotional nature, Teresa struggled with her own identity and daily experiences, without the nurturing of an attentive mother. She battled through her life alone, and as an adult she became an overly responsible and easily frustrated person, with a chronic edge of anger and a core of deep loneliness.

Our goal in the forgiveness session was to release the childhood pain of her relationship with her mother, so that she could be serene in her growing caregiving role with her mom in this era of their life together. *"I don't want to hate her every day, and miss out on enjoying her and this part of our life. I see that she's trying to be nice to me sometimes, but I can't take it in – I just retort and pull away, and then I hate myself for doing that. I don't want to feel guilty when she dies because I held back my love for her, out of revenge because she held back her love for me when I was young."*

This forgiveness session took place in a group therapy format. I placed two chairs together so Teresa and I could sit close together, with an empty chair out in front of us to represent the location of her mother. We visualized her mother as present there in the chair, and called her to listen to her daughter's pain and participate in this forgiveness work. Eight fellow- students sat in a semi-circle at a small distance from us, "holding space" and supplying compassionate witnessing. As I led Teresa through The Eight Steps, in Step One, she expressed her intention to her mom, *"I need to stop hating and resenting you – I want it to be nice between us now, so we can enjoy our time together in the house. I don't want to miss this chance to have a good relationship with you while you're still here. I will forgive you for not being there for me as a girl."*

In Step 2, I assisted Teresa freely express her anger and frustration at being expected to do things for her mother in daily life today, which she freely did – even at one point getting up to

heartlessly tip over the chair which represented her mom. But then she dropped into her deeper feelings of sorrow about the neglect and emotional abandonment she had endured daily as a child. She sobbed and I supported her to stay with that deep crying as she recalled a number of incidents where she felt used or lonely or unimportant. After about 20 minutes, her emotions began to subside and shift, and I guided her into Step 3: releasing expectations that are causing suffering.

One by one, I coached Teresa to state declaratively what she would have wanted, what she would have wished and preferred from her mother: *"I wished you were always glad to see me and listen to me ... I would have preferred that you let me be a child, and do your job as my mom and nurture me ... I would have liked you to be fond and proud of me, as a smart and sensitive kid, and help me love myself ... I would have preferred that you filled up my heart with love so that I could easily give to you now ... "*

One by one, we stated the expectations, and one by one released them, visualizing them as blocks in her heart that were melting away into nothing, leaving new space for new experiences.

As we continued through the rest of the 8 Steps, Teresa's affect grew more and more serene, and she appeared to be surrendering and finding new peace with being with her elderly mother, as she is today, and accepting her own new role as a nurturer of an elder. When I helped Teresa turn to the Higher Self for healing in Step 6, we employed the concept of her reaching out to a *new* mother, the Divine Mother, a mother who cherished her and was proud of her and was there for her at all times. As Teresa brought this loving maternal transpersonal energy into her personality, her face softened, her stiff shoulders relaxed, and her twinkle of good humor started breaking through, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. At the conclusion, she was able to See the Good in Step 8, as she appreciated her mother's cooking for her, and remembered their rare times of enjoying Scrabble together, a game in which they were well matched.

This forgiveness session took about 45 minutes, from beginning to end, though Teresa and all of the students had done prep work in journals and small group discussion earlier that day.

The next time I saw Teresa for our monthly group, I checked in about how the forgiveness work "took" for her. She shook her head in calm wonderment as she said, *"It's been absolutely fine for my mom and me since then. We are living quietly together like two compatible cats in a house. I drive her, she cooks. We sit and read together without talking. It's comfortable. We didn't fight once. In fact, I am really looking forward to being home with her all day tomorrow, Sunday, to clean the house together, put a fire on, and play Scrabble. That will be so nice and relaxing."*

I looked around at the group and saw my own amazement reflected in the faces of Teresa's group cohorts. Her transformation was obvious and unmistakable. And I know this from long experience – this issue has been permanently resolved.

In summary

I have found there is little that is more rewarding or more of a privilege than to be the facilitator of the experience of forgiveness for another person. At a certain point in the journey through The Eight Steps, there comes a pivotal moment of change, when the former struggle melts away, and the psyche becomes newly established in the "now," with all of its fresh possibilities. This moment is a bonding and liberating experience for client and therapist alike, and a significant turning point in the therapy process. As my mentor Edith put it, "Forgiveness is the home of the miracle – the experience of it is ever fresh."

Healing and caring for self and others through the practice of forgiveness will become a lifelong joy and the strongest tool one has in the therapy toolbox. There is always more to learn about life and about the amazing resilience of human beings, as we watch our clients transform seemingly impossible personal stories. As I wrote in the closing chapter of my book, *Unconditional Forgiveness*,

“Again and again, my clients healed, I healed, and the healing began to spill over into my daily life with absurd persistence. I felt pursued by goodness, sometimes outright ambushed by love. This is just the sort of thing that is hard for a brave little soldier type of person to take in, but I finally had to give up and just let it happen. Forgiveness made my life easier and gave to me a new life metaphor. No longer am I a brave little soldier struggling in the trenches of a battlefield. I am a retired soldier now, a happy gardener in peacetime.” (p. 159)

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See Mary's article on Forgiveness and a review of her book in this issue of IJHC.

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