

Forgiveness II: Forgiveness Pioneers in Western Psychology

Forgiveness and Psychology

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In 2006, the American Psychological Association (APA) published a brochure summarizing examples of research on the topic of forgiveness. That the APA would publish such a brochure shows the degree to which forgiveness has gained traction as a meaningful topic for psychological research. In that brochure the APA offered a comprehensive definition of forgiveness (adapted from a doctoral dissertation by C. Philpot, PhD from the University of Queensland in Australia.) It reads as follows:

Forgiveness is a process (or the result of a process) that involves a change in emotion and attitude regarding an offender. Most scholars view this an intentional and voluntary process, driven by a deliberate decision to forgive. This process results in decreased motivation to retaliate, and letting go of negative emotions toward the offender. Theorists differ in the extent to which they believe forgiveness also implies replacing the negative emotions with positive attitudes including compassion and benevolence. In any event, forgiveness occurs with the victim's full recognition that he or she deserved better treatment, one reason why Mahatma Gandhi contended that "the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong." (For this quote with full references, see the APA brochure "[Forgiveness: A Sampling of Research Results](#)," p. 5.

For further discussion of the definition of forgiveness and how it differs from categories such as morality, duty, justice, and reconciliation, see "[About Forgiveness](#)" by the International forgiveness Institute.

A significant degree of the credit for the emergence of forgiveness as a mainstream concern of Psychology goes to three pioneers in the field. The first is Robert Enright, PhD, of the University of Wisconsin (Madison) and co-founder of the International Forgiveness Institute. Second is Everett Worthington, PhD, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Professor of Psychology and head of both Fetzer Institute's "Forgiveness Research Working Group" and "A Campaign for Forgiveness" at The John Templeton Foundation. The third pioneer is Frederic Luskin, PhD, co-founder and Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project and faculty member of the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology.

Robert Enright

Robert Enright is generally considered the father of forgiveness work within the field of Psychology. Enright took a huge professional risk turning his research to the topic of forgiveness. His colleagues at that time saw forgiveness as an inappropriate or weak research topic and suggested that he was foolish to focus on it. Fortunately Enright would not be dissuaded. Among his early forgiveness studies were those focusing on elderly women, love-deprived late adolescents, men whose partners had chosen abortion, and substance-dependent in-patients. He also developed the *Enright Forgiveness Inventory*, a psychometric instrument used in forgiveness research.

Enright's work includes looking at what he calls the triad of forgiveness: forgiving, receiving forgiveness, and self-forgiveness. He suggests that greater clarity for the therapist utilizing a forgiveness intervention comes when all three aspects of the triad are kept in mind. Specifically with regard to forgiving, Enright has developed a four-phase intervention model, "Processes of Forgiving Another." He calls his four phases uncovering, decision, work, and outcome. These four stages are further divided into a total of 20 discrete steps. (Go to Baskin TW, and Enright RD, (2004). [Intervention Studies on Forgiveness: A Meta-Analysis](#). J Counseling & Development 83(1): 79-90, page 80, Table 1 for the details of Enright's model.)

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Enright and Baskin analyzed the results from nine published articles, finding that the interventions therein fell into three distinct categories. The first they labeled decision-based. In this approach the interventions were individual and short term (1-6 sessions) with the focus on the conscious, willful decision to forgive. They emphasized a cognitive therapeutic approach. The other two categories were described as process-based. They each entailed a sequence of stages as part of a gradual process leading eventually to forgiveness. In addition to cognitive elements, the process-based interventions also included affective and empathic components. Process-based interventions were further divided into two categories depending on whether the intervention was administered in a group setting (6-8 sessions) or in individual therapy (12 to 60 sessions).

Enright and Baskin found that the decision-based interventions showed little effect either for cultivating forgiveness or for related mental health benefits. However both the group and individual process-based interventions showed strong positive effects. Participants in group interventions did as well or better than 75% of the control group with regard to development of forgiveness. Regarding other mental health constructs, 65% equaled or outperformed those receiving no intervention. The comparable results for those receiving individual interventions were 95% and 92% respectively, exceptionally robust findings for psychological research, showing that individual process-based interventions were clearly the most effective. The authors suggest further study of the efficacy of process-based forgiveness interventions with clients suffering from mood and anxiety disorders where the etiology involves "anger borne out of unfair treatment." (For Baskin and Enright's article see [Intervention Studies on Forgiveness: A Meta-Analysis](#).)

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Dr. Worthington teaches courses on Positive Psychology and psychological measurement in addition to one entitled "Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice." He is also an expert on the interface between psychology and Christianity, his own personal faith. He has written extensively on the topics of forgiveness, marriage, and hope. His research focuses on these topics, but also expands them to include justice and social harmony.

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Worthington's REACH model has been manualized into 20-hour and 6-hour group intervention protocols, each available for download free of cost in a [secular or a Christian version.](#)

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Frederic Luskin

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Luskin gradually developed his own way of helping others forgive. According to him "Forgiveness is a teachable skill; you can learn it just the way you learn to play the piano." ("[Forgiveness Boosts Health,](#)" *Arthritis Today Magazine*) His approach, which he considers educational rather than psychotherapeutic, nonetheless incorporates elements of cognitive therapy along with mindfulness and Buddhist lovingkindness meditation. His forgiveness courses typically have once-a-week meetings, 60-90 minutes each, for 5-8 weeks. Elements of his approach are evident in his definition of forgiveness as follows:

Forgiveness is the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell. Forgiveness is the experience of peacefulness in the present moment. Forgiveness does not change the past, but it changes the present. Forgiveness means that even though you are wounded, you choose to hurt and suffer less. Forgiveness means you become part of the solution. Forgiveness is the understanding that hurt is a normal part of life. Forgiveness is for you and for no one else. You can forgive and rejoin a relationship, or forgive and never speak to the person again. ([Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness.](#), 2002, p. 68)

On his "Forgive for Good" website, Luskin offers the following list of nine steps in the forgiveness process as he teaches it.

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a trusted couple of people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person that hurt you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace. Forgiveness can be defined as the "peace and understanding that come from blaming that which has hurt you less, taking the life experience less personally, and changing your grievance story."
4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts and physical upset you are suffering now, not what offended you or hurt you two minutes – or ten years – ago. Forgiveness helps to heal those hurt feelings.
5. At the moment you feel upset practice a simple stress management technique to soothe your body's flight or fight response.
6. Give up expecting things from other people, or your life, that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the "unenforceable rules" you have for your health or how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, peace and prosperity and work hard to get them.

7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt seek out new ways to get what you want.

8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty and kindness around you. Forgiveness is about personal power.

9. Amend your grievance story to remind you of the heroic choice to forgive. [Forgive for Good website](#)

In the following video, Fred Luskin talks about forgiveness.

For an engaging account by a participant in one of Fred Luskin's workshops, see "[How to Forgive Anyone - and Why Your Life Depends on It.](#)" *O, The Oprah Magazine*, May, 2011.

Luskin's teaching goals emphasize skills which go beyond the forgiving of a particular person and the offensive actions that have occurred. Rather he seeks to help people develop a lifestyle characterized by forgiveness. "The essence of forgiveness" he says "is the ability to be resilient when things don't go the way you want." This resilience is possible for us, as human beings, because "we have been given the gift of the ability to make choices." Luskin describes four stages in coming to this kind of resilience. The first stage is when we are still caught in our angry responses to life's painful experiences. At the second stage, we've begun to notice that responding with anger is painful and have taken concrete steps and made clear decisions towards forgiveness leading eventually to an actual experience of forgiveness. At stage three, having recognized, in our own experience, the positive benefits of forgiveness, we respond to future hurt by turning to forgiveness more quickly. We realize that how long we suffer from a painful experience is largely our choice. In the final stage, our ability to forgive is so deeply ingrained that we rarely take offense or get angry at the behavior of others. Rather our response, or choice, of forgiveness is automatic and immediate.

Luskin's own research interests lie in measuring the impact of his manual-based, cognitive behavioral group interventions on such factors as the capacity for forgiveness, anger management, and hypertension. His work also looks at the differences regarding forgiveness between men and women and role of trait-based versus state-based anger.

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