

## **Forgiveness V: Forgiveness in Marriage and Cautionary views**

### ***Forgiveness Within the Context of Marriage***

“A happy marriage is the union of two forgivers.”

Robert Quillen, American Journalist and Humorist

Given the strong emotional dimension of committed relationships it is perhaps not surprising that significant research attention has been focused on the role of forgiveness within marriage and other forms of romantic partnerships. Clinicians who work with couples often find themselves addressing situations in therapy where one partner has hurt the other in some way. So what is the impact of forgiveness on marriage? Does Robert Quillen's view find support in the research?

Three different approaches to research on forgiveness in marriage have emerged over the past decade. Some research has focused on the benefits of forgiveness in marriage. Other research has explored factors that increase the likelihood of forgiveness in marriage and forgiveness interventions for couples.

### ***The Benefits of Marital Forgiveness***

A number of benefits associated with forgiveness in relationships have been reported in the literature. Bono, McCullough, and Root examined emotional well-being as a function of forgiveness in married couples. In their 2008 article they reported finding that higher levels of forgiveness were associated with *more “satisfaction with life, more positive mood, and less negative mood,” as well as fewer physical health symptoms.* (Bono G, McCullough ME, Root, LM (2008). [Forgiveness, feeling connected to others, and well-being: Two longitudinal studies.](#) *Personality and Soc Psych Bull* 34(2), 182-195.)

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In 2006, Hall and Fincham published their findings from research on forgiveness with unmarried college couples who had dealt with the issue of the particular betrayal of the infidelity of one partner. They noted that forgiveness increased the likelihood of the couple remaining together, as well as emotional well-being whether the couple stayed together or not. (Hall JH, Fincham, FD (2006). [Relationship dissolution following Infidelity: The roles of attributions and forgiveness.](#) *J of Soc and Clin Psych* 25(5): 508-522.)

### ***Factors That Mediate Forgiveness in Marriage***

Several factors have been shown to mediate forgiveness in marriage. In their 2008 study referred to above Bono, McCullough, and Root also identified several factors that mediate forgiveness in marriage. In general, the closer the relationship between the partners before a transgression, the greater the positive effect of forgiveness for the forgiver. Apology and making amends by the transgressor also mediated for greater forgiveness and therefore increased the associated emotional benefits. (Bono G, McCullough ME, Root, LM (2008). [Forgiveness, feeling connected to others, and well-being: Two longitudinal studies.](#) *Personality and Soc Psych Bull* 34(2), 182-195.)

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### ***Research on Interventions***

Despite these findings, the effectiveness of forgiveness interventions in marriage therapy has not been established. Fincham et al. in their review found little research on the efficacy of forgiveness interventions in marriage even though several such protocols were described in the literature. In one such study (2002), an 8-week marital group therapy targeting “communication, conflict, forgiveness and reconciliation” was conducted by Selic et al. Results showed that “forgiveness skills, anger expression, and marital satisfaction had improved at posttest” but the results had largely disappeared by the follow-up assessment. (Sells JN, Giordano FG, King L (2002) [A pilot study in marital group therapy: process and outcome.](#) *Fam J: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 10(2): 156-166.)

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In summary, while there are many reports in the empirical literature of the benefits of both forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness ( [See Forgiveness Lesson III](#)), nonetheless neither form of forgiveness is without a potential downside with some clients.

### **Additional Resources**

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