Forgiveness II: Forgiveness Pioneers in Western Psychology

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Robert Enright

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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 Forgiveing 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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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.

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Everett Worthington

Everett Worthington is the author, co-author or editor of several books on forgiveness. As co-author of To Forgive Is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past (1997), he had just completed the first draft when he found himself facing his own extraordinary personal test of forgiveness. Early on the morning of January 1, 1996, Dr. Worthington received a call from his brother who had just discovered the body of his brutally murdered mother on the floor of her Knoxville home. For a poignant written account of this event in his life, see “Everett Worthington's Reach for Forgiveness.”

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.

Dr. Worthington has developed what he calls “The Pyramid Model to REACH Forgiveness.” This process-based approach to the cultivation of forgiveness has six components described as follows:

- defining (D) forgiveness and comparing it with related concepts such as reconciliation, recalling (R) the hurt in a nonthreatening environment, building empathy (E) for the offender, encouraging an altruistic (A) response to the hurt based on experiences when the participants had themselves been forgiven, facilitating a commitment (C) to forgive the individual, and helping the participants maintain or hold (H) on to their forgiveness. (Wade NG, Worthington E, and Haake S, (2009) Comparison of Explicit Forgiveness Interventions With an Alternative Treatment: A Randomized Clinical Trial. J Counseling & Development 87(2):143-151, p. 145.)

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.

SEE VIDEO of Worthington describing the stages in his forgiveness process-based intervention.

Frederic Luskin

Frederic Luskin is a licensed Educational Psychologist, a Nationally-Certified School Psychologist and an MFT. He came to the study of forgiveness through the painful personal experience of being inexplicably betrayed and abandoned by a close friend and business associate during graduate school. As he puts it, “I was badly hurt by a friend of mine and it threw my life upside down.” Luskin found that he was simply unable to forgive. In the midst of this personal crisis and in the need of a dissertation topic, Luskin decided to see what he could learn by focusing his doctoral research on forgiveness. His choice of a dissertation on forgiveness eventually led him to the forefront of this emerging field within Psychology.

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.” 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:

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