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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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.)

In a 2005 survey of the research to date on forgiveness in marriage, Finchen, Hall, and Beach found four factors which, according to research, mediate forgiveness in marriage. These four are ambivalence towards one’s partner, attributions by the offended towards the offender, empathy, and the level of commitment in the marriage. They suggest that addressing the first three of these could be important elements of successful marital forgiveness interventions. (Finchem FD, Hall J, Beach, SRH (2006). Forgiveness in marriage: Current status and future directions. Family Relations, 55, 415-427.)

Research on Interventions

Despite these findings, the effectiveness of forgiveness interventions in marriage therapy has not been established. Finchen 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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…(a) resolving past hurts, as related to increase in forgiveness, (b) strengthening the marriage dyad, as related to increased marital satisfaction, and (c) providing a supportive group context as related to preventing depressive symptoms. (Baskin TW, Rhody M, Schoolmeesters S, Ellingston C (2011). Supporting special-needs adoptive couples: Assessing an intervention to enhance forgiveness, increase marital satisfaction, and prevent depression. The Counseling Psychologist XX(X): 4.)
This intervention involved 36 leader-facilitated contact hours plus a participant workbook of activities completed between sessions. There were 6-7 sessions scheduled on Saturdays over a 3 month period. Each cohort had two leaders, both licensed psychotherapists, one of whom presented the forgiveness curriculum while the other led the marriage-strengthening segments. The forgiveness curriculum was developed by Robert Enright who also participated in its implementation by viewing videos of sessions and giving feedback to the presenters. (For more on Enright, see Forgiveness Lesson II.) The marriage-strengthening segments were based on the work of John Gottman. While there was no specific component addressing depression, the group support and discussion of potentially difficult adoption issues in a preventive manner was designed to reduce the likelihood of depression among adoptive parents.

Baskin et al.’s statistical analysis, published in 2011, of pre- and post-intervention data plus three month follow-up data, compared with a control group, showed significant increases in the ability to forgive and marital satisfaction, while participants’ depression levels were decreased. Gains were maintained at the 3.5 month follow-up assessment.

Interventions specifically targeting forgiveness are not the only interventions that promote this capacity in marriage. For example, Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) has been shown to facilitate forgiveness in couples who have long standing unresolved issues involving “betrayal, abandonment, or and identity insult.” In 2010, Greenberg, Warwar, and Malcom provided 10-12 sessions of EFT to 20 couples after evaluating them for a similar period pre-intervention, these couples thus serving as their own waitlist control group. There was a significant increase in forgiveness after EFT, which was maintained through the three-month follow-up evaluation. (Greenberg L, WarwarS, MalcolmW (2009). Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy and the Facilitation of Forgiveness. J of Marital and Family Therapy 36(1): 28–42.) On the Psychotherapy.net Website you can watch a 2 minute video about EFT for couples. For a brief written summary of EFT as well as more in depth resources, go to the International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (ICEEFT) website.

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Luskin has also written a very practical book on marital forgiveness entitled Forgive for Love: The Missing Ingredient for a Healthy and Lasting Relationship that could be used in marital therapy. (For more on Luskin, see Forgiveness Lesson II.)

Cautionary Views

Although the scientific literature has many reports on the positive benefits of forgiveness, the picture is not completely one-sided. For example Lesson III presents the discrepancy between the way psychologists view forgiveness and the wider variety of perspectives held by the general public. Wade alludes to this situation in his 2010 introduction to a journal issue devoted to forgiveness that Forgiveness comes with many misconceptions, some of which can be very damaging to clients in unhealthy or hurtful relationships. For example, many people think that forgiveness necessarily includes reconciling with the offending person. Understand this way, encouraging a person to “forgive” a harmful and potentially dangerous partner would be sending them back into an unsafe situation. (Wade, N. (2010)Introduction to the special issue on forgiveness in therapy. J of Mental Health Counseling, 32: 1-4.)

For clinicians, Wade’s perspective underlines the importance of Bagnulo et al.’s advice that therapists clearly communicate their working definition of forgiveness at the beginning of any forgiveness intervention. (See Forgiveness Lesson III.)

Jeannie Safer, author of Forgiving and Not Forgive: Why Sometimes It's Better Not to Forgive, a psychotherapist in NYC, and supervisor and faculty member at the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health and the National Institute for the Psychotherapies, offers a second cautionary view of forgiveness interventions focused on the motives behind forgiving. In a January 2, 2008 interview on National Public Radio (NPR), Safer notes that she’s not against forgiveness per se, just compulsory forgiveness. Forgiveness, she says, is not a “one shoe fits all” situation. She points out that in our culture, sometimes people feel pressured to forgive. That could lead to guilt or shame when they are unable to measure up (or perhaps to false or ambivalent forgiveness). For clinicians, this concern highlights the importance of being sensitive to the motivations clients bring to the issue of forgiveness. To listen to the entire interview, which also includes host and moderator Neil Cummins as well as Fred Luskin, go to "Studies Suggest Forgiveness Has Health Benefits" on the NPR website.

In their book, The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power, yoga teachers Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad echo Safer’s concerns. They suggest that religious imperatives to forgive have sometimes been misused as a way to sustain authoritarian control. Such a misuse of forgiveness could contribute to the kinds of spiritual problems described in the lesson “DSM IV: Religious and Spiritual Problems, 2.4 New Religious Movements and Cults.”

Research Showing Potential Negative Impacts of Forgiveness
While in general the interpersonal consequences of forgiveness are positive (Wallace M, Exline JJ, Baumeister RF (2008). Interpersonal consequences of forgiveness: Does forgiveness deter or encourage repeat offenses?, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 44(2): 453-460.), cautions by critics like Safer or Kramer and Alstadt raises the question if there is any research that supports the view of a dark underside to forgiveness. In fact, such studies have been published. However at this point (2011), such research has been almost exclusively limited to transgressions that occurred within marriage or while dating.

In 2004, Gordon, Burton, and Porter researched 121 women in an abused-women’s shelter to explore this very possibility. They examined the factors that led the shelter’s residents to decide to return to their dangerous relationships. Using multiple questionnaires covering a wide range of variables including “demographic information, severity of violence, attributions for violence, psychological constraints (or investment), and forgiveness of the partner” they analyzed their subjects’ responses to find those factors most responsible for decisions to return. Forgiveness of their abusive spouses was the factor that most strongly predicted such decisions to resume difficult relationships. Gordon KC, Burton S, Porter L (2004). Predicting the Intentions of Women in Domestic Violence Shelters to Return to Partners: Does Forgiveness Play a Role? Journal of Family Psychology 18(2): 331-338.

Luchies et al. (2010) studied the impact of forgiveness on self-respect and self-concept clarity. They conducted four different studies, three of which examined transgressions within marriage or during dating. In the fourth, the relationship in which the offense occurred was more broadly defined as one with a “close other.” In their article published in 2010, they report having found that forgiveness could, in fact, have two polar opposite effects, depending on the stance taken by the perpetrator of the offense. If the offender had behaved in a way that indicated that the victim would be safe and respected, then forgiveness bolstered self respect and self-concept clarity. However, if the perpetrator did not offer assurances of safety and respect, then forgiveness undermined self respect and self-concept clarity, a result that the researchers refer to as “doormat effect.” They offer the following reflection for clinicians working with couples:

…may not be prudent to recommend forgiveness without considering the extent to which the perpetrator has acted in a manner that signals that the victim will be safe and valued in a continued relationship with the perpetrator. (Luchies LB, Finkel EJ, McNulty JK, Kumashiro M (2010). The Doormat Effect: When Forgiving Erodes Self-Respect and Self-Concept Clarity. J of Personality and Soc Psych 98(5): 734–74.)

James McNulty has been emerged as a voice of caution when it comes to the use of forgiveness in marriage. In his article “The Dark Side of Forgiveness: The Tendency to Forgive Predicts Continued Psychological and Physical Acts of Aggression in Marriage,” published in 2011, McNulty writes about a related effect of forgiveness during the early years of marriage. Working with 72 couples recently married for the first time, McNulty followed their reports of forgiveness of negative behavior of their spouses for their first four years of marriage. He focused on those spouses who reported being on the receiving end of psychological or physical aggression from their partner. Among these victims of aggression, those who depicted themselves as being “relatively more forgiving” also reported that the level of aggression by their partner remained stable over the four years of the study. By contrast, those who self-reported being “relatively less forgiving” noted reductions in both emotional and physical aggression during the research period. (McNulty JK (2011). The Dark Side of Forgiveness: The Tendency to Forgive Predicts Continued Psychological and Physical Aggression in Marriage. Pers Soc Psychol Bull. 37(6): 770-783.)

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In a third article researching the conventional wisdom, also published in 2010, which encourages couples to “to engage in more-positive cognitive and behavioral processes and avoid more-negative ones,” McNulty concluded that this advice is just too simple. Rather his research findings showed that although more-positive expectations, more-positive attributions, less-negative behavior, and more forgiveness most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing infrequent and minor problems, less-positive expectations, less-positive attributions, more-negative behavior, and less forgiveness most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing more-frequent and more-severe problems. (McNulty JK (2010). When Positive Processes Hurt. Relationships Cur Dir in Psych Science 19(3): 167-171. Abstract.)

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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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Barnett and Youngberg offer a ritualized approach to forgiveness with couples and provide a case example of an intervention they used with a couple that employed a flowerpot, potting soil, and bulbs in a ritual to facilitate forgiveness and growth. Barnett JK, Youngberg C (2004). *Forgiveness as a Ritual in Couples Therapy.* The Family Journal 12(1) 14-20.

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Additional Resources

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