

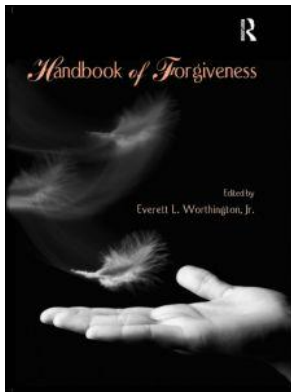
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Handbook of Forgiveness

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Forgiveness in Couples: Divorce, Infidelity, and Couples Therapy

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Forgiveness in Couples: Divorce, Infidelity, and Couples Therapy

Kristina Coop Gordon
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Most clinicians would agree that betrayals and forgiveness are significant issues for many couples. However, despite the prevalence of the need for forgiveness, until recently most couples therapists have been reluctant to use therapeutic strategies that relate explicitly to forgiveness (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993). Fortunately, in the last few years, forgiveness has been increasingly incorporated into couples treatment, and its use has begun to receive empirical support. In this chapter, we present our integrative, trauma-based model of forgiveness; then we review recent applications of forgiveness to couples therapy that have received initial empirical support. We conclude by outlining directions for future research and intervention.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

We define *forgiveness* as a process whereby partners pursue increased understanding of themselves, each other, and their relationship in order to free themselves from being dominated by negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors after experiencing a major interpersonal betrayal. This process is distinguished from a view of forgiveness as excusing or forgetting that a relationship injury or betrayal has occurred, or as requiring a decision to reconcile the couple's relationship. An important aspect of our conceptualization of forgiveness is that it does *not* stipulate that partners must reconcile in order for forgiveness to occur. Partners can decide to terminate the relationship and still fulfill the conditions of forgiveness.

Instead, our model asserts that forgiveness consists of three components: (a) a realistic, nondistorted, balanced view of the relationship, (b) a release from being controlled

by negative affect toward the participating partner, and (c) a lessened desire to punish the participating partner. For a more thorough explication of this approach to understanding forgiveness and its place in the forgiveness literature, see Gordon and Baucom (1998). The forgiveness process also allows for the possible development of warmer and more positive feelings toward the participating partner. However, healthy forgiveness requires a realistic appraisal of the partner, not an assessment that ignores real and dangerous aspects of the partner or the relationship. Forgiveness means that negative affect no longer dominates individuals' lives or controls their actions toward their partners and that this event has been resolved to such an extent that the injured partner no longer carries its negative effects into other relationships. Furthermore, another key issue in our definition of forgiveness is the stipulation that forgiveness is a process, not an event. Most theorists agree that forgiveness of a serious transgression takes a great deal of time and emotional work (e.g., Worthington et al., 2000).

Finally, our model of forgiveness also proposes that forgiveness in relationships often closely parallels recovery from a traumatic event. Research reported in the trauma literature has suggested that posttraumatic stress reactions evolve from "violated assumptions" (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1989). The "betrayal" that requires forgiveness may be seen as an interpersonal trauma that upsets the person's previous assumptions and expectations of his or her partner and relationships in general. These violated assumptions often can leave the "victim" feeling out of control and no longer able to predict future behaviors on the part of his or her partner. Therefore, the forgiveness process results in part from attempts to reconstruct these former cognitions and regain a sense of interpersonal control, predictability, and safety in the relationship.

Thus, we believe that there are three major stages in the forgiveness process, each of which parallels the general stages that are believed to occur in recovery from a psychological trauma: (a) impact, (b) a search for meaning, and (c) recovery, or moving on. The primary cognitive emphasis is not to suggest that the experience of forgiveness is wholly an intellectual one. This process is likely to be suffused with overwhelmingly intense negative affect to such a degree that the process seems to be primarily emotional in tone. However, the current theory suggests that accomplishing these cognitive goals is a key factor in moving through these stages. Thus, within each stage there are important cognitive tasks that must be accomplished before moving on to the next stage. However, within each of these stages there are also distinct emotional and behavioral components in addition to cognitive ones.

In the first stage, called the *impact stage*, people recollect details related to the betrayal in an attempt to comprehend what has happened. However, because this betrayal often has major implications for the injured person's well-being, this cognitive process is accompanied by an overwhelming array of emotions, such as fear, hurt, or anger. These emotions often alternate with a sense of numbness or disbelief. Additionally, people may find themselves acting toward their partners in ways that are punitive, erratic, or unlike their usual selves. These are natural reactions to an unexpected, painfully traumatic event and are similar to the approach-avoidance strategies used by victims of traumatic stress (e.g., Horowitz, 1985).

The goal in the second stage, the *meaning* stage, is to discover why the event happened and to give it meaning. Research on the reactions of trauma victims suggests that a major strategy in their recovery is a search for some meaning behind the trauma (e.g., Horowitz, 1985; Janoff-Bulman, 1989). This meaning may come from two sources—identifying causes of the trauma (e.g., “I didn’t lock my door” or “I made a bad choice in dating partners”) or some positive impact the event had on their lives (e.g., greater spiritual growth, better understanding of life). Similarly, the injured person in the relationship also begins to look for the meaning behind the event, such as a deeper understanding of the partner’s motives and the relationship as a whole. This meaning helps the victims regain some sense of control over their lives. If they know “why” the transgression happened, it gives them the ability to try to prevent it from happening again, and it may give them the sense of safety needed to approach a decision to forgive, which happens in the next stage, *moving on*.

Again, similar to trauma victims, in this recovery or moving on stage, the injured person must move beyond the event and stop allowing it to control his or her life. In the current conceptualization, forgiveness involves moving on by giving up the control that negative affect can have over the injured person’s thoughts and behaviors and by giving up the right to punish the partner. In this theory, the injured person must also reevaluate the relationship and reach a decision regarding whether he or she wishes to continue with the relationship. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation. Furthermore, forgiveness does not require that anger disappear completely. More likely, the emotions and thoughts associated with the event will recur; however, these thoughts and feelings are no longer as severe or as disruptive as they once were.

REVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL LITERATURE ON FORGIVENESS AND COUPLES TREATMENT

As yet, treatment-outcome studies on the use of forgiveness in couples therapy are still scarce, although the concept of forgiveness is quite prominent in the clinical and theoretical literature. In general, forgiveness has been empirically evaluated as a therapeutic option for couples therapy in at least three instances: infidelity and betrayal, marital enrichment, and increasing the quality of co-parenting following a divorce. In this section, we will review the existing literature, the theories underlying the treatments, and the research findings in each of these areas.

Infidelity and Major Betrayals

Integrative Forgiveness-Based Treatment for Infidelity. Based on the forgiveness model we described earlier in this chapter and elsewhere (Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004), we have developed and evaluated a treatment based on this model and on empirical evidence from our basic research (Gordon et al., 2004;

Snyder, Gordon, & Baucom, 2004). The first stage of the treatment aids the couple in developing skills to contain and regulate their negative emotions and to discuss more effectively with each other the impact that infidelity has had on themselves and their relationship. Thus, the first several sessions use well-established cognitive-behavioral strategies (Epstein & Baucom, 2002) to deal primarily with helping the couple to (a) set appropriate boundaries around themselves individually and as a couple, (b) manage their emotions, and (c) express and identify their reactions to the impact of the infidelity. In the second stage, the therapy integrates more insight-oriented as well as cognitive techniques (Snyder, 1999) as the partners attempt to understand why the affair happened and examine both current and developmental issues within themselves and in their relationship that may have contributed to the affair. The developmental aspect of this treatment often is critical. The injured and participating partners often already know or have access to information about their relationship that may have influenced the participating partner's decision to have an affair; however, they are often unaware of deeper or unacknowledged needs or motives from their partner's past history that may be impacting their current behaviors. Gaining this new understanding often results in an increase in compassion for the partner and tolerance of his or her flaws. Thus, our treatment is designed to help the couple to (a) explore these factors in a neutral, supportive, and structured environment; (b) develop empathy and understanding for each other to the extent possible; and (c) attempt to alter any negative or problematic issues that they pinpoint as contributing influences to the person's decision to have an affair.

Finally, in the third stage, the treatment again becomes more present- and future-focused, which in turn calls for more cognitive-behavioral strategies. As the couple begins to understand why the affair happened, they need to evaluate the viability of their relationship, its potential for change, and their commitment to work toward change. In addition, the process of forgiveness becomes a focus of intervention. The therapist explains to the couple how they have been progressing through the forgiveness process as they have gone through this treatment. Their misconceptions of and resistance to forgiveness are examined, and any blocks to this process are addressed. This treatment then helps them to evaluate important aspects of their relationship in order to reach a well-considered decision about whether they wish to continue their marriage. Depending on this decision, the couple either continues to work on rebuilding their relationship or receives the therapist's support and guidance as they work through the necessary issues of terminating the marriage. The latter course retains efforts toward increased understanding and forgiveness of traumatic events in the marriage in order to move on in their individual lives.

We have conducted a replicated case study that allowed us to explore in depth the efficacy of our integrative treatment designed to help couples recover from an affair (Gordon et al., 2004; Snyder et al., 2004). Six couples entered and completed treatment. By the end of treatment, the majority of these couples were less emotionally distressed (e.g., less posttraumatic stress symptomatology or less depression, as measured by the Beck Distress Inventory) and less maritally distressed, and the injured partners reported

greater forgiveness regarding the affair. Five of the six couples showed clinically significant changes on measures of forgiveness, demonstrating that this treatment was able to shift the injured partners' levels of forgiveness of the affairs significantly in the intended direction. The treatment effect sizes for the group were comparable to those of other empirically supported marital treatments and were significantly greater than the average effect sizes for wait-list controls across marital treatment-outcome studies (Baucom, Hahlweg, & Kuschel, 2003). However, a third of the couples did not respond as favorably to treatment, and group-mean data showed some deterioration in marital satisfaction and depression scores from posttest to 6-month follow-up. Couples showing less favorable response were those in which one or both partners exhibited enduring individual, emotional, or behavioral difficulties independent of the affair (e.g., features of a borderline or antisocial personality disorder).

Decision-Based Forgiveness Treatment for Infidelity. DiBlasio (2000) has developed a unique decision-based forgiveness intervention for couples based on the premise that forgiveness, or at least the decision to forgive, can take place in a single session. He suggests that this cognitive decision to forgive leads to shifts in emotional reactions to the betrayal and quickly to more emotional peace, whereas forgiveness driven primarily by emotions leaves a client powerless and at the mercy of time. Although DiBlasio also acknowledges that forgiveness often does take time, he defines decision-based forgiveness as:

The cognitive letting go of resentment, bitterness, and need for vengeance. By this definition, emotional readiness is not a factor in the decision process. There is a separation of reason from feelings in making the forgiveness decision, followed by an act of will. (DiBlasio, 2000, p. 150)

There are 13 steps involved in DiBlasio's decision-based forgiveness for infidelity (DiBlasio, 1998, 2000). The first three steps involve defining decision-based forgiveness, discussing its benefits, and preparing the ground for the decision. Then each partner is given the opportunity to seek forgiveness for his or her own wrongful actions, the intent of which is to create an atmosphere of personal accountability. During this step, DiBlasio suggests that therapists must attend to their clients' expectations concerning how their partners should respond and help each person avoid coercive attempts to make his or her partner admit behaviors that the individual sees as wrong.

The couple then takes turns going through steps 4–12. During these steps, the offense is stated, the offender provides an explanation for his or her behavior, and the reasons for this behavior are further explored, as are the offended person's reactions. Following these steps, offenders are encouraged to be empathic about the effects of their behaviors on their partners and to develop a plan to stop or prevent the behaviors. Then the offended partners are asked to recognize the offenders' emotions—such as guilt, shame, or fear—about the offense or the effects of the offense, which can be facilitated by either tracing patterns back to offenders' childhoods or by the offended partners identifying their own failures in their relationships. The next two steps

involve recognizing the “choice and commitment involved in letting go” (DiBlasio, 2000, p. 155) and a formal ritual of seeking and granting forgiveness between partners. Finally, the last step consists of a ceremonial ritual or act that symbolizes the couple’s commitment to forgiveness and decision to let go of the pain of the betrayal.

These steps are accomplished within a lengthy (2- to 3-hour) single treatment session. Although DiBlasio acknowledges that many therapists would find this framework too compressed to address an issue as complex as an extramarital affair adequately, he also argues that the forgiveness session may be an early step that would then facilitate more traditional therapy to heal the relationship completely. Similarly, he responds to criticisms that forgiveness is more a process than a decision by suggesting that his decision-based treatment also is a process, albeit a process that unfolds in a very short period of time.

Recently, DiBlasio (2003) presented preliminary findings on a treatment outcome project examining the efficacy of this treatment. Couples were randomly assigned to three groups: a secular, forgiveness-based group; an alternative treatment group; and a no-treatment control group. Couples were also allowed to choose the option of entering an explicitly Christian forgiveness group. Results showed no difference between the secular forgiveness and alternative treatment group and trends toward greater improvement in forgiveness and contentment when comparing the secular forgiveness group and the no-treatment control. Statistically significant differences in forgiveness, marital satisfaction, and individual contentment outcomes were found comparing the Christian forgiveness-based group with the no-treatment control. However, because this group was not randomly assigned to this treatment, it is unclear whether these differences were due to the treatment or to a systematic selection bias in the type of couple who would choose this treatment.

A Contextual Model of Families and Forgiveness. Hargrave has developed a theoretical framework of forgiveness for use in family and couples therapy that has received some empirical support. Hargrave’s (1994) model suggests that forgiveness involves a response to a violation of an innate sense of justice or a disruption between the implicit balance of give (obligations) and take (entitlements) inherent in healthy family functioning. He further suggests that the betraying member—the one who disrupts this balance and violates the justice standard—has likely experienced a violation of trust in a prior relationship and consequently feels justified in enacting hurtful behaviors within the current relationship. As a result, the betrayed partner faces the realization that the betraying family member may not be reliable or trustworthy, which can engender a number of emotional reactions, such as rage and shame. If this injustice is not satisfactorily resolved, betrayed individuals are likely to carry the results forward into new relationships and thus play out their own roles of destructive entitlement in their own family relationships. Forgiveness is theorized to be an effective method to end the cycle of intergenerational transmission of discord and betrayal.

Thus, Hargrave posits that the work of forgiveness in families is made up of both *exonerating* and *forgiving* in an attempt to right injustice and rebalance the ratio of

obligations and entitlements in the family system. *Exonerating* includes gaining insight into and understanding of the motive behind the betrayal. The increased insight gained in this “station” of forgiveness allows the individual to become aware of how familial patterns are repeated and to understand or “identify with the victimizer’s position, limitations, development, efforts, and intent” (Hargrave & Sells, 1997, p.44). On the other hand, *forgiving* involves the injured person engaging in an overt act of forgiving, which involves direct discussion between the victimizer and victim about developing a new, trustworthy relationship in the future. In addition, forgiving also might involve giving the offender the opportunity for compensation, such as allowing the victimizer to engage in a series of behaviors designed to show increased signs of trustworthiness. Thus, *exoneration* appears to be cognitive in nature, whereas *forgiving* is more behavioral. Hargrave emphasizes that these components are not stages that people progress through in succession; instead, he hypothesizes that people vary between these strategies as they forgive.

Some empirical evidence exists for the use of this model in group therapy with couples. Sells, Giordano, and King (2002) developed a protocol for group couples therapy based on Hargrave’s theoretical framework, in which couples received modules in empathic listening, conflict resolution and anger management, and forgiveness. The treatment lasted for 8 sessions over 8 weeks. The forgiveness modules involved three components: (a) expression of relational injury, (b) setting goals surrounding regaining trust and achieving insight, and (c) focusing on the group’s spontaneous reactions to the materials given for homework. Participants were five couples recruited from a large private-practice agency; it was unclear whether these couples were specifically recruited for the occurrence of a betrayal. Results indicated that couples were successful in acquiring and, to some extent, retaining forgiveness skills at 3-month follow-up, and forgiveness was correlated with marital satisfaction and psychological symptoms. However, these correlations were small, and the researchers noted that there was an increase in state anger at follow-up, as well as a decline in the forgiveness skills (although these were still higher than pretreatment levels), marital satisfaction, and psychological health, which they interpret as an atrophy effect. The general conclusions were that forgiveness may be achieved through these group interventions but that couples require a longer period of “reinforcement and support to form an internal reorientation and sustain the development of new habit[s]” (Sells et al., 2002, p. 164).

Forgiveness and Marital Enrichment and Prevention Programs

A Pyramid Model of Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Couples Therapy. Worthington and colleagues have developed a pyramid model of forgiveness that hypothesizes three central components to forgiveness: empathy, humility, and commitment (e.g., Worthington, 1998; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000). Empathy between partners regarding each other’s situation is believed to be critical in facilitating a softened

atmosphere between partners, enabling them to risk forgiving each other. Humility on the part of each partner also furthers this process by requiring that the hurt partner acknowledge that she or he is not perfect by recalling times when she or he hurt the offending partner. Worthington (1998) theorizes that this recognition of human fallibility and of one's own imperfections brings with it the realization that forgiveness, which releases the offender from one's own hate, anger, or retribution, is the just or fair thing to do; therefore, forgiveness is seen as "the natural response to empathy and humility" (Worthington, 1998, p. 64). Finally, although an individual might internally experience forgiveness, Worthington suggests that forgiveness lacks a degree of reality until the individual formally commits to forgiving through overt behaviors.

Based on this model of forgiveness, Worthington has developed a forgiveness intervention described by the acronym REACH. First, the injured individual must *recall* the hurt by acknowledging the offense and examining the nature of the injury. The focus of the intervention then centers on promoting *empathy* in each partner for the experience of the other partner. Interventions may include writing a letter from the other person's point of view or describing the hurtful events in a session from the other's perspective. Third, the partners are invited to give an *altruistic gift of forgiveness*, in which participants explore times when they have needed and been granted forgiveness and the impact on them when forgiveness was received. This experience may achieve the quality of humility by accessing the realization that one is not perfect. It promotes awareness of one's partner's suffering as well as a desire to alleviate that suffering by granting forgiveness. The fourth step in the model is for the partners to *commit* verbally to forgive, once the therapist believes that the partners have experienced enough empathy and developed enough humility to take this step. Finally, the partners are encouraged to find ways in which they can *hold on to forgiveness*, because it is inevitable that past hurts will be remembered. In a sense, the couple is inoculated against these unavoidable recapitulations by the therapist encouraging them to make the distinction between simply remembering past pain and continuing to reexperience bitterness and hatred.

Worthington's pyramid model of forgiveness has been tested in two studies involving interventions (Burchard et al., 2003; Ripley & Worthington, 2002). In both of these studies, the forgiveness intervention was used either as a preventive measure or as a means to enrich currently stable marriages; in neither study were couples recruited for existing betrayals and an expressed need for forgiveness. Ripley and Worthington (2002) provided an initial test of the pyramid model of forgiveness by comparing two marital enrichment groups, a HOPE (Handling Our Problems Effectively) communication-based group and a REACH forgiveness-based group, with a no-treatment control, using a wider range of married couples. These components together comprised what Worthington et al. (1997) termed *hope-focused marital enrichment*. In Ripley and Worthington (2002), neither treatment significantly affected self-report measures of marital quality, communication, or forgiveness. The only difference between the groups

was that the HOPE treatment created significant improvements in observational measures of couples' communication.

In the follow-up study (Burchard et al., 2003), 20 newlywed couples were recruited from the community to participate in an intervention involving couples who met as a pair with a marriage consultant. The aims were to prevent the development of marital distress and to enhance their marital functioning. These couples were randomly assigned to one of two marital enrichment programs, HOPE or Forgiveness and Reconciliation through Experiencing Empathy (FREE), or to an assessment-only control. FREE was based on teaching couples the pyramid model of forgiveness and reasons why forgiveness is important, and on teaching reconciliation skills. Couples practiced the skills under the attention of a consultant. Both of these interventions consisted of four sessions of about 2–2.5 hours each (9 total hours of consultation) over 3–5 weeks. Results indicated that both interventions improved the participants' quality of life posttreatment, whereas the general quality of life for the control group decreased; however, the hypothesis that the forgiveness-based intervention would create significantly better quality of life than the more traditional communication-based intervention was not supported.

Both of the above studies were sequential pilot studies to refine the method used in a larger research effort involving 156 newly married couples. Worthington et al. (2003) reported preliminary results at a conference. Using the method of Burchard et al. (2003) but using a 9-month follow up, Worthington et al. reported that both HOPE and FREE were superior in forgiveness measures and marital satisfaction to assessment-only controls at 1 month posttreatment. On some measures, HOPE reflected more improvement than did FREE. However, at 9 months posttreatment, FREE was superior to HOPE, and both were superior to the assessment-only controls on most measures. In these preliminary results, only self-report measures were analyzed. Behavioral and salivary cortisol data were still being analyzed at that time. Worthington et al. (2003) showed that the FREE intervention had preventive benefits that showed up at a longer follow-up after treatment. When couples were followed up within a month of treatment (i.e., Burchard et al., 2003; Ripley & Worthington, 2002; Worthington et al., 2003, posttest), however, few positive preventive effects of the forgiveness intervention were found.

In summary, neither of these treatment studies indicated that forgiveness interventions provide a greater general enhancement to marital and individual well-being over and above a more traditional conflict-resolution approach. However, it should be noted that these groups were not targeted for specific betrayals. A forgiveness-based intervention might be more useful for individuals who are currently experiencing a pressing need to forgive a major betrayal, rather than as a preventive measure. Furthermore, the follow-up periods for two of the treatments were quite short; because major hurts or betrayals may not have occurred in this time period, the studies' designs may not give an adequate sampling of the behaviors of interest or an opportunity for the intervention to demonstrate its effects.

Forgiveness and Divorce

Rye and colleagues (Rye et al., 2004) have developed an intervention targeting individuals' experience of anger and bitterness after divorce that is designed to increase their levels of forgiveness toward ex-spouses. Loosely based on Worthington's REACH model and conducted in a group therapy modality, this treatment contained five steps: (a) discussion of feelings of betrayal; (b) coping with anger; (c) forgiveness education, obstacles to forgiveness, and strategies for achieving forgiveness; (d) self-care and self-forgiveness; and (e) relapse prevention and closure. A sample of 149 divorced individuals was randomly assigned to a secular forgiveness group, a religiously integrated forgiveness group (similar to the secular group except that participants were also encouraged to draw on their spiritual beliefs while working toward forgiveness), or a wait-list control group that was also similar to a treatment-as-usual group because it allowed individuals to seek out available community resources. Results indicated that there were significant intervention effects for levels of forgiveness and depression posttreatment, such that individuals in the two intervention groups had more self-reported forgiveness and less depression at the end of treatment. Notably, unlike DiBlasio's (2003) findings, there were no differences between the secular and the religious groups on these variables. Rye et al. (2004) also had friends and family members reporting on the individuals' levels of forgiveness. There were no significant intervention effects for these observer ratings. Furthermore, the participants also completed a measure regarding their forgiveness in parenting, which essentially assessed how well the participants interacted with their ex-spouses around parenting issues; again, no significant differences in treatment outcomes for the groups were found on this measure.

Although the findings regarding forgiveness were mixed and were not significant for parenting, these results still provide partial support, indicating that individuals' levels of forgiveness toward their ex-spouses can be increased by a relatively brief intervention. Given the emotional impact that parental conflict after divorce can have on children (Amato, 1996), any intervention that may reduce the level of that conflict ultimately might have beneficial effects beyond the individual who is participating. Consequently, this is an area of forgiveness intervention that deserves more study and innovation.

Summary

All of these interventions to some degree promote a better understanding of each partner and suggest that this better understanding should consequently lead to increased emotional empathy. This improved insight and heightened emotional empathy are considered to be central to the forgiveness process. Furthermore, these interventions all promote forgiveness as beneficial to the relationship, and some even suggest that

forgiveness may go beyond ameliorative effects on a relationship to have preventive effects on marital deterioration.

At the same time, there are several distinctions to be made among these treatments; each model promotes its own “twist” on the forgiveness process. The integrative forgiveness model put forth by Gordon et al. (2004) emphasizes forgiveness as a necessary reconstructive process after a relational trauma. Thus, their model highlights individuals’ need to rebuild safety before forgiving by reconstructing disrupted assumptions and achieving cognitive insight into themselves and the relationship. Consequently, their model places less emphasis on compassion between the partners as a condition of forgiveness, although such compassion may be a frequent consequence of the forgiveness process. Although DiBlasio (2003) lays out a similar process of forgiveness to the other clinical models, his decision-based model compresses this process into a shorter time frame and emphasizes mutual seeking of forgiveness in the beginning phase. Worthington’s (1998) pyramid model places more weight on empathy and, like DiBlasio’s model, emphasizes mutual fallibility and need for forgiveness. Finally, Hargrave and Sells (1997) adopt a family systems approach to forgiveness that acknowledges the intergenerational context of betrayal. The implications of their model for understanding why betrayals occur might be clinically very useful through its explication of how interpersonal hurts and styles of relating may be handed down across generations. However, a problem with this treatment might arise in the language used to describe the stations of forgiveness; in particular, the word *exoneration* could be problematic for some persons because its connotations may play into preexisting negative stereotypes of forgiveness as excusing or condoning negative behaviors.

At this time, the data remain inconclusive regarding the impact of couples-based forgiveness interventions. There is some evidence that forgiveness treatments affect forgiveness (Gordon et al., 2004; Rye et al., 2004; Sells et al., 2002; and possibly DiBlasio, 2003). However, there is only mixed evidence that treatments go beyond forgiveness to affect individual and dyadic functioning; evidence favoring generalized effects include findings from Gordon et al. (2004), Ripley and Worthington (2002), Rye et al. (2004), and possibly DiBlasio (2003), whereas evidence against generalized effects include findings from Sells et al. (2002) and Burchard et al. (2003). It is possible that difference in treatment effectiveness might arise when forgiveness is taught in a primary prevention context as opposed to a secondary or tertiary intervention. It seems that the strongest effects occur when forgiveness is addressed in the context of existing interpersonal hurt; otherwise, the strategies might not have the resonance necessary for them to be encoded in the couples’ repertoire of responses. At the same time, it is possible that we could teach individuals to be more forgiving but also possible that new interventions might be needed or longer follow-ups required to capture these interventions, effects as suggested by Worthington et al.’s (2003) long-term follow-up findings.

NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

More, More, More

Research in this area is still in its infancy. Although the studies reviewed here are a promising start, more and higher quality trials are needed. All of the existing studies are plagued by methodological flaws that make it difficult to assess their efficacy adequately, let alone the effectiveness of these interventions. For example, studies often have a low sample size or no control groups, or the participants are not randomly assigned to treatments. Although the study on forgiveness after divorce by Rye et al. (2004) was exemplary in many ways, the authors did not specify their means of recruiting couples. Whether individuals were recruited specifically for forgiveness interventions might have introduced a selection bias with the unintended artifact that these programs are working only because people want them to work—that is, participants are already predisposed to forgive by choosing an intervention that is advertising forgiveness. If this is true, what about individuals who are adamantly opposed to forgiveness? Can or should we help them to forgive as well?

Divorce

As noted earlier, a particularly promising line of research is the study of forgiveness to decrease the bitterness and conflict that occurs between parents after divorce. Although Rye and colleagues (2004) were unable to show changes in parenting behaviors posttreatment, more targeted interventions that explicitly discuss how lack of forgiveness may affect parenting and, consequently, the family as a whole or that involve both spouses participating in the same intervention might yield more powerful results. Because conflict after divorce is a particularly damaging phenomenon, efforts targeting this problem are worthy of greater attention. Forgiveness interventions may have considerable potential in this area.

What Works for Whom?

We do not yet know which forgiveness interventions work best with which individuals or couples. DiBlasio's (2003) data suggest that religiously based forgiveness interventions may be quite efficacious for individuals who choose that modality. However, what type of intervention works best for a bitter, angry partner who is not spiritually oriented and bristles at the mere mention of forgiveness? Our own intervention with couples struggling with infidelity was less successful with emotionally dysregulated individuals. Such couples might benefit from more emotion-focused treatments or a combination of individual treatment focusing on emotion regulation as well as conjoint

therapy. Finally, forgiveness interventions may not be effective as preventive strategies but instead may be more applicable to individuals who are in the throes of interpersonal trauma or betrayals.

CONCEPTUAL CONFOUNDS

Forgiving one's partner for failing to pick up the dry cleaning is not the same as forgiving one's partner for infidelity or even a major betrayal of a personal confidence to a friend. All of these instances of forgiveness are likely to be important in the healthy functioning of a relationship, yet the forgiveness process is likely to be different for each one. A great deal more emotional work is required to respond to a major interpersonal betrayal, whereas a simple attributional shift (from "my partner doesn't care about my needs" to "my partner was busy and forgot about the errand but still cares") may be required to deal with the dry-cleaning incident. Thus, it may be that talking to premarital couples about how to deal with the daily hurts and irritations may be efficacious, but it is not effective to teach them in advance how to deal with major betrayals and hurts because the kind of major effort involved in helping partners overcome these severe difficulties does not lend itself well to brief preventive group interventions.

Moreover, when conducting forgiveness interventions in couples therapy, what is an optimal forgiveness outcome? As Ripley and Worthington (2002) note, measures that assess only "unforgiveness," such as revenge and anger, may not adequately capture the entire range of forgiveness. Is forgiveness simply the absence of negatives, or does it necessarily contain positive elements such as reconciliation, compassion, or wishing one's partner well? It is likely that the answers to such questions are complex and that the definition of optimal forgiveness might vary depending on the situation. Forgiveness may be more adequately conceptualized as multidimensional or as involving diverse types or modalities. For example, one type of forgiveness may be high on positive affect (reconciliation, compassion for partner, wishing him or her well) and low on negative affect (revenge, anger, rumination); by comparison, in other situations, such as when a partner is likely to reengage in the hurtful behavior, an optimal forgiveness outcome might be moderate positive affect (compassion for the partner and wishing him or her well but without reconciliation) and low negative affect (no wish for revenge or rumination and moderate anger). Finally, in the case of a continuing abusive situation, low positive affect (no compassion, little wishing him or her well, no reconciliation) but also low negative affect (no revenge or rumination, moderate anger) might be the most realistic goal. Indeed, recent research indicates that women residing in a domestic violence shelter who are highly forgiving of their partners are more likely to intend to return to them (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004). Encouraging reconciliation or even compassion for the partner may not always be an appropriate intervention.

CONCLUSIONS

If allowed only one word to describe the state of research on forgiveness interventions in couples therapy, that word would be *beginning*. If allowed two words to describe this state of affairs, the words would be *reasonable beginning*. Finally, if allowed three words to capture our progress, they would be *reasonable beginning only*. Incorporating forgiveness in couples interventions and interventions after divorce shows a great deal of promise; however, as a field, we still have far to go before that potential is fully realized.

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