

Forgiveness Therapy for Couples

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Forgiveness is the word we use when we want to say we have let go of a particular wound or grievance that we were stuck on. When used properly it is the ultimate balm to heal fractured relationships. Unfortunately it is not practiced enough and too often misunderstood to be effectively utilized by suffering couples. In addition therapists who work with wounded clients are mostly untrained in how to help their clients forgive their past and present partners. Remember that John Gottman found that 70% of all marital issues that couples start with in their relationships remain. The bad news is trying to change our partners rarely works. The good news is that when appropriately understood forgiving them does work. Forgiveness was found by Gottman and other researchers to be a key factor in successful long term relationships.

A model of forgiveness that has been successfully researched and recently applied to couples work is the Stanford Forgiveness Project developed by Dr. Luskin. Their research showed statistically significant improvement in physical and emotional well being in people who were taught how to forgive. The research also made clear that forgiveness is a skill that can be taught through psycho education and mindfulness techniques to people suffering from all kinds of wounds and grievances. People who worked with this process became more confident, less depressed, less anxious, more compassionate, reported increased self esteem and saw reduced blood pressure, body aches and muscle tension, and improved physical vitality.

Forgiveness Assessment Process:

When beginning forgiveness work with couples or conflicted individuals the therapist must make an initial assessment in terms of how they typically manage hurt. We employ a 7 stage assessment of forgiveness readiness and try to understand where it is best to intervene. **First we look to find the grievance stories our clients are telling.** A grievance story is the tale of woe that the client uses to defend his position. This is the reality they have constructed that details how they were hurt. Typically the grievance story portrays the offender as very powerful. In a way the offender becomes the star of the story. The client is cast as the victim. He/she has given up much of their power. The grievance story is often repeated over and over and seems resistant to change. In some cases the grievance story emerges readily because the client is almost obsessed with it. In other cases the grievance story is not so obvious. The grievance story may be hidden or sometimes not fully conscious.

In such instances an excellent way to harvest the grievance story is through the use of the genogram. The genogram often reveals patterns in the client's life that may show grievance stories that are similar in theme or appear in other contexts. A genogram can serve as an “ice breaker” as it is a three generational psychological family tree that depicts a family's legacy, history, relationship and communication patterns. Families/Couples come in for therapy because of disagreements and consequent resentments leading to grievance formation and spiraling discord. Forgiveness is making peace in the present, yet the failure to understand the history of how family dynamics emerged can lead to repeating embedded dysfunctional patterns.

As we listen to their story we examine how the client interprets the harm done to them. Most grievance stories hold fast to a highly personal interpretation of the offense committed. In the personal interpretation, the client is not only upset at being hurt; they have the added outrage that it was done to them and to them alone. They feel as if they were picked out of the universe to be hurt. They have little real consideration that the world is full of people who are hurting, many much worse than they are and thousands of people hurting in the exact same way. This overly personalized interpretation lacks empathy for others. The impersonal interpretation of the offense differs in that it recognizes that all of us are hurt and that it is an unavoidable aspect of life. The therapist does not want the client to deny the personal aspect of hurt they have experienced. Instead the therapist helps the client balance the personal and impersonal aspect of the experience. In a grievance story this usually means helping the client experience the offense less personally in effect giving them a wider lens.

Second the forgiveness therapist, after harvesting the grievance story determines where the client is in their grief process. The therapist needs to know how the client is managing their grief. Are they in touch with what they are feeling? Can they articulate their feelings and do they know specifically what they are upset about? In order to forgive, one must be clear about their feelings and the action that they feel has wronged them. Attempts at forgiveness without this basic step leads to a false forgiveness which tends to backfire. In making such a grief assessment the therapist determines how ready the client is for forgiveness at this time and what work must be done to help the client become clear enough to successfully forgive. In some cases of severe trauma it will take a great deal of preparatory work before the client can safely and effectively attempt forgiveness. Forgiveness is the end point of the grief process. With all clients forgiveness requires that one grieve the wound or loss first.

Third, the forgiveness therapist evaluates how the clients typically manage stress. Do they have ways of calming themselves or are they at the mercy of their own reactivity. Clients vary in how quickly or intensely they emotionally escalate. This understanding will help the therapist know how to introduce the breathing and guided imagery exercises that are such an important part of the stress reduction component of forgiveness therapy. A central understanding of forgiveness therapy is that little can be done cognitively for a client when they are a fight/flight mode. Calming the mind and the body is essential to help a client get a new perspective on their situation.

Fourth, the forgiveness therapist evaluates the unenforceable rules that the client is employing in their grievance story. The unenforceable rules are any expectation or demand that the client makes on themselves, others, or life that they do not have the power to make happen. Unenforceable rules that are unearthed in the grievance story can often be found in many other contexts in the client's life. The benefit of this realization is that if you help a client with the unenforceable rules in their grievance story, you will probably be helping them in many other facets of their lives. Our major intervention with respect to unenforceable rules will be to help our clients convert their demands towards their partner into hopes or wishes. This transformation brings the client more in line with interpersonal sharing and the reciprocal nature of intimacy.

Fifth, the forgiveness therapist unpacks the grievance story to find the client's positive intention. The positive intention is the positive goal that the client had that put them in the

hurtful situation in the first place. The positive intention often represents the most loving, positive part of the client that has been forgotten in the grievance story. In a nutshell we help them find the positive piece that may not have manifested in one relationship or piece of relationship and re connect them with their good goal. The positive intention is broader than any specific person or experience. When the client goes back into the hurt and retrieves the positive goal, they can choose to move forward and create a more skillful story.

The sixth aspect is to evaluate the degree of negativity the client's exhibit and compare that to the positive emotion/gratitude they express. That is do they give more attention to what is wrong in their relationship or to what is right. No matter what a client harps on that is painful and negative the result will be increased suffering and relationship impairment. We see the opposite of complaining about one's partner (or unforgiveness) is forgiveness acceptance and gratitude.

Seventh, the forgiveness therapist determines the skillfulness of the client's use of "Content and Process". By content we mean the actual details of the grievance story as the client experiences them. The process is how the client manages the hurt. Clients caught in a grievance story will most of the time be driven by over focus on their content. They will utilize this content to minimize or ignore the poor ways they have handled their lives. For instance, a client can easily justify his out of control screaming at someone as being justified by their partner's flaws. The client may not be proud of their behavior but they justify it by relentlessly citing the provocation. If the client is deeply immersed in the content, the forgiveness therapist must intervene to articulate the unskillful means of their process. For example, the therapist can show that calming down and positive refocusing rather than immediately reacting to the distress can make one feel better no matter what happened to them. We also show the client that changing the content is impossible (we cannot change the past).

Within the seventh step, content vs. process, many of the resistances to forgiveness emerge. After being hurt once clients are naturally hesitant to be hurt again. The forgiveness therapist helps the client deal with their pain and vulnerability by dialoging about the effectiveness of bitterness or despair as a protection against hurt. We will examine the stages of forgiveness by exploring therapeutic work with Stan and Margaret.

Stan and Margaret

Stan and Margaret came for couple's therapy because of their disagreement regarding their parenting styles. Stan thought Margaret was too controlling and Margaret felt that Stan was soft and not involved. They had three children ages 7, 9, and 12 (two boys and the eldest a girl).

Stan's Genogram depicted a parenting style from his family of origin that was free and open. His parents both of Italian decent were very traditional, his mother did the parenting and his father was the provider. He had one brother who was older and they both fended for themselves as far as "growing up." Their parents were pretty loose with rules and the "boys" were trusted to do the right thing.

Margaret had parents that were very strict and over-involved. She was Irish and although her mother was the prime parent her father was the enforcer. Margaret developed a good degree of

responsibility and was able to avoid conflicts with her parents. She had one younger sister and they both worked together to fulfill their mother's rules.

Margaret and Stan could not agree on how to raise their children. The three children were good at getting in-between the parents and playing one off against the other. Stan and Margaret were committed to each other, however there was some ambivalence in Margaret. Margaret did 90% of the second shift while Stan felt that he was doing his share by providing for the family. Margaret worked part-time and took care of the finances. She resented Stan for not being involved but also could not delegate or share her responsibilities since as she said, "he seldom does anything around the house" anyway "my mother did it all and so can I."

Margaret felt Stan did not support her decisions regarding the children. Stan felt that Margaret treated him like another child, "you never ask me what I think, you just tell me what to do." Both had good people skills outside of their marriage and were well liked and responsible. Margaret was more organized and better at details while Stan worked well with the wider picture yet lacked organizational skills. To make things worse they had both suppressed their hurt and bad feelings. Margaret was more of a "thinking" person and tended to get anxious while Stan had a "sensitive" temperament; he would explode then let it go.

The initial session dealt with gathering information through the Genogram framework. The session ended with my having them do a guided visualization about relaxing and appreciating the reasons that got them together. This set the stage for a more collaborative framework. The following session focused on them **identifying their feelings** and how they had devolved into resentments and their **grievance** stories(**Step 1.**). This allowed a slightly wider perspective and each pointed out certain things from each other's past that they were unaware of, i.e. some of the childhood feelings they had regarding their own parent's actions and behaviors.

Stan realized that he was **making demands**, ("I want her to cut the kids some slack,") of Margaret that were not equitable and Margaret also came to the realization that Stan may not be able to parent as her father did ("I am the one who has to deal with the children and I want him to support me."). They realized that these unenforceable rules were at the core of their **grief**(**Step 2.**). They both were able to **share their desires and aspirations** for themselves and the family (they responded well to a simple relaxation exercises that had them focus on their stress levels). It was agreed that **dwelling on the negative was harmful** and was not the best way to **manage their stress**, especially when it was not shared in a collaborative manner (**Step 3.**).

Both Margaret and Stan were able to clearly articulate what their grievance was. Margaret did not want all the responsibility and needed to trust that Stan would agree on certain basic family rules regarding the children. Stan did not want to be treated like a child and wanted more respect as a parent. They both understood the "fight or flight" pattern that revved them up and created so many unnecessary conflicts and each was able to identify things that were not in their power to change (**unenforceable rules**). They participated in some breathing and **softening skills** to create a calmer communication and more loving exchange (**Step 4.**).

Following up on the previous sessions, the couple continued to practice gentle deep breathing and developed a list of **positive intentions and mutual goals** that would enhance their life

together. They discussed how their different temperaments might clash, but agreed that they could not change what was not in their power to change. Each made a commitment to cooperate and to use their desire for centering and balance to create win-win decisions despite their different communication styles (**Step 5.**).

The following sessions dealt with their **choosing to recommit to each other** in a new collaborative and **positive** partnership. Each created a list of unenforceable rules and shared their optimistic desires with each other. Margaret felt respected and Stan said that he can now understand what empathy was all about. They both narrated how they were feeling vulnerable yet more comfortable with an emerging trust that was not there prior to their therapy. They were able to see without excessive reactivity the patterns from their upbringings and were developing tools to resolve their differences (**Step 6.**)

They decided to forgive. They decided to write up a caring contract of individual respect comingled with a vital shared relationship. This meant for Stan the commitment not to withdraw from Margaret who now felt that she could share parenting in a respectful way. They committed themselves to accepting each other's fallibility and **pledged to be more compassionate** in dealing with their flaws and family of origin rigidities. The two of them wanted to focus less on negative content and more on the process of creating a life together (**Step 7.**)

A few subsequent family sessions included the children. Stan and Margaret now demonstrated a unified framework. Each child was free to articulate what it was that they felt they were not getting in the family. Their desires were age appropriate and dealt with some jealousy issue and sibling interactions. Discussion ensued as to whether specific demands were realistic or not as well as developing kinder ways of sharing and communicating. Each family member was instructed to develop ways of showing positive emotions and to show regular appreciation to the other members of the family. The fulcrum of change had been Stan and Margaret's ability to forgive which allowed them to change harmful patterns and express the love they had buried under hurt feelings.

Dr. Fred Luskin, Director, is an author and senior consultant with the Health Promotion Project at Stanford University. He developed the Forgive For Good methodology and has been featured on major media outlets, journals and PBS (www.learningtoforgive.com).

Jed Rosen, M.S.W., L.C.S.W., Clinical Director, has been practicing and supervising, family, marital, and individual and group psychotherapy for over twenty five years. He is an instructor for continuing education at The Graduate School of Social Work for Rutgers University, Bryn Mawr University and Adelphi University (jed.rosen@verizon.net).

Dr. Ken Silvestri, Educational Director, has published over fifty articles and conducted numerous workshops on family therapy, homeopathy, and alternative education and communication skills. He has been in practice for thirty years and is an AAMFT clinical member, approved supervisor and an active black belt student of Aikido (www.drkenethsilvestri.com).