

Helping Clients with Forgiveness Work

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Resisting Forgiveness

- Sources of Clinician Resistance
 - Don't feel competent/prepared to engage clients in forgiveness work
 - We have our own forgiveness work that needs to be done (old regrets and resentments)
 - Doesn't forgiveness belong in the realm of religious/spiritual leaders' work?
- Sources of Client Resistance
 - Don't see the connection between their presenting concerns and underlying regrets/resentments
 - "I've tried forgiving and I can't forget what happened. Therefore, it doesn't work for me."
 - "If I forgive, doesn't that mean that I'm saying that what happened was okay?"
- Living with Regrets/Resentments
 - To mask/cope with pain, clients may resort to such things as prescription medication, controlling others, drug/alcohol use, seeking success/advancement, staying busy, behavioral "distractions" (e.g., the Internet, gaming, sex, gambling, etc.), depression, and/or anxiety.

Wounds

- The nature of life: (Nouwen)
 - We were created to experience perfect love
 - We are raised by imperfect people
 - Wounds result
 - *Wound: something happened that we didn't want to happen*
 - Coping mechanisms evolve
 - Left unchecked, these coping mechanisms interfere with our experience of perfect love
- Four core beliefs that evolve from wounds: (Carnes)
 - I am a bad and unworthy person
 - No one will love me as I am
 - My needs are never going to be met if I have to depend on others
 - My current coping mechanism (success, control, acceptance, acknowledgment, sex, alcohol, gambling, food, relationships) is my most important need

Reacting to Wounds (Luskin)

- Some rebound quicker than others
 - Resiliency
 - Spirituality
 - Supportive community
- Others find it more challenging
 - Creating a grievance: The reaction to a situation which ends up making the event more painful and longer-lasting
- Emerges when two things coincide:
 - Something happens that we didn't want to happen
 - We deal with the problem by thinking too much about it (renting space)
- You have a grievance when you answer yes to the following:
 - Do you think about the painful situation more than you think about the things in your life that are good?
 - When you think about the painful situation, do you become either physically uncomfortable or emotionally upset?
 - When you think about the situation, do you do so with the same old repetitive thoughts?
 - Do you find yourself telling the story about what happened over and over in your mind? Or to others as part of "your story"?
- **To form a grievance, the following three things have occurred:**
 1. Took the offense too personally
 - Anger has its place: it acts as a warning sign that a boundary has been broken, we may be in danger, or we may have been mistreated
 - Many people get stuck in the extremes: anger or denial
 - There are few instances where anger acted out is the optimal response
 - Few times when the long term use of anger will be of benefit

- Personal vs impersonal - all painful events have elements of both and the challenge is to walk the line in seeing both at the same time
- Many continue to take the painful experience personally for years afterward
- Finding the impersonal in the hurt can be done in two ways
 - One way is to realize how common each painful experience is: nothing has happened to you that is unique
 - Remembering this fact may seem like the hurt is being trivialized, but it's worth taking the risk to suffer less pain
 - This is one reason that support groups can be so beneficial – we see that others have been hurt in similar ways
 - Second way is to understand that most offenses are committed without the intention of hurting anyone *personally*
 - Explore ways in which the person did not deliberately intend to hurt *you*
 - Each offense carries the personal and impersonal within it
- 2. Blamed the offender for how you feel (accountability is different from blame)
 - When we are in pain in the present, we often blame our bad feelings on the hurts done in the past
 - A blame hypothesis is created as a way to try to understand why we hurt in the present
 - at first it may help us feel better (as the pain is someone else's fault), but
 - eventually these feelings fade and you're left feeling helpless and vulnerable
 - When someone else is to blame, it's as if we need something from them to lessen the pain (apology, admit fault, change, beg forgiveness, etc.), all of which is unlikely, especially if the person has moved on.
 - When we blame others for how we feel, we grant them the power to regulate our emotions
 - Every time we allow ourselves to be reactivated by an old hurt, we give more and more power away, end up feeling hopeless and powerless, and thus staying tied to the worst part of their lives
- 3. Created a grievance story
 - Describes the painful things that have been endured but not healed from
 - Telling them makes you feel mad or hurt all over again
 - There can be physical reactions (stomach, tightening, sweat)
 - In creating the story, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy of sorts: the messages such as, "life is not fair, people will hurt me, I am a victim" becomes infused with who we are and how we act. We therefore bring more pain and discomfort on us as people begin to move away from us
 - Creating a grievance story is different from sharing your pain with others
 - The grievance story is told over and over
 - The responsibility for one's well-being is placed on the perpetrator(s)
 - At every turn, the perpetrator's actions are taken too personally
 - At every turn, one's present misfortune is blamed on the perpetrator
 - The way to get past the grievance is to learn how to forgive, and in that process, to learn how to tell a different story.

Impacts of Grievances

- Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms
 - Self-Destructive Behaviors
 - Mood Disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety)
 - Suicidal ideations
 - Self-Injurious Behaviors
 - Addictive Disorders
 - High Risk Behaviors
 - Re-victimization
 - Personality Disorders
 - Borderline, Avoidant, Obsessive-Compulsive
 - Other-Destructive Behaviors
 - Hurt People: Hurt People
 - Cascading impacts of neglect, abuse, & violence
 - Personality Disorders
 - Narcissistic, Histrionic, Antisocial
 - Self-Medicating Behaviors

- Chemical Addictions (Alcohol, Heroin, Marijuana)
- Process Addictions (Gambling, Sex, Food)
- Co-Dependency
- Pursing success, acceptance, & acknowledgment
- Issues with Control

Lowering Resistance to Forgiveness

- **Readiness for Forgiveness**
 - Stages of Change and Forgiveness (adapted from Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994).
 - Pre-Contemplation
 - Do not see the purpose related to presenting concern
 - Forgiveness may be important, but...
 - Spiritual Bypass – aka “premature transcendence”
 - The client attempts to avoid the necessary psychological work by jumping directly to the spiritual
 - Main symptom – sole focus on spiritual (compartmentalization)
 - One common belief – “God has delivered me”
 - Explore the meaning behind this statement
 - Contemplation
 - Acknowledge that they need to forgive
 - Waiting for the “magic moment”
 - Struggle to understand the purpose/process
 - Not ready to take action yet
 - Substitute thinking for action
 - Stallers and chronic contemplators
 - Planning
 - Confidence builds, adjustments are made, not necessarily resolved ambivalence
 - Action
 - Requires time, effort, energy and support; overt modifications are made; clinician’s favorite stage
 - Maintenance – prepare for relapse
 - Termination – apply learning to other issues
- **Challenges to Forgiveness (Luskin)**
 - Pseudo-Forgiveness
 - Forgiveness of wrong person
 - Use of “forgiveness” to minimize or deny undesirable emotions
 - Quick and easy but does not stand test of time
 - Intention of forgiveness is to increase guilt of other
 - Done out of fear of losing the relationship
 - Intention is power seeking
 - “Too ready” – tendency to forgive
 - Forgive and forget?
 - What Forgiveness is Not
 - Forgiveness is not accepting the offending behavior
 - “While you forgive, you may also say, ‘Never again will I knowingly allow this to happen.’” – Jack Kornfield
 - Forgiving is not forgetting that you were wounded
 - Forgiving is not condoning, pardoning, or excusing
 - Forgiving is not reconciling
 - Forgiveness is not weakness
 - Forgiveness is not contingent on apology from the other
 - Forgiveness is not justification of the other’s behavior
 - Resisting Forgiveness
 - Defense against painful memories or feelings
 - Defense against vulnerability of love
 - Defense against admitting one’s own flaws
 - Maintenance of self-pity

- Maintenance of self-indulgence
- Maintenance of a desired relationship
- Defense of narcissism (“I’m better than you”)
- **Defining Forgiveness**
 - Since we’ve (a) discussed pseudo-forgiveness, (b) dispelled some myths about forgiveness, and (c) noted ways that folks resist forgiveness...
 - It is important to help the client define forgiveness
 - Define it for themselves
 - Define it via their belief-system
 - Remember that definitions can be developmental
 - Might offer some starting points...
 - Forgiveness - to give up or give away anger and the actions associated with it, retribution, and revenge (against self and others).
 - Forgiveness is choice: clients don't HAVE to forgive those who have hurt them
 - On the same token, they can choose to forgive those who harmed them
 - Forgiveness:
 - is the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become the hero instead of the victim in the story you tell
 - changes the present, but not the past
 - means you become a part of the solution
 - is the understanding that pain is a part of life
 - is for you and no one else: you can forgive and rejoin a relationship or you can forgive and never talk to the person again
 - is when we become calm enough to say confidently that what happened to us (e.g., an abusive parent) was dead wrong and then chart the best course for our lives
 - is the beginning of a new chapter, not the end of the story (don't make acknowledging a wrong an end in itself, thus missing the opportunity to forgive and grow)
- **Benefits of Forgiveness (Baker)**
 - Clients are no longer victims of the past
 - They have less to be afraid of
 - Self-esteem grows (they prove that they can survive both the old pain as well as future ones)
 - They become stronger and learn what is, and is not, okay for them
 - They can be of assistance to others who have similar hurts
 - Forgiveness is an act that shows strength
 - Their strength is made clear when they acknowledge that they are hurt and that they are not ashamed of being hurt
 - They end up giving more love and care to the important people in their lives
 - Too often, the people who suffer from clients' grievances are not the ones who hurt them but those who care for them today
 - If they rent too much space to what went wrong, where is the space to appreciate the good in their current lives?

Sources and Additional Readings

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- Prochaska, J. O., Norcross, J. C., & DiClemente, C. C. (1994). *Changing for good*. New York: Avon Books.