Forgiveness: A Pathway to Emotional Healing

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Robert Enright, Licensed Psychologist
Department of Educational Psychology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
(renright@wisc.edu)

and
International Forgiveness Institute, Inc.
(internationalforgiveness.com)

Suzanne Freedman
Department of Educational Psychology and Foundations
University of Northern Iowa
(suzanne.freedman@uni.edu)

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I. Introduction

   A. Overview (short-term benefits and long-range goals)

   B. Forgiveness is a choice

II. What is person-to-person forgiveness?

   A. Forgiveness is a moral virtue (Aristotle, about 2,350 years ago). Three-part definition

   B. The oldest preserved accounts are within the Hebrew scriptures (salah). Christian (aphiemi), Muslim (afo), Confucian (shu), and Buddhist perspectives all make room for forgiveness and see it as a morally worthwhile activity. In fact, we have never examined an ancient text with a moral basis to it that did not value forgiveness. Forgiveness cuts across many different philosophies and religions.

   C. More on what forgiveness is and is not (It is focused on persons, those who do wrong. It is not about excusing or condoning, forgetting, reconciling, or tossing justice out.)

III. Why forgive? We find, from scientific analyses, considerable emotional, relational, and even physical health benefits from forgiving (see page 3)

IV. Working with incest survivors: Research and a pathway to healing (Chapter 4, p. 78, Forgiveness. Please see page 4 of this handout.)

V. Personal experience of child sexual abuse and forgiveness

VI. How to do Forgiveness Therapy, a video demonstration
VII. Question and Answer Time

VIII. Forgiveness education as prevention of excessive anger: How to teach children the art of forgiveness

   A. Research evidence

   B. Curricular examples in primary school, middle school, and in anti-bullying programs

IX. General discussion
Examples of Experimental Studies (with Randomized Experimental and Control Groups) in which People Forgive or Learn about Forgiveness

Incest survivors. The forgiveness group became emotionally healthier than the control group after 14 months. Differences between the groups were observed for depression, anxiety, hope, and self-esteem. The results were maintained in a 14-month follow-up. (Freedman & Enright, 1996)

Drug rehabilitation. The forgiveness group became emotionally healthier than the control group, similar to the above study. The experimental participants’ need for drugs declined substantially, relative to the control group. Results were maintained at a 4-month follow-up. (Lin et al., 2004)

Cardiac patients. Again, the experimental (forgiveness) group became emotionally healthier than the control group. At a 4-month follow-up, the experimental group had more efficiently functioning hearts than the control group. (Waltman et al., 2009)

Emotionally-abused women. Results are similar to the above studies in terms of emotional health (decreased anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, increased self-esteem). (Reed & Enright, 2006)

Terminally-ill, elderly cancer patients. After a 4-week intervention, the forgiveness group showed greater improvement in psychological health (less anger, more hopefulness toward the future) than the control group. Physical indicators of both groups showed declines. (Hansen et al., 2009)

At-risk middle school students in Wisconsin. Those in the experimental group not only improved more in emotional health than those in the control group, but also they improved more in academic achievement than the control counterparts. (Gambaro et al., 2008) At-risk middle school and high school students in Seoul, Korea. The findings are similar to the above study. (Park et al., in press)

First Class (Primary 3) children in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Those in the experimental group were less angry than those in the control group. Randomization is by group; analyses are on each individual. (Enright et al., 2007)

Third Class (Primary 5) children in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Those in the experimental group were less angry and depressed and more forgiving than those in the control group. (Enright et al., 2007)

First Class and Fifth Class children in Milwaukee’s central city. Those in the experimental group were less angry than those in the control group. (Holter et al., 2008)

Parents of Third Class (Primary 5) children in Belfast, Northern Ireland improved statistically (the parents improved) as they taught forgiveness to their children. The comparison group parents taught art to their children. (Magnuson et al., 2009)

Scientific note: The therapeutic studies are statistically moderate to strong (Lipsey, 1990), with effect sizes typically in the .59 range for emotional health between groups (Baskin & Enright, 2004). The teacher-led initiatives have effect sizes (between groups) in the .28 to .73 range for anger. The teacher-led programs involve group instruction rather than individual treatment. There is no direct therapy, but instead there is instruction primarily on learning about forgiveness rather than forgiving.
Forgiveness Process Model for the Guided Private Reflection

preliminaries

Who hurt you?
How deeply were you hurt?
On what specific incident will you focus?
What were the circumstances at the time? Was it morning or afternoon? Cloudy or sunny?
What was said? How did you respond?

PHASE 1—UNCOVERING YOUR ANGER

How have you avoided dealing with anger? Have you faced your anger?
Are you afraid to expose your shame or guilt? Has your anger affected your health?
Have you been obsessed about the injury or the offender? Do you compare your situation with that of the offender? Has the injury caused a permanent change in your life? Has the injury changed your worldview?

PHASE 2—DECIDING TO FORGIVE

Decide that what you have been doing hasn’t worked. Be willing to begin the forgiveness process.
Decide to forgive.

PHASE 3—WORKING ON FORGIVENESS

Work toward understanding. Work toward compassion.
Accept the pain.
Give the offender a gift.

PHASE 4—DISCOVERY AND RELEASE FROM EMOTIONAL PRISON

Discover the meaning of suffering.
Discover your need for forgiveness. Discover that you are not alone. Discover the purpose of your life. Discover the freedom of forgiveness.

Forgiveness Education in Milwaukee’s Central City: Overall Report of Findings

International Forgiveness Institute, Inc.
1127 University Avenue
Madison, WI 53715

Executive Summary

At the end of each school year, the International Forgiveness Institute sent year-end evaluation forms to all Milwaukee teachers and psychologists (Junior Infants through Second Year) who taught the Forgiveness Education Program during school years 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012. The annual average response rate was 53% (a total of 107) of those who taught through the forgiveness education guides. Because we offered a small monetary incentive to each, it is unlikely that the results are biased toward only those teachers who liked (or did not like) the program.

Highlights of the evaluations (four-year averages) are as follows:

• 91% of the instructors found the forgiveness curriculum materials easy to use.
• 75% of the instructors observed that, as a whole, the students decreased in anger as a result of learning about forgiveness.
• 78% of the instructors observed that the students increased in cooperation as a result of learning about forgiveness.
• 71% of the instructors observed that, as a whole, the students improved in their academic achievement as a result of learning about forgiveness.
• 91% of the instructors thought that they became a better overall instructor as a result of teaching the forgiveness curriculum.
• 93% of the instructors thought that they became a better person as a result of teaching the forgiveness curriculum.
• 84% of the instructors thought that the classrooms as a whole began to function better as a result of the forgiveness curriculum.
• 76% of the instructors thought that the school as a whole began to show improvement because of the forgiveness education program.
References to Some of Our Work


