

Practical Skills for Working with Clients Who Are Angry

Why Forgiveness Work is Especially Effective with Anger

with Ruth Buczynski, PhD; Shelly Harrell, PhD; Joan Borysenko, PhD;
Bill O'Hanlon, LMFT; and Kelly McGonigal, PhD

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Dr. Buczynski: How do we help clients who struggle with an enduring anger that they just can't seem to work with? Sometimes the best answer is forgiveness.

To fully explore the impact that forgiveness work can have, we'll look at four different perspectives.

To begin, Dr. Shelly Harrell shares the fragile journey she made with a single mother who carried a deeply-felt rage.

Dr. Harrell: She was very angry in therapy, and very much did not see the point of therapy initially. Again, for me it was very much, "What different space can I create for her that is a respite from how she experiences the world when he walks out the door?"

She still lived with her family. She was unable to keep a job and did not have healthy relationships. She was actually pregnant when I first started working with her. Over time, she did begin to soften a little bit – not out in the world but in the sessions, and she did begin to experience me and the therapy as a place where she could exhale. Or, in other words, a place where she could drop the mask a little bit.

This was tested at one point during the therapy process. I had to make a child abuse report and she was subsequently kicked out of her home and was homeless for a bit of time. I asked her, "It strikes me that I'm the one who caused this set of events, by making this report."

And she said to me, "Yes, yes, I know that. But, I know you're coming from a good place and that your intent is not bad."

We eventually worked through some anger she had with me, but her experience was that she was able to demonstrate that when she felt this sense of being cared of, there was not a need to lash out as much.

She wanted to protect the relationship with me. She didn't want to ruin it by doing what she'd done in other relationships – which, while we did need to work through her anger with me over the course of therapy, I saw that as a good sign because she did not have desire to protect other relationships. She valued what was

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happening enough to say, "I don't want to be mad at you. I want you to be a person who is acting in my best interest."

Even though this was a negative thing – to have made this child abuse report, I knew she was basically communicating, I need to see someone who is acting in my best interest.

The nature of our relationship over time helped to soften her and helped her to value behaving in the world in a different way.

One of the things we had to work through was her mother, who was not going to change. This was not something she could expect to happen. The insults that her mother would hurl at her and the rage were not going away. So, what does she do with all that?

Another big piece of the work with hostility is forgiveness work. That's the hard stuff right there. Forgiveness work is hard stuff.

Dr. Buczynski: Tell me more; why do you connect hostility to forgiveness?

Dr. Harrell: If we go back to the initial conceptualization, hostility is the actual and/or perceived experience of being wronged, hurt, abused, or treated unfairly. So, part of what may be helpful is releasing what one is

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carrying of being wronged and treated unfairly and hurt and abused, and understanding that carrying it hurts you more than it hurts the person you're angry with.

Forgiveness work, to me, is a critical piece of working with anger and particularly with hostility – and that is not an easy process. That takes time to release and build a sense of compassion for the other person, compassion for someone who has hurt you.

The work we had to do in terms of her relationship with her mother was forgiveness work. If Mom isn't going to change, how can I not carry this with me in a way that interferes with me having relationships in my life? With me keeping a job? With me? How do I release this?

That process of forgiveness was important. As she began to forgive, her hostility began to decrease as well.

Mr. O'Hanlon: When I was first a therapist, I didn't really get much training in forgiveness stuff. When people would come in, I was just a little lost of what I should do or whether it was a crucial piece. In recent years,

there's been so much research.

I know you had Fred Luskin at your live conference, and he's done some good work. And there's Michael McCullough. The person I learned a great deal from was Ev Worthington who did and is still doing a lot of research. He was a forgiveness researcher, and his mother was killed by a robber who broke into her house. He really had to apply it.

When I got the research, it showed that there was less depression, less hostility, and less posttraumatic stress when people go through the forgiveness process.

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I like the distinction between it's not really excusing or forgetting. It's choosing, as an empowered person, rather than as a victim. I choose to forgive because I don't want to carry around this stuff. I want to be in a better place.

Most people who are angry don't get those distinctions. When you explain that to them and you give them the research, and you give them the process (there are several forgiveness processes that this research is based on), most people are willing to go through it. Not everyone, of course. But, most people. I think it's a good thing to do.

Dr. Borysenko: First, it is so important to explain to people what forgiveness is and what forgiveness isn't. As

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long as people think that forgiveness makes it okay for the low down dirty dog (or yourself – if you're the low down dirty dog in this case) to get off the hook, then they really won't do forgiveness work.

Forgiveness is not about making somebody's difficult behavior okay. It's about setting yourself free so that you're not always telling the same story over and over again, and allowing that experience to haunt you and imprison you.

I like to define forgiveness as a form of interior freedom. When you phrase it that way, people are much more able to do it.

I'll mention Fred Luskin that Bill just mentioned – one of the techniques that is in common use is from his

work: benefit-finding. Many others find benefit-finding to be so important.

For example, say you have a mother who was really mean to you. If you keep rerunning that graven story, you keep triggering your amygdala – so the question is, well, maybe you had a mother who was mean to you, but what benefits derived from that?

Maybe, looking back, it made you much more independent.

Maybe it made you a problem solver.

As you begin to say, okay, there are all kinds of life experiences – good and bad. I can learn from those life experiences. What did I learn from this? Then, you rewrite your narrative. Changing your story is the way to move from victimhood to empowerment – and, most importantly, to interior freedom.

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The second way I work with forgiveness with some people, not everybody, is through the use of ritual. I might have discussed this somewhere in the last 52 weeks, Ruth, but it bears saying again. Narrative and story and memory exist in your hippocampus, but the emotional sense – the anger, the misery, whatever else – exists in your amygdala.

Talk therapy doesn't get to the amygdala. That's all in the hippocampus.

Ritual, imagery – that gets directly to the amygdala. Sometimes in the case of a dead parent, I might have a client go to the cemetery and perform some ritual of forgiveness. Talking to the part, maybe putting flowers on the grave.

Another thing I've done frequently – and I do think I've mentioned this once before – is in the case of problems with the mother. When we've worked far enough that the person feels, okay, I'm ready to be set free, I have that person bring in a picture of the mother. Then, I take a piece of string and I attach it from their own umbilical cord to the picture of the mother.

Then we'll do a meditative process, which usually brings tears. The amygdala is on there.

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Then, we cut the cord. We cut the cord, and celebrate what has been learned.

That's the final step of forgiveness: we recognize that

something has been done that was difficult – but, instead of focusing on that, we change our locus of focus not to what was done, but to who we have become in a positive way because of it.

Dr. McGonigal: So, I thought I would just share with you one of my favorite studies that, to me, is mind-blowing.

It's very clear in the research that if you get some sort of compassionate reappraisal of someone who's harmed you, it's good for you mentally.

But there was a particular study that was done in 2009 at the University of Wisconsin that took men – young to senior, who had some sort of pre-existing cardiovascular disease.¹ They were also people who were holding on to some strong anger about a trauma or offense they'd experienced. They had both of those – the trauma and anger, as well as some sort of heart problem.

At the beginning of the study, they had each of these men talk about the experience they were so angry about while they did a stress test. This is the kind of stress test where they inject something radioactive into your arm which will then travel through the bloodstream to your heart. If you do a heart scan, you can see what part of the heart tissue takes up that radioactive substance. The healthy tissue will take it up – so, a healthy heart will light up; it will be a big, glowing heart.

Anger can reduce blood flow to the heart in a way that puts you at risk for heart attacks and other problems.

Initially, they found that, for these men who were so angry, there were dark spots on the heart when they thought about the thing that makes them angry. Literally, the state of anger and the lack of forgiveness was reducing blood flow to their heart in a way that sets them up for future heart attacks.

Then, they gave them a forgiveness intervention where they asked them to think about the situation from a compassionate point of view and to acknowledge their own hurt – which is so important when we're talking about forgiveness.

It's not just, *let's move past this*. Forgiveness is really about self-compassion. Then, it is about beginning to shift your focus to a bigger, wiser point of view on the offender or the system that created the pain, and to try and take that compassionate view where you see the causes of their suffering and their actions and understand they're someone who needs to grow and change in a positive way.

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To come up with someone that feels not like approval but like something that feels wise and understanding, gives a bit more space around that anger.

Ten weeks later, they did the heart scan again, talking about the same experience. This time, their hearts didn't have the same level of dark spots or cold spots. Taking this perspective changed what was happening in their bodies when they thought about this thing they had been holding onto for a lifetime.

I love that study. One of the things Ellyn mentioned is that forgiveness is for you, and it's important for the person who's doing it to understand it. This is one of the absolute most clear examples I've ever seen of why a person might want to practice forgiveness. You're literally nourishing and protecting your own heart.

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Dr. Buczynski: As we heard in these four perspectives, forgiveness work, while difficult, can bring about incredible change.

"Change" in a biological sense as well, when you look at that remarkable study from Kelly McGonigal.

It brings to mind an old saying: "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else. You are the one who gets burned."

In the final module, we'll wrap up our work on anger with a stunning revelation at a school for troubled youth. I'll see you there.