

FORGIVENESS

A TEACHABLE SKILL FOR CREATING AND MAINTAINING HEALTH

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Dr. G A Pettitt MRCP, MRNZCGP, DOBstRCOG
General Practitioner, Motueka, New Zealand.
Note: Now of 81 Cambria St. Nelson, New Zealand

Setting the scene

Twenty groups of drugs are used to modify the body's reaction to stress. The total planetary cost is staggering. Teaching skills in transforming negative emotions could be an alternative strategy.

Much is gained by studying people described as warm (vasodilated), flexible or relaxed (not having increased muscle tone), or alive and vital (as opposed to "not too bad"). Such people accept and love life as it presents itself. They accept and love themselves and others as they are. They separate in their minds doers and deeds: while working to change the effects of harmful actions, they hold nothing against the doers of them. They give freedom to others to be responsible for their lives and to learn from experience. In short, they are forgiving people who do not try to control others or feel bad when their expectations (of themselves or others) are not fulfilled.

Thoughtful doctors may recall how forgiveness of some kind has often accompanied healing in patients or relationships, or an especially peaceful death. They may also recall times when lack of forgiveness, persisting resentment, etc, accompanied difficulties in healing or dying healthily. If it is so that to become a more forgiving person is associated with better healing, living, and dying, then it behoves us to define and research the skill, and to discover if it can be taught or caught by others.

While teaching stress management, wellness, and psychosynthesis courses, the writer has increasingly noticed the value to participants of one component - the forgiveness process. This paper is to describe how this is currently taught, give examples of outcome, and to invite comment on its potential in health care and medical/nursing education.

In this context forgiveness means:

The process of cancelling the conditions in the mind that prevent the full flow of love and vitality through a person as a result of a life event.

In this sense it is not an external act of pardoning. It is not a forgetting of the lessons learned. It is not permitting oneself to be overridden. It does not stop one taking appropriate wise action to caringly yet strongly confront and prevent harmful actions.

It is an inner action of the will in the mind and value systems of the person. It is an act of self-care. What must be cancelled will be described later. This inner action can have profound effects on parts of the nervous system usually called involuntary. Unlike the three Rs and

in schools, and even the religious institutions that urge its practice are not always clear as to exactly *how* it should be done. Yet it is a skill essential for the fourth and fifth Rs - Right Human Relationships and Right Choice Making. This is an experiential process with definite stages. Simply reading about it does not convey the deeply moving quality it can reach. Not all its details can be conveyed in a short article.

THE FORGIVENESS PROCESS

Step 1: Setting the stage. Intention, motivation, commitment:

To forgive, one must first affirm one's decision to no longer suffer the damaging results of the negative emotions that occur as a result of memories of past actions of oneself or others. This does not stop efforts to change the effects of harmful actions but may make one more effective at so doing. If the motivation to forgive is insufficient, help may be needed to bring to awareness the benefits and burdens of continuing to hold the unforgiving mind-set, so that conscious choice is made.

(Follow-up 1995: We have found that having the forgiver explore and be very explicit about their deep value system greatly increases the incentive and power behind the process).

Step 2: Pieces of the jig-saw - the five necessary mind-sets:

When commitment is present, one will be willing to practise the five new mind-sets that will enable forgiveness to take place. These are:

1. Seeking to know the unmet basic needs that underlie the behaviours of all in any stressful situation. Honouring these, and if practical, trying to meet them, brings fulfilment. Trying to meet (or not to meet) the more superficial wants, does not. Basic needs may be physical, emotional, aesthetic, sexual, to do with survival, freedom, or challenge. Full unfoldment is not possible if they are unmet. Patterns of behaviour were imprinted in us at times when they were not met, which may persist and cause damage to ourselves or others if not changed. The needs to be loved, to love, to be accepted, respected and valued have figured most in this work. This mind-set enables one to see through unpleasant or disease-producing behaviour to see the unmet human need that underlies it.

2. The daily evocation of a state of calm from which to view situations. Taking 10 deep breaths and relaxation training are an early form of what this can become. This inner peaceful frame of mind is the goal of many forms of meditation and prayerfulness, and can be learned relatively easily. It corresponds to a sympathetic/parasympathetic shift that can be felt and measured, and is a latent potential in all of us.

3. The openness to becoming gladly aware of one's own part in setting up the unpleasant situation, if such is present. Self-correction of this then occurs, unconscious provocation of the consciously disapproved behaviour ceases, naturally improving the situation.

4. The intense will to find and adopt a course of action that is fair to all, in the sense of promoting the best unfoldment of all affected by a situation. This is subtly and yet profoundly different from the desire for justice for oneself or retribution for the other(s). It is an early form of planetary consciousness, needed for our survival as a species.

5. The use of the will to look for and recount the good aspects of the other(s) involved, so that the latent potentials for good and for personal growth are brought in to influence the thought processes. This mind-set has been called unconditional positive regard. It runs counter to our usual toxic habit of relating the bad and omitting the good (as in news broadcasts, or dumping the day on spouses at the day's end).

These mind-sets seem to be an essential foundation for unconditional love. Training to develop them can be given through experiential exercises. One can become aware of the resultant changes in body patterns.

Step 3: Feelings are not denied:

Catharsis may be needed. Because of repression, one is often not aware of the full emotional reality within. The will has been used to contain the powerful sympathetic drive; the distress is physicalised. It can be helpful to one with this style to experience safely the true inner feelings, and this can increase the motivation to practise forgiveness. Those who are overwhelmed by deep emotion can be helped by catharsis to get some release.

Many methods for emotional release exist. In daily life we often recount the bad to spouse or friend, which may help the teller-but not often the listener! Better are: beating out anger, screaming out fear, crying and sharing grief, confessing guilt with an unconditionally loving person. Other methods are psychodrama and bodywork to special music. These can be helpful in discovering, honouring, and releasing the stored emotional realities behind the dis-ease. One having difficulty with Step 3 may need such release, which requires a safe, totally accepting environment. The provision of such could become a priority for a health care system that embraces the whole person.

Emotional release methods alone do not always completely free one from the cumulatively diminishing effects of life events. The process of forgiveness will go beyond this. Forgiveness is beyond emotion. It is a mental and spiritual act of the will. It is a higher use of the will than using it to repress negative feelings, or to be willed by them into hurtful thoughts or actions, states needing repeated release, or illness.

(Follow-up 1995: We have found that even more important than emotional release is to discover what were the negative beliefs or conclusions that formed in the mind at the time of the trauma(s). When these have been unearthed, they can be changed to wiser ones. If they are not brought to light and changed, they will persist in the unconscious mind and continue to cause harm.)

Step 4: Changing one's mind:

The intending forgiver is now ready for the inner act of will that will produce a change of mind. What then is the condition in the mind that must be changed to restore vitality and love to the person? The images of all painful interactions have been stored one by one in our memories; they continue to modify our perceptions, behaviour, and physiological sets. It is the continuing harm (feeling bad) from these images that needs to be altered. It can be shown that for each unpleasant memory, we have another unfulfilled image of how we would have preferred events to have gone. Sometimes this is clear, more often not, and effort is needed to bring it to consciousness. It is our disappointment that this preference was not fulfilled that

our capacity for love and vitality, and causing dysfunction in our involuntary systems. When we use our will to cancel our demand that our preference be fulfilled, we can return our systems to the healthier set that existed prior to the event. Increased energy is experienced after this. To do this creative imagination is used. The forgiver forms an image of how they would have preferred the other(s) to have behaved. This can be concretised in spoken or written words addressed in imagination to them. There are certain important cautions as to exactly how this should be done - this is as precise an intervention in a person's life as surgery or medication. The preference statement must contain no negatives and be in such a form that a third person could know if such behaviour had been carried out. Imprecise technique can prevent a successful outcome. The desire that this preference should have been fulfilled is the condition in the mind that must be cancelled.

(Follow-up 1995: An improvement has been discovered and expressing the deep value that was trespassed upon as very powerful in restoring the forgiver to a sense of dignity and power.)

Step 5: Acceptance of the past, and cancellation of expectations:

The methods of gestalt psychology are used. Only one incident at a time is processed. The forgiver forms an image of the one they have chosen to forgive, and enacts stating their preferences to him/her. Acceptance of the fact that the preference was not met is affirmed. Insistence that it should have been met is cancelled. It is important that these steps involve the motor system, either by speaking aloud or writing. The strength and quality of the voice or writing provide feedback as to how fully this is done - it may need repetition.

At this stage the mind-sets described in Step 2 become easier to maintain. Calm peacefulness, the ability to see the true unmet needs of all in the incident, to see gladly one's own contribution to the undesired outcome, to see the good in the unforgiven one(s) and even in the experience itself, to see what would have best promoted the growth of all concerned - all gather strength from here on. Connection is made with the inner source of wisdom, patience, understanding, love and goodness. This is called the Higher Self, True Self, Soul and many other names in different traditions but is the same inner reality.

Step 6: Restoring the flow of vitality and love:

This next stage greatly enhances the benefits of the process. Still using the imagination, the forgiver visualises receiving love themselves, from the part of their consciousness that has latent within it the qualities just mentioned. This is imagined flowing down into the symptomatic parts of their body, then into the whole body, then into the hurt feelings, and into the hurtful beliefs, to heal them. This can be very specific. When this is sensed to be complete, the love and goodwill are visualised overflowing and being directed to the previously unforgiven one. Plenty of time is allowed for this last step, and changes will be observed in the physiological patterning as this is done. It is vital that one day monitoring of EEG, EMG, GSR, pulse/respiration patterns, and, we can hope, parameters of immune function be carried out, to enhance our knowledge of the physiology and pathology occurring in different states of consciousness. Remember that this is essentially an inner action of the forgiver. There is never a physical approach to the one being forgiven, which would not improve the

knowing the process is complete, from the physical changes in their body.

In the course of teaching this process to several hundred people in various centres in New Zealand, and in his own life experience, the writer has become aware that profound mental, emotional, and physical shifts can occur. Research into this psychophysiological event is needed urgently, with open mind, skilled observation and biological measurement. There are also important issues regarding the training of teachers of this skill, and the building of sound group dynamics and safety that will allow disclosure of the kinds of painful memories that surface to be healed in this way.

Examples and discussion

It has been salutary to have to accept how often people have needed to forgive doctors, nurses, and hospitals in healing their past experiences. This has frequently been the case with those who have been badly treated as children by an authority figure. Previous abuse often sets the scene for ill-health which can also be associated with difficulties with medical attendants.

Chronic pain:

An angry woman with spinal injury worked on forgiving her medical attendants and the ACC (Accident Compensation Commission) for various errors of diagnosis and handling. As she did this, very painful memories of parental abuse gradually surfaced. Complete forgiveness of her parents, family and medical attendants took two years, but enabled her finally to manage her many reality problems much more comfortably and effectively. *(Follow-up 1995: This person, who was for a long time frequently bed-ridden prior to her self-healing journey, became mobile and very active in the community, among other things helping poor families manage on low incomes)*

Genitourinary:

A woman with recurrent cystitis and pelvic pain was not improved after three operations. She said that after the third one her surgeon had told her "It was a bloody mess inside" (haemostasis had been so difficult). To her, this confirmed the secret fears she had had about her body since being sexually abused as a child. She became well after forgiving the surgeon, the sex offender, and some other figures from her past.

Forgiveness of abusers has figured a lot in this work of self healing. If the statistics are true that 1:4 to 1:10 children suffer abuse, the reservoir of work to be done is large indeed. Equally important will be the work yet to be done with the abusers themselves on self-forgiveness.

The process of self-forgiveness

This differs in details from the one outlined, but is equally precise. It remains to make it possible for the abusers to find their way to safe situations where this can be learned by them.

Cardiovascular:

A grandmother with persistent angina (following a coronary thrombosis, and she had also had two breast cancers and a duodenal ulcer) became free of angina after she forgave the many members of her large family for not living their lives the way she thought they should (A

and well. She attributes her excellent health in large measure to the very complete forgiveness work she did - and still maintains! Another patient with hypertension that was very poorly controlled on medication, was able to reduce, and then eliminate, medication after completing her forgiveness agenda with the aid of a support group of fellow students. 6 years later her blood pressure is normal).

Addiction:

An alcoholic teenager who had stormed out of his home ("I'll never return!") contacted his parent the day after that parent completed the process of forgiving him some months later. He went for treatment and is now establishing a family in a mature way.

Violence:

Two participants have shared that they abandoned plans to do murder or violent revenge after using this material. It is not hard to imagine the different quality of driving and accident rates of the forgiving and unforgiving states.

(Follow-up 1995: Since 1987, when this article was written, the forgiveness process has shown itself of value in assisting survivors of mass shooting and loss of family members, and of ritual abuse by a satanic cult)

Conflict:

Negotiations have gone unexpectedly better when one or both parties has carried out the process before and during business and marital conflicts.

Allergy:

Intriguingly, a patient with severe allergy to wattle flowers began to forgive the wattle for causing her allergy. Eventually she was able to sit in a closed car with a bunch of wattle with no reaction. Does that not provoke an extension of our theories about allergy? *(Follow-up, 1995 - this person has had no recurrences of this. Another patient discovered that the food she reacted to were in fact the foods her mother had regularly cooked for a male relative who sexually abused her)*

Refusal to forgive:

An emotionally abused child became a woman with multiple health problems, (and difficulties with doctors),-obesity, seronegative polyarthritis, multiple injuries from her alcoholic husband, multiple surgeries, bladder dysfunction, and depression. Her condition improved when she partially forgave the most damaging parent. Later she deteriorated. She was found to have taken back the forgiveness and be once more hating the parent, now deceased some years. ("I will never forgive!") She never learned the process and continued to have serious health problems. *(Follow-up 1995: This person continues to have serious health problems)*

Body responses teach us what is going on if we "listen to them"

The lie detector works because our bodies do not lie. We can train ourselves to become as sensitive to the information the body offers us in the patterns of muscle tension, joint stiffness, and autonomic sets that lie behind many metaphors in daily life. That muscle power increases after the forgiveness process is easily tested clinically.

Psychosynthesis

This is an emerging body of knowledge of the different levels of the psyche and of the different ways we use our will. It is not a new kind of therapy so much as an approach to human development that includes the belief that it is not only the tangible that can be approached scientifically. In the context of psychosynthesis, forgiveness is seen as lifting one from the physical and emotional levels up to the world of the thoughtforms that contributed to ill-health. Its effect is to bring to life the intangible quality of unconditional love.

Life, and people, flourish better in an atmosphere of unconditional love. Healing on all levels can occur more easily. We may not know how to measure it but we know its presence. There is more health, more aliveness, more creativity, more warmth and giving (ie, more being-for-giving).

Questions and Implications

How does the state of unconditional love affect arterial perfusion (warm heart and clear mind)? Or muscle tension and posture (what is the opposite of so-and-so is a pain in the neck and makes me uptight)? Or organ performance (What is the opposite of "You make me sick and tired. My stomach gets knotted up when I think of what you did.")? How do endocrine and immune systems function in states of chronic resentment, or of forgivingness?

Is it not dawning on us that to ignore the intangible realities such as these is, in fact, unscientific? The needs of our patients and drug costs indicate that more priority be given to research in this area. Humans are complex, and the process described may seem complex. Many people resist the idea of a connection between forgiveness and health, (as I did, on first contact with it). Some say it is too difficult or takes too long.

In essence it is not more complex than driving a car and takes no longer to learn. Any skill, once learned well, can become a good habit - like good driving.

In the writer's experience, this may be hard to teach on a 1:1 basis in times of crisis or overwhelming illness. Just like good driving, *Preventive Training* would be more ideal. In a group situation, as a weekend workshop, it takes about 18 hours. (*Comment, 1995: This is a tiny fraction of a person's life - about 1/77,000th of the average lifespan. A small investment indeed!*)

One quarter to a half report major beneficial changes. Refresher courses could increase this. A minority seem to reject it, but have returned to the material later and become enthusiastic. Errors of technique do occur at first and individual 1:1 attention may be needed. As with any skill, care and repetition are necessary. (*1995: Small groups of students working together weekly for some weeks after a workshop can greatly increase the skill level and value to participants, so that a forgiving attitude becomes a way of life*)

Working with the material is a considerable personal challenge - a surgeon does not have to operate on himself to learn surgery, but it is necessary to face up to using this material in one's own life for quite a while before trying to assist others with it. We discover that for high-level wellness, we need to do it most often for those with whom we live and work, and, surprisingly, especially those we love most.

The correct use of the will is central. One cannot be forced to do this. It is self-initiated and directed. It enhances self-esteem, and builds confidence and the will. For peace

with nature and with each other. The forgiveness process is offered as a tool for this purpose, and an alternative to the expensive search for, and use of, drugs to modify the harmful effects of the (often unconsciously) sustained, unforgiving state. Methods for teaching it to children will one day be invented by gifted teachers, and the long-term results evaluated.

(Follow-up 1995: Forgiveness workshops have been given now in many countries by Edith Stauffer, PhD, the originator, and by her students such as myself. Many improvements to the forgiveness process have been suggested by students attending forgiveness workshops. It is a dynamic process that must be adapted to the needs of the individual, respecting their religion, ethnic origin, gender and age. The issues that come up are many and varied, and include family, religious, racial, political, occupational, and educational abuses. It is to be hoped that ways will be found to extend this work of forgiveness to groups and nations, for the principles will be the same).

Acknowledgment:

I acknowledge the help and teaching of Dr Edith Stauffer PhD, Director of Psychosynthesis International and author of Unconditional Love and Forgiveness (see below).

Further reading:

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Correspondence:

Dr G A Pettitt, 81, Cambria St., Nelson, New Zealand