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Close Romantic Relationship Maintenance and Enhancement: Applied Directions.

Forgiveness:  
Toward a public health approach to intervention

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There are few certainties in life. But one certainty is that romantic partners are not perfect despite our tendency to idealize them (e.g., Murray, Holmes & Griffith, 1996); it is a rare person who does not, at some point, feel “hurt,” “let down,” “betrayed,” “disappointed” or “wronged” by his or her relationship partner. Such events have the potential to corrode, disrupt and even end relationships. Understanding how partners react to them is therefore fundamental to understanding how relationships are maintained. Romantic relationships may also provide a context for devastating emotional wounds that may initially seem to be beyond repair. Such wounds either end the relationship, change it forever, or are overcome through processes that remain little discussed by marital researchers. How is it that some partners are able to overcome hurt prompted by a negative partner behavior and resume positive interactions whereas others remain hurt and engaged in negative interactions or even avoidance of the partner?

Psychologists have paid considerable attention to negative, potentially destructive behavior in relationships, particularly their role in relationship dysfunction. For example, it is well established that negative reciprocity (increased likelihood of negative behavior following negative behavior by the partner) and negative reactivity (suppression of positive behaviors below base rates following negative behavior by the partner) characterize distressed relationships (e.g., Margolin & Wampold, 1981). Likewise, we know that inhibiting the tendency to respond negatively to a partner’s bad behavior and responding constructively instead, a process called accommodation, is related to relationship commitment, greater interdependence between persons, and having plentiful time, rather than a limited time, to respond (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). The proximal determinants of accommodative behavior are perceived “reasons for the event” (e.g., Rusbult, Yovetich & Verette, 1996, p. 79), a finding consistent with growing evidence that explanations for relationship events predict partner responses to the events (for a review, see Fincham, in press). Thus, we have a growing literature that ties together negative relationship events, explanations for those events, and reactions to the events.

Although important, such findings provide only a partial understanding of how relationships are maintained in the face of negative partner behavior and they seem particularly inadequate to explain reactions to serious relationship transgressions. Consider the case of an extramarital affair where the perceived reason for the affair is the adulterous spouse’s selfish focus on their own immediate wishes. Assuming equal levels of commitment, what happens in one marriage that allows the betrayed partner to overcome his or her anger and resentment and behaves in a conciliatory manner towards the spouse whereas in another marriage the relationship remains tense for years? As they remain constant in this example, neither the major relationship macro-motive (commitment) nor the proximal determinant (reasons for the event) identified in research on accommodation can help in

providing an answer. This example highlights the need for a new category of relationship process that may follow the transgression and the initial hurt engendered by it, but that may also influence the aftermath of the event. We examine forgiveness as one process that may be useful in distinguishing between couples with different outcomes

Although it is a complex construct without a consensual definition, at the center of various approaches to forgiveness is the idea of a motivational transformation towards a transgressor in which motivation to avoid and/or retaliate against the transgressor is relinquished. Forgiveness therefore sets the stage for possible reconciliation with the transgressor suggesting that it may have substantial implications for long-term relationship outcomes as well as short-term patterns of interaction [footnote 1]. At the same time, forgiveness has the potential to provide closure with regard to a painful or disturbing relationship event and so may have substantial implications for individual well-being and health, as well as implications for other family subsystems.

This chapter therefore examines the potential importance of forgiveness in close relationships and is divided into two major sections. In the first, we examine objections to forgiveness before reviewing evidence suggesting that it might have beneficial direct and indirect relationship effects. In view of such effects we briefly summarize research on how forgiveness can be facilitated. This serves as a springboard for the second section in which we argue that existing methods used in forgiveness intervention research cannot address the public health problem posed by transgressions in close relationships. We therefore suggest that an alternative approach is required and outline a new way of addressing the public health problem that can be delivered on the scale that is needed. The chapter concludes by summarizing major arguments and identifying future challenges.

#### Forgiveness in close relationships

Forgiveness is widely accepted as a positive event. However, it is important to consider potential negative connotations to forgiveness that may either provide obstacles to forgiveness or alert us to negative outcomes that could occur if forgiveness were advocated in a careless manner. Therefore, we begin our discussion by considering explicitly several important objections to forgiveness, each of which presents a way in which forgiveness could be seen as harmful.

#### Forgiving is harmful

Forgiving is weak. Nietzsche (1887) argued that forgiveness is a sign of weakness and, from this perspective, may have adverse implications for the self. Likewise, many who might otherwise contemplate forgiving a partner might be held back by the potential implication that to do so would be an admission of their own weakness. Accordingly, the perception that forgiveness is a "weak" response may be a significant impediment to forgiveness in close relationships. In considering how to counter the charge that forgiveness is a sign of weakness, it is critical to note that forgiveness requires

the victim to acknowledge adverse treatment that entitles him or her to justifiably feel negatively towards the transgressor who, in turn, has no right to expect the victim's empathy. Forgiveness thus requires the strength to assert a right, the right to better treatment than that shown by the transgressor. Absent such assertion, conciliatory actions can reflect factors such as condoning of the transgressor's behavior, a strategic ploy, a desire to appease the transgressor and so on. Accordingly, some behaviors that may be labeled "forgiveness" might need to be distinguished from "true forgiveness" if we are to avoid confirming the perception that forgiveness is for the weak. Conciliation in the absence of affirming one's right to better treatment may indeed reflect weakness but this should not be confused with forgiveness. In addition to asserting one's claim to a position of moral authority vis-à-vis the transgressor, forgiveness requires the strength to relinquish this position of moral authority and release the transgressor from the debt they incurred by the transgression. As anyone who has attempted to forgive knows, forgiving is not an easy option but is instead extraordinarily difficult because it involves working through, not avoiding, emotional pain.

Forgiving creates danger. It can be argued that forgiving creates danger in two ways. First, it prevents people from experiencing appropriate anger and pain and thereby robs them of the motivation to communicate overtly to others that they do not tolerate or find acceptable transgressions against them. From this viewpoint, forgiveness may prevent honest communication and many persons may feel reluctant to forgive because it does not feel "honest" to do so. Indeed, "instant" forgiveness for transgressions may not be beneficial for either victim or transgressor as it may not reflect an honest attempt to move past the hurt. However, as noted above, forgiveness does not preclude experiencing anger and communicating one's right to better treatment. Second, it can be argued that forgiving exposes one to potential re-victimization. Many persons report reluctance to forgive precisely because they feel the perpetrator needs to be dissuaded from engaging in the behavior again. But exposure to re-victimization is not a necessary part of forgiving. There is nothing inconsistent with forgiving a transgression and, at the same time, taking reasonable measures to prevent a re-occurrence of the transgression, including breaking off all contact with the transgressor if it is prudent to do so. Likewise there is nothing inconsistent about forgiving a transgression while clearly asserting the expectation of better treatment and that a recurrence of the transgression will not be tolerated. To the extent that forgiveness leads to a restored relationship it may be seen as setting the stage for re-victimization, but re-victimization in romantic relationships can occur, and may be more likely to occur, while the partners are disengaged.

Forgiving creates injustice and inequity. It can be argued that forgiving subverts the course of justice and that when forgiveness occurs justice is not served. In the aftermath of a transgression it is commonplace for victims to experience a "moral injury" in the sense that their beliefs about what is

right and wrong have been assailed. This experience may lead to a strong desire to set the scale of justice back in balance through some process of retribution or some consequences for the transgression. Such consequences (e.g., appropriate punishment, compensation) might be justified on numerous grounds such as a necessary corrective to shape future behavior, to protect others from danger, and so on. Importantly, natural consequences of destructive behavior are not precluded by forgiveness, even when these are the behavioral reactions of the victim. For example, there is no particular reason to expect "trust" to re-emerge quickly in the aftermath of a relationship transgression even if forgiveness has occurred. It has also been argued that forgiveness creates inequity in a relationship. Kelln and Ellard (1999, p. 865) assert that forgiveness is an unsolicited gift that creates "inequity distress" because a transgressor motivated to relieve his or her guilt can no longer simply compensate the victim but must reciprocate the forgiveness. In a laboratory study they showed that transgressors were more likely to comply with a requested favor following forgiveness than retribution, both forgiveness and retribution, and a control condition in which neither occurred. As the interdependence in close relationships can be viewed in terms of high "indebtedness" between partners, inequity distress is unlikely to be significant in this context.

#### Some events should not be forgiven

It can be argued that some events should not lead to forgiveness (e.g., rape, severe domestic violence). When not based on the earlier discussed objections to forgiveness, this view is predicated on moral assumptions about behavior and about forgiveness as a moral act. A variant of this view is that humans should not concern themselves with forgiveness as only God can forgive. Once the moral/religious assumptions supporting this viewpoint are adopted, the viewpoint can be compelling. In principle, however, an individual can choose to forgive any transgression. In general, more severe transgressions are harder to forgive and some acts are so heinous that it can be hard to imagine how a victim can forgive them, yet there are documented, compelling examples of forgiveness for such terrible acts (e.g., the murder of a child, see Jaeger, 1998). In addition, the potential positive consequences of forgiveness for the self may pertain even in cases of severe transgressions.

Coda. The arguments offered so far are theoretical and do not preclude forgiveness having a downside in regard to actual, lay conceptions of the construct. For example, some people may link strongly, or even equate, forgiveness and reconciliation and may therefore by virtue of forgiving someone place themselves in danger of future harm. This possibility is consistent with the results of a recent study. Katz, Street and Arias (1997) found that women who forgave a dating partner for hypothetical episodes of relationship violence decreased the stated likelihood that they would leave the relationship. One implication is that therapeutic attempts to facilitate forgiveness should include an educational component to ensure that participants understand fully what forgiveness does and does

not entail. It may also be necessary to assess perceived negative consequences of forgiving the partner before we attempt to encourage forgiveness. At the same time, any discussion of facilitating forgiveness is predicated on the assumption that forgiveness is valuable for the individual or the relationship. Before turning to existing literature on intervention, therefore, we first examine whether forgiveness is associated with positive relationship outcomes.

#### Forgiveness improves relationships indirectly by promoting individual well-being

Physical health. The belief that forgiveness can improve physical health is found in religious writings and in the recommendations of some health professionals (see Thoresen, Harris & Luskin, 2000). This link appears to be an intuitive one; forgiveness results in decreased hostility and there is documented evidence that chronic hostility is associated with adverse health outcomes (Miller, Smith, Turner, Guijarro & Hallet, 1996). In a similar vein, forgiveness can facilitate the repair of supportive close relationships and such relationships are known to protect against negative health outcomes. For example, marital conflict is associated with poorer health (Burman & Margolin 1992, Kiecolt-Glazer et al 1988) and with specific illnesses such as cancer, cardiac disease, and chronic pain (see Schmalzing & Sher 1997) and hostile behaviors during conflict relate to alterations in immunological (Kiecolt-Glazer et al, 1997), endocrine (Kiecolt-Glaser et al 1997, Malarkey et al 1994), and cardiovascular (Ewarts et al 1991) functioning. Nonetheless, the direct evidence linking forgiveness and physical health is limited to anecdotal accounts and a few cross-sectional correlations. At the present time “no controlled studies have demonstrated that forgiveness affects physical health” (Thoresen, Harris & Luskin, 2000, p. 254). Absence of evidence, however, is not evidence of absence and laboratory research supports theoretical linkages between forgiveness and physical health. Specifically, vanOyen Vitvliet and Ludwig (1999) show that engaging in forgiving imagery (empathizing with the offender, granting forgiveness), relative to unforgiving imagery (rehearsing hurts, nursing grudges), decreased physiological indicators of stress (heart rate, blood pressure and skin conductance). It is quite possible therefore that, over the long-term, forgiveness protects against stress-related health problems.

Mental health. vanOyen Vitvliet and Ludwig (1999) also showed a link between forgiveness imagery and emotional responses, namely, reported anger and sadness. This finding is consistent with correlational research linking forgiveness and psychological symptoms. For example, Tangey, Fee and Lee (1999) found a negative relation between a dispositional tendency to forgive others and depressive symptoms and hostility; forgiving oneself as a transgressor was also inversely related to depressive symptoms and positively related to overall psychological adjustment. Symptoms of anxiety, depression, and anger have also been shown to decline following a forgiveness intervention (e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1996). Likewise, to the extent that forgiveness helps enhance relationship

quality it may be associated with improved mental health because of links between overall relationship quality and mental health. For example, the link between relationship quality and depression is increasingly well established (see Beach et al 1998) and a link with eating disorders has been documented (see Van den Broucke et al 1997). Similarly, associations have been noted for physical and psychological abuse of partners (e.g. O'Leary et al 1994), male alcoholism (e.g. O'Farrell et al 1991) and early onset drinking, episodic drinking, binge drinking and out of home drinking (see Murphy & O'Farrell 1994). These findings are promising but again compelling, direct evidence documenting a causal link between forgiveness and mental health is lacking. It would therefore be premature to conclude that forgiveness improves individual well-being. Nonetheless, recognition of the negative physical and mental health outcomes associated with processes that can occur in the absence of forgiving (e.g., preoccupation with blame, rumination) appears to sustain theoretical attempts to identify processes linking forgiveness and physical and mental health. This effort is also supported by findings linking forgiveness and relationship well-being, a topic to which we now turn. Forgiveness improves relationships directly

Basic research. Indirect evidence regarding the importance of forgiveness for relationships abounds. For example, experiencing resentment and hurt towards one's partner is probably incompatible with feeling supported by him or her. Lack of support is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and supportive close relationships, in turn, are known to protect against negative health outcomes (though it is not clear whether this happens directly or indirectly through relationship satisfaction, Cutrona, 1996). It is equally hard to imagine resentment or anger towards the partner as engendering feelings of intimacy or producing the beneficial effects that flow from being in an intimate relationship.

But there is direct evidence on the importance of forgiveness in close relationships. Initial evidence shows that forgiveness is related to relationship well-being. For example, McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown and Hight (1998) found that a composite measure of relationship commitment and satisfaction was negatively related to reported avoidance and revenge following a recent hurt and the worst relationship hurt as identified by participants in a romantic relationship. Fincham (2000) also found that forgiveness and marital satisfaction were related and went on to show that forgiveness accounted for variance that was independent of marital satisfaction in predicting overall behavior towards the partner and in reported retaliatory and conciliatory responses to a partner transgression. Moreover, forgiveness fully mediated the relationship between responsibility attributions for partner behavior and reported behavior towards the partner. Importantly, McCullough Rachal, Sandage et al. (1998) show that pre- and post transgression closeness are related, in part, through forgiveness. Worthington (1998), presenting a regression

analysis of the same data, shows that forgiveness accounts for variance in current relationship closeness after relationship length, pre-transgression closeness, characteristics of the hurt (impact and depth) and events since hurt (apology and time since transgression) are entered into the regression equation. Thus, forgiving does appear to promote reconciliation (closeness). Complementing these findings is the fact that partners themselves acknowledge that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction (Fenell, 1993).

Documenting the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction and relationship behavior is an important, preliminary step in showing that forgiveness improves relationships. However, longitudinal data that speak directly to this causal assumption are not yet available. In the interim, we can turn to research on forgiveness interventions for relevant data provided we recognize that any causal relation discovered is not necessarily characteristic of what happens in the normal course of events absent intervention.

Intervention research. Intervention research also provides useful evidence regarding the effects of forgiveness on close relationships. Because such studies are often experimental in design, they are an important test of the hypothesis that facilitating forgiveness may cause benefits in romantic relationships rather than merely being associated with beneficial relationship outcomes. Since Close (1970) published a case study on forgiveness in counseling, various models of forgiving have emerged in the counseling/psychotherapy literature. However, with the exception of Enright's work (e.g., Enright & Coyle, 1998) the impact of these models on clinical practice has been questioned (McCullough & Worthington, 1994). Where there has been an impact, model builders have skipped the task of validating their models and proceeded directly to intervention outcome research (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000). Perhaps more importantly, the psychotherapy literature has far outstripped empirical data on forgiveness leaving us in the position of attempting to induce forgiveness without knowing a great deal about how forgiveness operates in everyday life or in close relationships. Nonetheless, we examine the small body of data on forgiveness interventions that is beginning to emerge.

Of the 14 available studies, all but two (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996) are group interventions. Worthington, Sandage and Berry (2000) summarize these interventions (delivered to 393 participants) by showing that there is a linear dose-effect relationship for the effect sizes they yield. Specifically, clinically relevant interventions (defined as those of 6 or more hours duration) produced a change in forgiveness (effect size = .76) that is reliably different from zero, with nonclinically relevant interventions (defined as 1 or 2 hours duration) yielding a small but measurable change in forgiveness (effect size = .24). These authors tentatively conclude, "that amount of time

thinking about forgiveness is important in the amount of forgiveness a person can experience” (Worthington, Sandage & Berry, 2000, p. 234). Because effect size and proportion of males in the study were negatively related, they also conclude that men are more “substantially at risk for holding onto unforgiveness than are women” (p. 241). Finally, they note that one study produced a negative effect (Al-Mubak et al., 1995, Study 1) that is most likely due to participants being given time to think about their hurt without being induced to think about forgiveness.

The analysis summarized above demonstrates that we have made good progress in devising interventions to induce forgiveness. But this is analogous to focusing on a manipulation check in experimental research. What about the dependent variable; does inducing forgiveness produce positive psychological outcomes? Here results are more mixed. For example, Hebl and Enright (1993) showed that their forgiveness intervention produced significantly greater forgiveness in elderly females than a placebo control group but that both groups showed significant decreases in symptoms of anxiety and depression. In contrast, Al-Mabuk et al. (1995) found that, relative to a placebo control group, their forgiveness intervention produced significant increases in forgiveness and hope and a significant decrease in trait anxiety among college students emotionally hurt by a parent. However, the groups did not differ in depressive symptoms following intervention. A problem with these, and many of the other available studies, is that the interventions are delivered to samples that are either asymptomatic or show limited variability in mental health symptoms making it difficult to demonstrate intervention effects on these variables.

It is therefore encouraging that in an intervention study where participants (adults who had experienced sexual abuse as children) were screened to show psychological distress prior to the intervention (Freedman & Enright, 1996), the intervention produced significantly greater forgiveness, hope and self-esteem and decreased anxiety and depression relative to a wait list control group. Intervention with the wait list control group, showed a significant change for the group relative to the time the group had served as a control condition, and made the group indistinguishable from the experimental group. These changes were maintained over a 12 month period.

Summary and critique. Systematic data are emerging to supplement clinical insights (see Fitzgibbons, 1986) and phenomenological studies of forgiveness (Rowe, Halling, Davies et al. 1989). The demonstration of dose-dependent effects is encouraging even though it is mitigated somewhat by the heavy reliance on self-selected participants who do not exhibit clinically significant symptomatology. Because interventions are a relatively blunt experimental manipulation that may influence a number of variables, it will be important in future intervention studies to show that changes in forgiveness are correlated with changes in psychological well-being. Perhaps most importantly in the current context, intervention research has thus far focused on the individual

experience of forgiving and not the interactions that occur around forgiveness. The result is that most intervention research tells us little about how to help couples negotiate forgiveness in their relationships (Worthington & Wade, 1999). This is an important omission because repentance and apology (phenomena that involve interpersonal transactions) facilitate forgiveness and because, in the context of a relationship, forgiveness may involve numerous transactions between partners.

The limitations of the available data are more understandable when one recalls that less than a decade ago pioneering publications did not contain reference to any published empirical research on forgiveness (e.g., Hebl & Enright, 1993; Mauger et al., 1992). Clearly research on forgiveness is in its infancy and the jury is still out on the case for the importance of forgiveness in maintaining relationships and promoting relationship well being. This is not to imply that the case lacks evidentiary support. However, we believe that the existing database is most consistent with a view of the problem addressed by forgiveness, and how forgiveness might be promoted, that is different to what is typically found in the literature. We therefore turn to consider how relationship transgressions that give rise to forgiveness can be conceptualized and addressed as a public health problem.

#### Relationship transgressions as a public health problem: The way forward

Relationship transgressions have a significant impact on public health. For example, more people seek professional help for relationship problems than for anything else (Veroff, Kulka & Douvan, 1981). In a similar vein, it can be noted that while the divorce rate has stabilized in the 80s and trended downwards since then, it is still high (4.4 per 1,000 population, National Center for Health Statistics, 1995). Not all of these events are due to the inability to come to terms with a relationship transgression but even if only a small proportion are, it would reflect a significant public health problem.

Perhaps this is best illustrated by considering a particular relationship transgression, the extramarital affair, an event that can severely rupture a marriage or even end it (Spring, 1996). A nationwide survey shows how ubiquitous such affairs might be. A sample of 3,432 respondents aged 18-59 years was asked: "Have you ever had sex with someone other than your husband or wife while you were married?" On average, 25% of men and 15% of women answered in the affirmative. However, 37% of men aged 50-59 years and 19.9% of women aged 40-49 years answered yes suggesting that for lifetime prevalence the figures are higher. Considering the 20% refusal rate to answer the question, the figures may even be higher (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994). As these considerations make clear, many people will be touched by this serious breach of trust in their marriage as well as by other serious relationship transgressions. Given the potential for such events to precipitate serious mental health consequences (e.g., Cano & O'Leary, 2000), the result is a

widespread and important public health problem. Indeed, the magnitude of the problem is extensive enough to overwhelm traditional approaches to treatment delivery.

Our point is not to highlight the impact of extramarital affairs, serious those the effects may be. Rather, we hope to illustrate a simple point: traditional counseling approaches can't meet the public health challenge posed by this single relationship transgression. Assuming just 5% of marriages were impacted by an affair and required intervention, this would have yielded 2,799,950 cases at the time the survey was conducted. And assuming just 6 sessions of counseling, 13,550 therapists would be needed to work full-time (24 hours of weekly client contact @ 50 weeks a year) on this issue alone. Even if these resources were made available, many couples would by default (e.g., lack of financial resources, availability of counselor in geographical area) or desire (one or both partners find counseling unacceptable) not benefit from them and hence a different means of addressing this problem would be required. As these considerations suggest, we cannot rely on traditional models of therapeutic intervention alone if we are to address forgiveness in relationships in a meaningful way.

#### Characteristics of a viable intervention approach

Before turning to an alternative intervention approach, we briefly highlight some characteristics of a viable intervention for addressing the ubiquitous problem we have identified.

First, persons in need of help forgiving a partner may not be seeking help. This suggests that the traditional "waiting mode" familiar to counselors needs to be replaced by the "seeking mode" embraced by the community mental health movement (Rappaport & Chinsky, 1974). In contrast to waiting for clients to present at the office for diagnosis and treatment, the interventionist in seeking mode moves into the community taking on such nontraditional roles as developer of community programs, consultant to local groups, and evaluator of intervention efforts. A shift to seeking mode points to the importance of harnessing community resources in both identifying participants and in delivering the intervention. In the present context, this is particularly important because many potential beneficiaries of a forgiveness intervention are likely to be reached through natural community groups (e.g. religious organizations).

Second, persons in need of help forgiving may not have the financial resources to obtain professional help or be located in areas served by mental health care providers or persons who specialize in relationship problems. Therefore, any forgiveness intervention should be designed to reach people in a variety of settings (including rural and geographically isolated settings) and be viable for use in these settings. Thus, at a minimum, the intervention should be easily implemented, reasonably brief, and economic to implement. Ideally, it should involve a familiar process that occurs naturally in the community. This means that there is likely to be a need to look to a broader range of

persons (e.g., media specialists) and modes of delivery (e.g., distance learning) than is typical in traditional psychotherapy.

Third, at the same time as speaking to the above considerations, ethical considerations require that any intervention should represent best practice in terms of what is currently known scientifically about forgiveness and its facilitation. Perhaps two of the most important considerations here are that the intervention should:

(a) require the participants to spend time thinking about forgiveness as this seems to be related to the occurrence of forgiveness (with the corollary that simply exposing people to the transgression they experienced without facilitating forgiveness may be iatrogenic, Worthington, Sandage, & Berry 2000);

(b) include a psycho-educational component about what forgiveness does and does not entail. This is a common ingredient of forgiveness interventions that can serve both to avoid dangers likely to result from misconceptions about forgiveness (e.g. returning to a dangerous situation because reunion is confused with forgiveness) and to relieve psychological distress when someone feels the need to forgive a transgressor but finds themselves unable to do so because forgiveness is confused with something they may not want to do either consciously, or more often, unconsciously (e.g., condone transgressor's action).

Finally, it is important to remind ourselves that any intervention must lend itself to evaluation for without evaluation no program can be assumed to be effective. The notion that "something is better than nothing" is simply misguided, no matter how well intentioned the intervention. Bergin (1963) noted long ago that any intervention that has the power to help people has the potential to hurt them and the first principle of good practice is to avoid harm.

#### Towards a public health forgiveness intervention

Just the few considerations outlined in the last section make the development of an appropriate forgiveness intervention a challenging task. However, two observations take us a great deal of the way towards making it an achievable reality by helping to identify the form such an intervention might take.

Form of the intervention. First, as Gordon, Baucom and Snyder (2000) insightfully note, forgiveness in relationships is occasioned by transgressions that disrupt a partner's beliefs about the relationship, the partner, or the self and that such disruption is similar to that which occurs when a person experiences a traumatic life event (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). For example, on discovering an extramarital affair the betrayed spouse's assumptions are often disrupted (e.g., that the partner is trustworthy) and they may well feel that their world has become less predictable and controllable putting them at risk for (mental and physical) health problems that are known to be provoked by

traumatic experiences (Pennebaker, 1995). We do not share the view that forgiveness is only relevant to such contexts but we do agree that traumatic relationship experiences are most likely to lead partners to think explicitly about forgiveness (forgiveness may occur implicitly and ubiquitously in response to a broader range of negative partner behaviors). Nonetheless, Gordon et al.'s (2000) observation is particularly helpful because it points us in the direction of the literature on trauma and how it can be treated.

Second, there is a growing body of research showing that writing about past traumatic experiences has beneficial effects on mental and physical health (see Esterling, L'Abate, Murray & Pennebaker, 1999). This is particularly important as it speaks to several of the criteria we have identified for a public health forgiveness intervention. Writing, in the form of keeping a journal, is familiar and occurs naturally in the community, may be acceptable to people who would not consider counseling, is something to which most people have access, is cost effective, and can be tailored to allow people to deal with transgression at their own rates. Furthermore, a programmed writing intervention can be delivered broadly through traditional print media and also lends itself to delivery via the internet. This latter medium of delivery is particularly exciting because of its growing penetration of households throughout the world and because it allows greater control over the delivery of the intervention (time spent writing can be monitored precisely, writing can be analyzed on-line, and so on).

Having identified the form that the intervention might take we now need to specify the nature of the intervention. But any intervention is necessarily predicated on an underlying model of forgiveness and hence we turn briefly to this issue before specifying the nature of the intervention.

Model of forgiveness informing intervention. We have already offered several important observations about forgiveness. These include the need to acknowledge a transgression, identify that it is appropriate to feel negatively about being victimized, assert the right to better treatment, and a willingness to relieve the debt incurred by the transgressor. Moreover, we clearly distinguish forgiveness from related constructs such as reconciliation and reunion, on the one hand, and from forgiveness transactions between partners on the other. As a more detailed analysis is available elsewhere (Fincham, 2000), we limit ourselves to highlighting additional issues central to the proposed intervention.

Fundamental to the intervention is our analysis of forgiveness as a process that occurs over time and is characterized by a decrease in the probability of negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors towards the transgressor and an increase in their positive counterparts. However, this is not a linear, mutually exclusive process where, for example, positive thoughts replace negative ones. Rather, consistent with our research on relationship quality, positive and negative dimension are viewed as

relatively independent (see Fincham, Beach & Kemp-Fincham, 1997). Important determinants of these probabilistic intra- and inter-personal manifestations of forgiveness are the perceived nature of the injury, attribution of responsibility for the injury, the (individual and relationship) context in which it occurs, and the extent to which the hurt is related (consciously or unconsciously) to past injuries and ongoing partner behavior allowing, at one extreme, hurt to be occasioned by the mere presence of the partner. Each of these determinants can be further elaborated. For example, avoidance and revenge motives are increased when injury to self-image is greater, if moral injury (i.e. moral order has been slighted) is greater, when the injury arises from an intentional act in the absence of mitigating factors rather than a negligent act, when the transgression is viewed (symbolically or in concrete terms) as similar to past ones, and so on (see Fincham, 2000). Where appropriate we elaborate on these determinants in outlining the nature of the proposed intervention.

In light of this model, we argue that avoidance and revenge are not a viable means of lessening hurt because they do not help the victim (a) to create a broader framework within which the behavior of the partner can be reinterpreted or reattributed, (b) to integrate information in a manner that allows injury to self-image to be repaired, or (c) to incorporate new information about the perpetrator's perspective that allows moral injury to be decreased. In addition, avoidance and revenge do not allow the victim to grapple with new information at a sufficiently detailed level that the particular incident can be viewed on its own merits rather than "bundled" with many other incidents. Our analysis suggests that forgiveness might be facilitated by providing a structured set of exercises that facilitate detailed emotional processing of the transgression and one's own reaction to the transgression. Although there are a number of possible pitfalls in emotional processing of partner transgressions, it may be a necessary (if not sufficient) component for true partner forgiveness

Nature of intervention. The intervention we envisage is one that could be administered with guidance from paraprofessionals in the community and in a self-help format.

Getting started: Is this program for you? Whatever the format, the first component of the intervention would (a) screen out participants for whom the intervention is not appropriate and (b) help potential participants understand what is and is not offered by the intervention. Specifically, checklists that help determine the presence of psychopathology (e.g., Beck Depression Inventory) and relationship violence (e.g., Conflict Tactics Scale) should be completed and participants with scores above certain cut-offs advised of the need to obtain professional help. Although the determination of who will benefit is ultimately an empirical question to be resolved by appropriate research, it is important to have initial starting assumptions about the factors most likely to influence success. Because we view forgiveness as involving movement along two dimensions (avoidance and approach), and because we view the ease of forgiveness as being determined in part by explanations

and degree of injury to self-evaluation, these dimensions seem particularly important to monitor in future investigations of forgiveness. Persons who are unable to imagine giving up their avoidance and/or punishment of the partner, for example, may be less able to benefit from a highly structured, self-guided approach to facilitating forgiveness. Likewise, persons with extreme attributions of blame or who have suffered extreme injury to self-evaluation may require preliminary activities before they are ready to benefit from the proposed intervention. Accordingly, in addition to screening for mental health and relationship problems requiring treatment, it would also be desirable to screen participants on dimensions that may be related to readiness for a structured, self-guided intervention.

Following initial screening, potential participants can be asked to write a brief statement of what it is they wish to achieve from participating in the program. This exercise helps clarify for the participant what it is they are looking for and sets the stage for the two remaining elements of this first component of the program: a guided evaluation of whether the program is likely to be able to meet their needs and basic education about what forgiving another does and does not entail. These evaluation and education elements would be realized through use of the Socratic method. Having written down what it is they are seeking, participants review their statement with the help of a set of guided questions. Is there a specific hurt that the person is having difficulty overcoming? Or is the person seeking to come to terms with a relationship full of hurts that have accumulated over time and are still ongoing? If the latter, the person would be advised that the program is unlikely to meet their needs. In this case, they might be advised to either break the pattern of hurtful behavior into several particular illustrative incidents that might be more amenable to the current approach, or to pursue couple work with their partner to help address the pattern in some way before attempting to put the past behind them. Is the person seeking reconciliation? If so, they might be advised that forgiveness is different than reconciliation and encouraged to first work through the process of forgiveness fully before deciding if they truly wish to reconcile. They might also be advised that a more complete discussion of the costs and benefits of reconciliation will be provided after the forgiveness intervention. This would also provide an opportunity to present to participants information about the value of forgiveness to them individually, regardless of any effect on the relationship. As such, it provides an excellent opportunity for education about the nature of forgiveness.

A final component of the orientation phase of the intervention therefore would be to provide participants with a model of forgiveness that describes forgiveness as an act of strength and courage, but one that is often difficult and may take time. This may be a critical element of the intervention because persons who do not forgive from a position of strength may not forgive in a way that is helpful to them or to their relationship with the partner. Accordingly, a brief educational element would be an important final aspect of the orientation.

Getting going: Laying the groundwork for forgiveness. Consistent with our analysis of forgiveness, and building on the first component of the program, the next component is designed to help the participant write about the transgression and the hurt it engendered. Participants are encouraged to include details about sensations, thoughts, and feelings they may have had at the time. One goal of the exercise is to have participants confront directly any aspect of the event that might otherwise be avoided and so serve as a reason to continue avoiding the partner. Exposure therapies have been very successful in dealing with other patterns of avoidance and a writing format is common in such approaches (e.g., Calhoun & Resick, 1993). A second goal is to have the person acknowledge the hurt, recognize that it is undeserved, and embrace the view that they have a right to better treatment. They would also be encouraged to identify and write about the negative emotions prompted by the transgression. It is recommended that this exercise is done at a time when they feel calm and relaxed and that they attempt to retain this state during the writing. However, a relaxed state may be less important than the participant being able to write fully about the event, particularly about their feelings in regard to those aspects of the transgression that were most damaging to their self-evaluation or their sense of justice in the world. It is likely to be less helpful if participants write only of their conclusions about the perpetrator or the actions they have taken since the event to cope with it.

Two observations are important here. First, a moderate amount of negative emotion words in writing about trauma benefits health (high and low levels correlate with poorer health, Pennebaker, 1997). Second, simply thinking about or ruminating over the hurt may be iatrogenic (Worthington, Sandage & Berry, 2000). Hence a goal throughout the intervention is to facilitate writing that will prompt use of positive emotion words. Thus, in the context of embracing their right to better treatment, respondents are encouraged to highlight positive feeling about the self. In a similar vein, they are asked to write about the constructive ways in which they have coped with the transgression and the feelings that their coping has engendered. The elicitation of positive emotion is not only important because of the research on trauma; it is also important to ameliorate the fact that, by definition, transgressions denigrate the worth of the victim, and repairing injury to self-image is likely to be an important part of being able to forgive.

Although positive feelings about the self are important, in the context of relationships, positive feelings about the partner are also relevant. The next writing task addresses this issue. An important part of laying the groundwork for forgiveness is to (a) weaken the link between partner and the injury they caused and (b) to induce the victim to see the partner as a whole person and not just someone who transgressed against them. Weakening the link between partner and injury involves altering (but not severing) attributed responsibility. Attributed responsibility involves linking the

partner to their action and linking their action to the injury (partner→act→injury; see Fincham & Jaspars, 1980).

Weakening of the link between partner and act is addressed by asking the participant to write about the reasons for the partner's action assuming reasonable motives on the part of the partner. How did the partner view the situation and what was s/he thinking and feeling? How did the partner's experiences in life (e.g. in past relationships) influence his/her behavior? Weakening the second link between partner act and injury is addressed by asking participants to write down as many possible outcomes, both foreseen and unforeseen, of the partner's action as they can imagine. The victim is also asked to write about what s/he brings to the situation, particularly thoughts/past experiences that may not be known to the partner or recently communicated to him/her, that make the act especially hurtful to the victim.

In weakening both the partner-act and act-injury links participants are encouraged to write about the immediate situational context and the relationship context in which the act and injury occurred. According to the discounting principle in attribution theory, the extent to which alternative causes are present (e.g., work pressure, relationship tension) certainty as to the operation of the original cause (e.g., partner malice) will be lessened (Kelley, 1972). We also know that an increase in causal and insight words in the course of writing about a traumatic event is associated with improved health (Pennebaker, Mayne & Francis, 1997) and hence the goal here is not only to change attributed responsibility but also to increase insight into the event.

Finally, in preparing the ground for forgiveness, it is important for the victim to see the partner as a whole person. A final exercise in this component of the program is therefore to write about the partner first from the perspective of a friend or acquaintance who admires or likes the partner, and then to write about positive experiences with the partner. The victim is also prompted to develop a list of the partner's strengths and weaknesses. To ensure some balance, they can start with a weakness and be instructed that they should not add another until they have identified an initial strength and to continue in similar vein until the list is completed.

Getting going: Adopting a forgiveness orientation. Thus far, the issue of forgiveness has been addressed only in the initial phase of the program and only the groundwork for forgiveness laid. To facilitate the emergence of a forgiveness orientation, the issue of forgiveness again needs to be addressed explicitly along with what it does and does not mean to forgive. Here the victim's own humanity is important. S/he is asked to write about events when s/he hurt another and was grateful to be forgiven by the victim. What was it like to know that the victim has been hurt by his/her action? And how did the victim's forgiveness alter these feelings? If participants cannot identify actual events, they can be asked to imagine whether they might have hurt, or are likely to ever hurt, someone

without knowing about the harm that they caused. How would that feel? And what if they were to learn about the consequences of their action? And then how would it feel to be forgiven for what they did? The goal here is to help participants experience the ease with which they could occupy the role of perpetrator and how forgiveness not only liberates them from their own negative affect but also lays the groundwork, in conferring a gift on the perpetrator, for relationship reconciliation if that is a desired and prudent goal.

The next step is to actually commit to forgiving. In one intervention program, this takes the form of writing a letter of forgiveness as if the victim were going to send it to the perpetrator, by having the victim write a certificate stating the date of forgiveness, and by having the victim make a public statement about forgiving (Worthington, 1998). With the cautions that forgiveness is not granted on a given date (it is ongoing; only the decision to forgive can occur on a given date) and that a public commitment should only involve a trusted friend or confidant, we see considerable merit in incorporating such processes in our proposed intervention. Our certificate would be carefully crafted to help inoculate the participant from relapse by including statements that recognize the ongoing nature of the process and the steps that will be taken when the inevitable relapses occur in the process. This brings us to the final component of the intervention concerning persistence in the effort to forgive.

Keeping going: Forgiveness calls for persistence. The final component of the intervention is primarily future oriented in that it encourages writing about challenges to forgiveness. Thus, participants write about how they might react when they re-experience negative feelings and hurt associated with the transgression following their commitment to forgive. The idea is to plan for such lapses to mitigate their impact and to allow for further education about forgiveness (e.g., that periodic thoughts and feelings about the transgression are normative and are not the same as unforgiveness, that emotions cannot be ended though a decisions to end them but they can nonetheless be controlled when they occur).

Participants will also be encouraged to write about their experience of forgiving. This serves several functions. First, it serves to remind them of the task at hand. Second, it allows for reaffirmation of their commitment through reference to their certificate and written letter. Third, it allows participants to cycle back through earlier exercises if needed. Fourth, structured questions probe the person to think about whether the experience they are having pertains to the original transgression or whether additional transgressions are influencing their experience and might point to the need for professional help.

Two further written exercises are likely to be a particularly important. The first requires participants to write about what they have learned through experiencing the transgression and is

designed for them to find meaning in what they have suffered. This builds on prior writing exercises and is designed to help the person develop a coherent narrative about their experience, something that is known to be beneficial in responses to traumatic events (Esterling et al., 1999). A second, related exercise is to write about the changes they have experienced as a function of the decision to forgive, a task that is designed to reinforce forgiving in drawing attention to the release from (often persistent) negative affect.

Strengths and limitations of intervention. We have already noted several strengths of the proposed intervention, including its flexibility in both the mode of delivery (print media and electronic media) and adaptability to participant need (progress can be determined by responses to critical questions), its cost effectiveness, its similarity to a process that occurs naturally (keeping a journal), its adaptation to and delivery through community organizations, and its ease of evaluation (especially if delivered electronically). However, the program also exhibits the major weakness of extant forgiveness programs: it does not speak to the issue of forgiveness transactions between partners. Indeed, it does not capitalize on the fact that the transgression occurs in an ongoing relationship where the victim has direct access to the transgressor. This seems to be a serious omission and therefore deserves brief comment.

In the absence of research on forgiveness transactions, and without any knowledge of the participant's partner, it would be unwise to build any exercises into the intervention that includes interaction with the transgressor for at least two reasons. First, the transgressor may not view him/herself as having committed a wrong and therefore needing forgiveness. Any forgiveness transaction in such circumstances could easily promote conflict. Second, even where the transgressor acknowledges the transgression, the details of what happened are likely to differ between transgressor and victim as we know both engage in systematic, but differing, distortions of the original event (see Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Again, this creates the potential for conflict. Perhaps the best that can be done in this circumstance, is to have a parallel set of writing exercises designed to promote understanding of what people experience and what they go through when they feel they have been wronged by a partner. A transgressor could be referred to these exercises not because of their need for forgiveness but "to better understand their partner." At the same time, this concern raises the likely need to develop a companion writing program for perpetrators that could be pursued by persons coping with the fact that they might have committed a relationship transgression that has caused considerable distress to another.

### Conclusions

In this chapter we have identified forgiveness as a mechanism in the maintenance of relationships, explored objections to forgiving a partner's transgression, reviewed available evidence

on the benefits of forgiving and summarized research on interventions designed to facilitate forgiveness. We went on to argue that transgressions in relationships pose a public health problem and to identify an approach to forgiveness that might address this problem. The next step is to develop a detailed treatment protocol and to investigate the proposed intervention. Although this presents a major challenge, the potential payoff is great as the program is well suited to take advantage of the technological revolution that is afoot. The possibility of delivering an intervention to millions of couples throughout the world via the internet makes the road ahead both an exciting and daunting path to travel.

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#### Footnote

1 It is critical to distinguish the achievement of relationship reconciliation from the granting of forgiveness. Reconciliation, or the re-establishment of trust between partners, is an *interpersonal* process in which the behavior of both parties is necessary for its accomplishment whereas forgiveness is an *intrapersonal* process that focuses on the interpersonal but in which only the behavior of the forgiver is necessary for its accomplishment (relinquishing of motivation to avoid or retaliate). In short, forgiveness is important for understanding relationship maintenance because it can provide a platform for reconciliation between partners.

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