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INTRODUCTION

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Over the past 20 years, forgiveness has become an extremely popular topic for empirical studies and theoretical or clinical papers in the field of psychology. Social scientists, clinicians, and scholars in other fields (e.g., philosophy, theology, political science) have advanced many different definitions and meanings of forgiveness. Essentially, forgiveness can be classified into societal, therapeutic, and spiritual domains, each with different meanings (Shults & Sandage, 2003).

MEANINGS OF FORGIVENESS

In the *societal* domain, justice and fairness are primary referents, and forgiveness occurs when injustices are forgiven. For example, Nelson Mandela forgave his White jailors for 27 years of brutal treatment while incarcerated, even inviting one to his presidential inauguration (Govier, 2002, p. 111). Luis Perez Aguirre, a Jesuit priest in Uruguay who was repeatedly imprisoned and tortured for his human rights work, later met his torturer on the street and forgave him, even offering him assistance (Walker, 2006; Wessler, 1998). In many communal societies, forgiveness is enacted through formal rituals and often occurs between family groups. For example, in some tribal contexts

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Forgiveness and Letting Go in Emotion-Focused Therapy, by L. S. Greenberg and C. Woldarsky Meneses

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scripts about forgiveness and saving face can include restitution between families or clans, and the harmony of the group is often a highly valued motivation for forgiveness (Wangh, 2005). This is quite different from an individualistic emphasis on the personal benefits of forgiveness for the forgiver.

In the *therapeutic* domain, forgiveness relates to health and the healing of emotional wounds. Psychological definitions of forgiveness involve individuals attempting to forgive others to cope with the hurt and resentment of relational injuries. Here, people in therapy come to forgive others for painful emotional injuries (EIs), such as physical or sexual abuse, and for different forms of psychological maltreatment, neglect, and abandonment.

The *spiritual* domain refers to ultimate concerns and considers forgiveness to be spiritually transformative or good. Some notion of forgiveness can be found in most of the spiritual and religious traditions of the world. For many people, forgiveness is a sacred concept with meaningful referents in spiritual and religious texts, relationships with the Divine, and communal rituals.

These different understandings of forgiveness often overlap, but one thing is clear: Forgiveness has become a highly relevant social, personal, and spiritual topic.

A NONAUTHORITARIAN APPROACH TO FORGIVENESS

This book presents a therapeutic approach to interpersonal forgiveness, in emotion-focused therapy (EFT), that addresses interpersonal EIs. EFT is an experiential approach to forgiveness and stands in contrast to other more psychoeducational, cognitive interventions available in the field (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Sells & Hargrave, 1998). We might term EFT a nonauthoritarian approach to working with the emotions in the process of forgiveness because the therapist withholds judgment about what clients should be feeling or should be aiming for as their therapy goal. Rather than prescribing a path and teaching a set of skills to achieve forgiveness, we describe the empirically derived emotional change processes that lead to emotional transformation and present examples of these processes in action. We also discuss how therapists and counselors can facilitate these processes. Our attention is on the emotional impact of the different types of EIs that occur in people's lives, and the ultimate goal of our approach is to promote emotional transformation—by letting go, forgiveness, or both processes combined, or by holding the other accountable for wrongs done. Thus, this book and its emphasis stand in contrast to other forgiveness interventions that have been developed that focus on achieving forgiveness as the sole goal. Forgiveness in EFT is seen as one possible, optional path to resolution of EI. Accepting other positive outcomes, such as letting go and moving on or holding the other accountable, opens the door for considering “healthy unforgiveness,” which is currently downplayed in the field. As we highlight in the book, forgiveness may not always

be the desired outcome; rather, what is important is the resolution of EIs by transforming the anger, sadness, fear, and shame associated with the injury.

The notion of EI that we have developed and used in this book comes from our recognition of both the pervasive degree of trauma in our society and the extremely potent effect of trauma on mental health. Many people with different kinds of diagnoses have been found to suffer from traumas. A *trauma* is essentially an EI or many interpersonal EIs such as betrayal, abandonment, maltreatment, and abuse. Forgiveness has come to be seen as one possible path to overcoming these types of injuries.

THE ETHICS OF FORGIVENESS

Despite the variety of benefits that have been associated with forgiveness, many feminist critics and others have been wary of the ethics involved in the promotion of forgiveness. The spate of forgiveness promotion in the last decade has followed relatively quickly on the heels of several significant liberation movements, including civil rights and second wave feminism and the rise of queer politics. As Haaken (2002) noted, it may be no coincidence that, just when oppressed groups gain the strength to speak up and claim new rights, including the right to disengage from abusive relationships, the powerful (e.g., therapists and religious leaders) rediscover the virtues of forgiveness. There is some fear that in forgiving too widely, we waive our rights to a valuable form of moral and political protest. Others worry that the new ethics of forgiveness recapitulates a familiar and oppressive paradigm in which oppressed or violated groups and women, in particular, are taught the values of self-sacrifice and servility or concern for others at the expense of their own rights.

At the same time, there is an intuitive appeal of forgiveness based on a vision of morality that goes beyond formal duties and obligations to others and that imbues relationships as well as rights with value and significance. Forgiveness recognizes human imperfection and our capacity for change and improvement. When we forgive, we attempt to restore and revitalize moral relations between individuals in the aftermath of wrong rather than to sever them (Walker, 2006). This vision of repair, we feel, aligns well with feminist and other social justice orientations.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book is for practitioners of all types who work with people who have been emotionally injured. Specifically, it is for therapists and counselors who work directly in helping people resolve EIs. It is intended both for graduate students just starting out and experienced therapists and all practitioners in between, regardless of prior experience with EFT. Among other features, the book contains many details and examples of how to incorporate forgiveness

into an empty-chair dialogue technique. The book also outlines the empirical support for the task-analytically derived models of the change processes involved in arriving at forgiveness.

Chapter 1 provides an entrance to the book by first illustrating just how common EIs, interpersonal offenses, and bad interpersonal feelings are in our lives. We then present definitions and make important distinctions between forgiveness and unforgiveness, forgiveness and pseudo forgiveness, and forgiveness and reconciliation. We next set out to provide answers to the questions “Why forgive?” and “Must people forgive?” We also discuss situations in which forgiveness and interventions that prescribe it are not recommended.

In Chapter 2 we explicate the EFT approach and its main principles and concepts. EFT theory related to EIs and forgiveness is then presented, and several examples are provided indicating what the therapy and the therapeutic stance should look like.

Chapter 3 provides a deepening of the previous chapter and a more explicit focus on EFT for the resolution of EIs in individual therapy, providing a framework for treatment. EFT for forgiveness is grounded in the empty-chair work intervention for the resolution of unfinished business, which is a hallmark of EFT. This intervention has been extensively researched across several clinical problems. We explain how the process works session-by-session, including details of the therapeutic tasks keyed to client change processes and the homework assignments that accompany and aid the interventions. We discuss two distinct forms of positive resolution of EI derived from research on actual therapy cases—that of holding the other accountable or that of understanding or forgiving the injurer. Please note that in Chapter 3 and throughout the book, all clinical examples are taken from our experience. Names and other details of cases have been disguised to protect individuals’ privacy.

Chapter 4 presents research we conducted on the resolution of EIs in individual EFT. Two case illustrations are provided, and two paths of resolution of EI are presented: one through forgiveness and the other through letting go of the EI but not forgiving. We use transcripts to show specific steps of the client process and experience.

Chapter 5 is the first of the detailed sections on EFT for couples (EFT-C) dealing with EI. This chapter discusses the research on EFT-C and provides a concise description of EFT-C as well as its adaptation to the work on couple EI.

Chapter 6 discusses EIs and forgiveness in couple relationships from a theoretical perspective and also elaborates on the emotional processes in forgiveness and reconciliation. The phenomenology of forgiveness based on recent qualitative research with women who had overcome couple EI through forgiveness is also presented and provides further depth to the theoretical perspective presented in the chapter.

Chapter 7 describes the EFT-C forgiveness model derived from task analysis. The model and its components are elaborated, along with excerpts from real cases. We also discuss blocks on the path to forgiveness for couples.

Finally, Chapter 8 presents the case of a couple who successfully resolved their EI, with the injured partner forgiving her husband for his past affair. The case presents excerpts that illustrate the EFT-C forgiveness model. This case illustration acts to ground the theoretical and clinical aspects presented in the previous chapters.

We offer our concluding remarks to readers in the Afterword.