

Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Interpersonal conflicts are almost inevitable within families and groups of friends. Friends and family members are often deeply hurt in the course of their conflicts and sometimes there is a significant breach of trust. Occasionally someone will consider a certain offense unforgivable and will not seek reconciliation. Usually, however, people try to recover a sense of personal and relationship wellbeing by endeavoring to forgive and reconcile. **This can be a long and arduous process.**

Mutual hurts

Conflicts vary from brief disagreements that are hardly noticeable, to extremely destructive emotional and physical battles that last for years. During any major episode of conflict, all parties involved tend to feel unfairly treated by others. For instance, in an ordinary argument each person will try to protect the self from unfair accusations by using defensive statements or counter-attacks that may end up disqualifying and hurting the other. In these situations, both parties in the conflict feel wronged and both contribute to the hurt and suffering. Mutual wrongs, however, do not balance each other out and there is often a significant 'magnitude gap' with respect to the amount of injury inflicted by each party upon the other. One person usually ends up more traumatized. Thus, if genuine reconciliation is to occur, the person who inflicted the most harm needs to take more initiative to acknowledge mistakes, apologize, and take restorative action, while the other needs to take more initiative to forgive and restore the relationship. Once such a healing process gets started, reconciliation becomes more likely.

The need for vindication

In general, whenever a person has been hurt, there is a sense of their worth being diminished as a result of the injury. An automatic healing response to this is to try to restore one's worth by vindicating oneself. There are two contrasting methods whereby people can vindicate themselves. One is to diminish the worth of the other by retaliating or seeking justice by retribution. Ultimately, however, most people cannot feel good about themselves in hurting others; hence retaliation or revenge seldom achieves an adequate resolution. An alternative pathway to vindicate oneself is by focusing on methods to raise one's own worth. This can occur in different ways. In society at large, this might be achieved by increasing one's personal competence and making greater contributions to the community. For instance, a woman who has been repeatedly abused by her male partner may commit herself to initiate, develop and/or maintain women's shelters and child support services. Within families it might mean becoming more generous and making sustained efforts to restore one's relationships. One such effort might be to extend forgiveness towards the offender.

There are responses to injury between the extremes of revenge and forgiveness. Some of these can have useful effects. For instance, resentment can serve to energize efforts to hold offenders accountable for their offensive actions. For some people, vindication cannot be experienced without achieving some accountability. Others may choose to extend some forgiveness, by giving the offender another chance, but remain vigilant and wary. Each person's propensity to bear resentment or retaliate, as well as the strength of their disposition to rise above the hurt and to forgive, will influence the direction in which the relationship evolves.

Cycles of mutual violence

The impulse to retaliate and seek revenge is common when one is hurt. Acting on such an impulse, however, can obviously aggravate any conflict and make things worse. Hitting back (physically or emotionally) invites further retaliation and may lead to escalating cycles of violence. What is less obvious is how a 'credibility gap' about the nature and severity of the harm done can also make things worse, even when the desire to reconcile is present. A credibility gap refers to differences in understanding what actually happened in the conflict. One's own version of what happened is always experienced as more credible than the other's. A gap may arise through simple misinterpretation, different positions held in the relationship, differences in vulnerability, differences in meanings given to the events, etc. These differences, along with high levels of reactivity (arising from feelings of shame and guilt), create conditions for recurrent arguments about the original offenses.

Well-intentioned efforts to simply clarify what happened can turn out to be counter-productive. What is intended as clarifying feedback for accountability may be taken as unfair accusation. This activates self-protective responses of rejection of the feedback, denial of the complaints, and disqualification of the other, which in turn trigger stronger efforts by the other to make the point by intensifying the feedback. The tragedy of

this kind of systemic interaction is that attempts at clarifying the injustice can compel the victim to exaggerate the offenses committed and perpetrate injury upon the original perpetrator. In other words, the victim is inadvertently transformed into a perpetrator through the communication process. Both parties ultimately become both victims and perpetrators that results in more psychological and emotional violence. Thus, escalating mutual violence can arise through defensiveness as well as through retaliation.

Mutual forgiveness

One of the most effective antidotes to these escalating cycles of mutual violence is a cycle of mutual forgiveness. Forgiveness implies a willingness to abandon resentment, to relinquish any entitlement to retaliate or seek retribution, and to foster undeserved compassion, empathy, and generosity towards a perceived offender. **This is an incredible transformation for anyone to try to undertake.** Because of this, many people regard forgiveness as a spiritual practice. Indeed, all the major world religions encourage forgiveness. Psychotherapists and physicians are also increasingly endorsing forgiveness as an important healing process, both for relationships and for personal health. The generosity and love conveyed in forgiving affirms the value of persons who have offended, and often inspires them to respond in a forgiving manner as well.

Forgiveness and reconciliation differ

While there are important links between forgiveness and reconciliation, they are quite different phenomena.

Reconciliation entails the restoration of trust in a relationship that has been damaged. It is a major interpersonal achievement. Both parties must be involved and both must contribute to a resolution.

Forgiveness is something that is granted by the person who has been wronged. It can be carried out alone or in interaction with the offender. Forgiveness does not mean that reconciliation could or should occur. For example, a person may choose to forgive a former partner for a betrayal of trust that ended the relationship, but still choose not to reconcile. Yet, even in the absence of reconciliation, forgiveness is a worthwhile goal. It offers the person freedom from feelings of bitterness and resentment. On those occasions when I have been unable or unwilling to forgive, I have experienced myself actively avoiding the person who hurt me or relating to them in a very awkward and narrow manner. I have also experienced the enormous relief that ensues when one is eventually able to forgive.

It is interesting to note that **reconciliation does not necessarily mean that forgiveness has occurred** or will occur. One or both parties involved in a conflict may set aside the issue or episode and act as if it did not occur. This method of setting aside conflict is one way to avoid the potential complications of the credibility gap described above. As the memory of the offense and the associated hurt fades, the resentment is gradually abandoned as well. It is in this way that 'time heals'. Unfortunately, however, the memory and pain can readily be reactivated by a similar offense from the original offender or by someone else. If this happens, resentment may redouble and be out of proportion to the most recent offense. Thus the failure to address and reconcile old hurts leaves one carrying a greater risk for future conflict, as well as the ongoing burden of constraints and restraints due to unresolved resentment.

Steps to forgiveness

Some of the first steps involved in moving towards granting forgiveness include recognizing and acknowledging that one has been deeply hurt and identifying one's strong feelings about having been wronged. Simply saying 'I forgive you' may do little to relieve the pain and resentment. It is important that the person recognize and let go of certain needs and/or desires that may never be fulfilled as a result of the offense. The losses suffered through the injury need to be accepted. This may entail a great deal of emotional work. A considerable amount of cognitive work is also required in shifting one's perspective on the offender. Much of this entails thinking things through to the point that one can separate the offender from the offense and develop empathy and compassion towards the offender without condoning the offense itself. Eventually, when the person can construct a new understanding of the whole situation and of oneself and the person who offended within it, the stance of forgiveness can become stabilized. It is still possible to slip back into the old pain and a state of 'unforgiveness', so some situations require a process of re-forgiving again and again.

It is useful for people to recognize the benefits to themselves when they forgive. It is also helpful to identify some of the specific barriers to forgiveness that they may be up against. It is legitimate for an offender to ask for forgiveness, if there has been an acknowledgement of the mistakes made along with genuine expressions of regret and apologies, but it is inappropriate to demand forgiveness under any

circumstances. Indeed, any individual attempting to do so should be invited to take some leadership by forgiving the other person for not yet being willing or able to forgive.

Apology

It can be difficult for an offender to apologize. Offenders often feel too ashamed or guilty. They may be unable or unwilling to stop offending. They may have little or no awareness of the harm they have done. They may be so preoccupied with their good intentions that they fail to recognize the bad effects of their actions. They may be too afraid of humiliation and/or punishment if they admit to their mistakes. Or they may fear the costs of restorative action. They have to feel good about themselves before they can make an apology. What contributes to a genuine apology is a clear recognition of the harm done and of the injustice involved, an acknowledgement of the losses and painful experiences of the victim, an expression of deep regret and remorse, and an honest willingness to take restorative action. The absence of any one of these elements can constitute a barrier to the victim's ability to forgive.

Barriers to forgiveness

By the same token, a full and adequate apology may still not clear the way for a victim to forgive. There are many victim-based barriers to forgiveness. These may include overwhelming negative emotions, fear that the transgression will be repeated, assumptions that one needs to forget if one forgives, and fears of appearing weak or gullible. In some situations there may be a strong belief that justice will not be served by forgiving and that the transgression is unforgivable. On the other hand, sometimes the status of 'victim' confers certain benefits which could be lost if one forgives. For instance, one might lose the right to criticize, lose the right to retaliate, lose the right to seek compensation, or lose the right to hold some moral advantage over the perpetrator.

Trust

Full reconciliation may still not occur even when apologies have been extended and accepted, forgiveness has been granted and received, and both parties have a strong desire to reconcile. Reconciliation implies that there has been a prior breach of trust in the relationship and that this trust has been restored enough for the relationship to move into more maturity. Given the centrality of trust in achieving reconciliation, it is useful to examine what might be entailed in bringing it forth. There are two fundamental components of the trust that one person extends towards another. The first has to do with the perceived motivation of the other. In order to trust the other, one has to believe that the other has good intentions towards the self. This is quite obvious and straightforward. The second component of trust is less apparent and has to do with behavioral competence. In order to trust the other, one has to believe not only that they have good intentions towards the self, but that they also have sufficient ability to act effectively to implement those motives. It is this second component that is usually lacking when it seems that reconciliation should be possible but has not yet been realized.

Lack of competence

Remembering past mistakes and what has been learned from them is important if one wants to avoid making them again. However, the locus of remembering needs to be in the right place to do its work. A lack of competence can be in maintaining clear boundaries or a need to take more responsibility in actively remembering the past.

Self-forgiveness

People need to learn from mistakes and to hold themselves accountable. This often requires 'giving yourself a break'. Self-empathy and self-scrutiny can help. Perhaps it is partly because of the beneficial effects of progressive self-accountability through 'unforgiveness', that self-forgiveness is so difficult for some people to embrace. It is not easy to escape deeply entrenched patterns of behavior that have become part of one's personality, and ongoing negative feelings towards oneself about a problematic pattern can be a generative source of corrective knowledge and energy for change.

At the same time, however, undue and unnecessary suffering can occur when strong negative feelings are persistently directed against the self. For instance, intense guilt feelings about wrongdoing can turn towards self-loathing, spill into one's identity and become transformed into pervasive shame. Additional negative memories may be activated and can join to intensify self-demeaning thoughts that have debilitating and paralyzing effects. Living in the grip of tangles of shame and guilt is extremely oppressive. Needless to

say, other family members and friends can become enmeshed in, and oppressed by, such entanglements of shame and guilt as well. The viability of close relationships may become threatened. In such situations, movement towards self-forgiveness could be very therapeutic.

One major contribution towards forgiving oneself is to experience forgiveness from those one has hurt. For persons with a strong spiritual orientation, forgiveness from religious leaders or from their God can have profound effects. It is often useful to focus on teasing out, disentangling, and redefining the specific emotions of shame and guilt. Guilt feelings may easily be mistaken for shame, and vice versa. The pathway for deconstructing shame differs significantly from that for deconstructing guilt.

Shame tends to be more closely associated with one's identity and sense of self. The ultimate sources of shame are external to the self. Shame can arise directly from shaming practices engaged in by significant others, or indirectly through judgmental cultural beliefs and values that have been imposed or are passively internalized. To escape pathological shame, it is extremely helpful for a person to recognize the injustice of such shaming and to identify their own acts of resistance against this injustice, no matter how small they might be. To break out of shame patterns, one must honor their self and respect and appreciation will eventually replace the shame.

Guilt, on the other hand, can be associated with specific behaviors, whether they are acts of commission or of omission. To deconstruct guilt, one must clearly recognize and acknowledge the mistakes made. As they accept responsibility for these mistakes, express regret, offer apologies, and take restorative action, a gratifying shift occurs within the person from humiliation towards humility. Self-forgiveness results in a form of liberation that releases emotional energy to invest in further reconciliation, and can add more life to their lives and their connectedness with others.

text taken from "Enabling Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Family Therapy"
By Karl Tomm – University of Calgary

Your assignment: Turn this in when we are done reading, please.

Write about your own experiences with forgiveness and reconciliation – past, present, future –

- *Have you ever forgiven someone?*
- *Have you ever been forgiven by someone?*
- *Are you still in the process?*
- *Is it difficult work?*
- *Are you able/unable to forgive?*
- *Have you ever forgiven yourself?*
- *Are there any relationships you want reconciled in your life? How can you do it?*
- *Tell any of your personal stories which relate to the topics of Reconciliation and Forgiveness.*
- *Write about your plans and process for forgiveness and reconciliation in the present and future.*