

Symposia: Integration of Spirituality in Health Care Practice

## Teaching forgiveness - a novel therapeutic intervention to promote health?

### Introduction

A Case study

In fall of 2006, Mrs H.W., an 80 year old but still very active lady, who suffered for 16 years from high blood pressure came to my office. Due to chest pain in 2001, she had a coronary catheterization, which showed a diffused sclerosis of the coronary arteries but was not relevant to stenosis. Mrs W. was treated with **Aspirin**, **Atenolol** 50mg and **Enalapril** 10mg. Over the last weeks her blood pressure increased, so I added **Torasemid**, though without success. She then reported daily chest pains, described as pressure on her chest, like a stone, and she was limited in her physical activity. I involved a cardiologist, who recommended better management of her hypertension.

Mrs W. was now on a regimen with a beta-blocker, ACE-inhibitor and a diuretic. The next step was to add **Amlodipin**, a Ca-channel-blocker. Mrs W. did not feel better and her blood pressure fluctuated from a high of 200/121, to a low of 108/87.

I asked myself what to do next? What to do to prevent these hypertensive peaks and also to prevent Mrs. W. from having problems with hypotension? What would you do next? Would you, in such a situation, take into consideration to teach forgiveness?

I did. We started a forgiveness training and soon Mrs. W.'s chest pain stopped and her blood pressure normalized. 18 months later her Blood pressure, under the original treatment with Atenolol an Enalapril, is 130/80!

My way to forgiveness training is a short way. "Spirituality, Culture & Health", was the title of the Healthy People Congress held at Loma Linda University in March, 2004. There, Dick Tibbits, gave a short presentation of his interesting study done at Florida Hospital: Hypertension, reduction through forgiveness training. I work part time as director for the health department of the SDA-Church in the German Speaking part of Switzerland. I feel obliged to thank Dick Tibbits for the permission to translate his material and to work with it.

In my presentation I will give you an overview of this study. I will also introduce you to this kind of forgiveness training and I will discuss our experience with this approach.

### **Hypertension reduction through forgiveness training.**

Tibbits D, Ellis G, Piramelli C, Luskin F, Lukman R  
*J Pastoral Care Counsel* 2006, **60(1-2)** :27-34

The objective of this study was to determine if patients with diagnosed stage-1 hypertension could benefit by a forgiveness training program to achieve measurable reductions in anger expression and blood pressure. Twenty-five participants were randomly divided into wait-listed control and intervention groups. The control group monitored blood pressure while the intervention group participated in an 8-week forgiveness training program. At the end of eight weeks, the wait listed group became an intervention group.

Those who received forgiveness training achieved significant reductions in anger expression when compared to the control group.

This anger reduction was highly significant.

While reductions in blood pressure were not achieved by all the participants, those participants who entered the program with elevated anger expression scores did achieve significant reductions in blood pressure.

Here we see the achieved blood pressure reductions ranked in order by the five highest reductions in anger expression scores.

Hypertension is a complex multi-factorial disease. Hence, the fact, that not all participants achieved a reduction in blood pressure is not astonishing. If anger is not a cause of your hypertension, then a reduction in anger will not help you.

However, this study demonstrated a positive correlation between anger reduction and blood pressure reduction. Tibbits draw the conclusion, that forgiveness training may be an effective clinical intervention for hypertensive patients with elevated levels of anger.

### **The forgiveness training program (learn to forgive – for the sake of your health)**

... as it is presented in Switzerland and Austria by the "Liga Leben und Gesundheit" and in Germany by the "Deutscher Verein für Gesundheitspflege".

Forgiveness is often settled in a religious context where it comes from. Nearby all religions teach us, that we should forgive: non teach us how to forgive.

Our training program consists of 7 2-hour-lessons where we communicate information and guide the participants through a process.

We start by declaring the foundations of our course: anger kills, forgiveness reduces anger, resulting in better health.

Speaking about anger, we collect the experiences of our participants, but we refer also to specific literature as the book ANGER KILLS by Redford and Virginia Williams.

This book contains a report of an interesting study of the University of North Carolina. 255 25-years old doctors had taken the MMPI during their time at medical school. Survival rate after 25 years shows big differences between the participants who scored for low hostility (less than 14) or the ones who scored for high hostility (14 or more).

Such research led to the acceptance of emotional factors, such as anger not only as a risk factor but as a predictor for coronary heart disease.

Most participants have already experienced positive effects of forgiveness in their lives. Therefore, they understand that forgiveness reduces anger and improves wellbeing and health.

Our comprehension of human beings is to see each individual as a whole person, a unity of body, mind and spirit.

Mind and body are strongly connected. The mind's perception is the body's reality. What we are feeling and what we are thinking affects our body.

Our body is wired to respond. It was documented in a laboratory test, that rehearsing hurt memories increases blood pressure, heart rate, skin conductance and brow muscle tension. Imaging forgiveness reverses all these measures.

Resentment is re-feeling the original anger.

Anger cannot be stored like baggage. The only reason anger persists is because we rehearse the injury, hence, renew the anger and intensify it.

Forgiveness is a learned skill. We discuss wrong concepts or misunderstandings of forgiveness like forgetting, excusing, denying, reconciling and others.

We differentiate between three dimensions of forgiveness: interpersonal or relational forgiveness, intrapersonal forgiveness and transcendental or spiritual forgiveness.

In our training program we focus on the intrapersonal dimension.

It is best, when you reach forgiveness in all three dimensions. But when you don't succeed to forgive in the intrapersonal dimension, then you will not succeed to forgive in the relational dimension. (explain slide)

We define forgiveness in a practical way:

Forgiveness is the process of reframing one's anger from the past with the goal of recovering one's peace in the present and revitalizing one's purpose for the future. Each part of this definition is important and is discussed during the program.

The first step is to reframe one's anger from the past, which means changing, modifying, correcting or adjusting your memories. This concept is best understood when you consider how a frame changes your perspective on a picture. A small frame focuses your attention on a very specific aspect of the total picture, while a larger frame allows you to see the whole picture.

Robert Enright lists five questions which are helpful for reframing the past:

1. What was life like for him or her when growing up?
2. At the time of the offence, what was life like for the person?

3. Are you able to tell the story of your relationship with this person in a broader sense than the offence itself?
4. What is the person like in the global perspective? (as a member of the community)
5. What is the person like as you take a cosmic perspective? (religious or spiritual p.; as God would see this person?)

When I named reframing as the first step, I didn't mean, that our program is a 7, 12 or 17 step program to go through and arrive at the aim. I much rather compare our program to a toolbox.

If you have only one hammer in your tool-box, then every problem has to become a nail. Our program is like a tool-box with a lot of different tools. Participants may get acquainted with the different tools and may gather first hand experience on how to use them effectively.

Our tool-box includes tools such as:

- Understanding forgiveness
- Reframing
- Relaxation
- Understanding anger
- Correcting distorted A-C-thinking
- Using assertiveness to reduce anger
- Understanding and reducing unenforceable rules
- Finding new goals

And some additional tools.

Forgiveness helps you to deal with your hurts from the past, but it does not protect you from new wounds. You need not to live your life only in fighting or fleeing, there is a third choice, to live assertively.

Forgiveness often starts with an insight: vengeance **hurts you** more than the other person while forgiveness **helps you** more than the other person.

When you do not forgive you are in effect handcuffing yourself to spend your time with the person you do not want to be with.

Forgiveness is the power to heal the wounds of the past we cannot change. Forgiveness is like a journey, it needs time. We forgive, when we are ready to be healed.

For a deeper understanding of this kind of forgiveness training I recommend you to read Dick Tibbits book "Forgive to life".

### Case study

At a special Forgiveness Workshop in Germany, Summer 2006, I was shocked by lady X's comment. This WS was a shorter than usual program, as we had only 2 lessons a day at 1¼ hours each, during this three day WS. More than 30 people participated. At the beginning of the second lesson lady X declared: "There are

things that happen that you can never forgive. This is my problem. My son works as a pastor and his daughter was sexually abused and then committed suicide. I tried and worked hard but such things are unforgivable."

For me teaching "forgiveness is a learned skill and all things are forgivable", her statement was like a MCA (most critical accident). Will lady X succeed to forgive or not? This was the question I felt being raised by the whole group. When you have larger groups and less time, then you have less possibilities to work with each participant's story. The program focuses then mainly on sharing information.

At the end of the program, lady X confessed freely, that she was not at the point to forgive, but that she gained new hope now was willing to start the journey of forgiveness.

One year later, in summer 2007, she greeted me at the same camp and reported, that she got the point. She took all our material, went to a psychiatrist and worked it through. She forgave. She felt free. She looked ten years younger!

With our forgiveness training programs we do not follow a research strategy. We focus to involve the public to a low cost great benefit program. Are such programs really effective?

Tibbitts' findings corresponded with other Intervention studies, where forgiveness training was shown to be effective. Here are some examples:

Forgiveness training is effective for all kind of people, young and elderly, males and females, Catholics and Protestants, problems with addictions, somatic problems like heart disease and relational problems such as being betrayed.

*Elderly women who felt uncared for (Hebl & Enright 1993)*  
*College students of neglectful parents (Al-Mabuk et al. 1995)*  
*Clergy, struggling with interpersonal issues (Van Loon 1997)*  
*Adult children of alcoholics (Osterndorf 2000)*  
*Individuals in drug rehabilitation center (Lin 2001)*  
*Male veterans with heart problems (Waltman 2003)*  
*People in recovery from chemical dependency (Shapiro 2002)*  
*Adolescent girls who were victims of aggression (Park 2003)*  
*Women abused as children (Hebl & Enright 1996)*  
*Men whose partners had abortions (Coyle and Enright 1997)*  
*Partners of unfaithful lovers (Rye 1998)*  
*Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland, who have lost family members to political violence (Luskin 2002)*

Wade, Worthington and Meyer published in Worthington's Handbook of Forgiveness (2005) a meta-analysis of group interventions to promote forgiveness. They included 27 studies (from 1995 to 2004) with a total of 39 forgiveness interventions, 10 alternate treatments and 16 no-treatment control groups. They wrote:

"The data appear to speak clearly: Forgiveness interventions are effective."  
(Handbook 436)

Even if many questions are not yet answered at least two conclusions can be drawn:

1. Explicit forgiveness interventions appear to promote forgiveness more than general treatments.  
This implies that for therapists to help clients as fully as possible, it may be necessary to introduce forgiveness explicitly.
2. Full interventions were more predictive of larger effects than were either partial or no treatments...  
This suggests that providing a coherent treatment, rather than a smattering of disjointed interventions, may lead to better outcomes. (Handbook 435.436)

Worthington ends his handbook of forgiveness in giving specific advice to his different types of readers. He says:

"If you are a practitioner, you can use powerful interventions to help families, adults, children, those who have been victimized, and those who have been traumatized. You can invest your time and effort in running forgiveness groups or using forgiveness in counselling, family life education, and community prevention."  
Handbook, 570

That is just what we experience with our forgiveness training programs.

Last week I got an email of one of our forgiveness trainers. She wrote: "I enjoy to do this work, it is a wonderful thing."

We are all hurt at some point in our lives – that is why forgiveness concerns each one of us!

Let me close with some questions:

Seeing that forgiveness has an effect:  
How can we integrate the concept of „Forgiveness“ into therapy or healthcare?

Considering its effects as underlining Aaron Antonovsky's concept on "Salutogenesis" promoting health and a strong sense of coherence.

Could we integrate forgiveness:  
–into the academic curriculum of disciplines such as medicine, nursing, psychology, sociology etc.?  
– into the curriculum of basic education at our schools?

Thank you for your attention.

Dr. med. Ruedi Brodbeck  
Hauptstrasse 4  
CH-3422 Alchenflüh  
+41 (0) 34 445 37 66

[ruedi.brodbeck@hin.ch](mailto:ruedi.brodbeck@hin.ch)