

THE COMPLEXITY OF FORGIVENESS: PAIN, ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESTORATION

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ABSTRACT

From the earliest moments of life, our well-being is shaped by the diverse relationships we form and experience, creating intricate bonds that influence our overall wellness. This article delves into the intricate nature of forgiveness, examining both interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects within the context of emotional and psychological pain from harmful acts. Drawing on principles of restorative justice, mental health, and trauma-based practices, it explores how relationships can evoke a range of emotions—from pain and restoration to despair and hope.

The authors bring insights from their extensive fieldwork spanning various settings, including prisons, legal systems, healthcare, social services, and human services programs. Immersed in communities such as incarcerated individuals and those impacted by homelessness, they offer valuable lessons for professionals within the health/human/legal services fields. They emphasize the importance of facilitating forgiveness with mindful care, recognizing its diverse outcomes among individuals and communities. This article underlines that forgiveness is a nuanced process, devoid of a universal timeframe or a one-size-fits-all approach.

The discussion extends to the significance of boundaries, particularly in cases of deep trauma where forgiveness alone might not lead to complete healing. Boundaries, the authors suggest, can complement forgiveness, aiding in self-preservation and building resilience. Through diverse case illustrations, professionals within the health/human/legal services fields in wellness fields gain insights into ways of fostering well-being.

While acknowledging the value of forgiveness, the article advocates for recognizing and respecting alternative paths to healing. It encourages a continued exploration of forgiveness's complexity, from individual to societal levels, including the impact of systemic oppression. The authors emphasize curiosity and mindful engagement as transformative tools, advocating for a broad perspective on healing possibilities that honor forgiveness while embracing diverse approaches.

KEY WORDS

Forgiveness, Accountability, Restoration, Trauma, Wellness, Health Services

Abbreviations: Restorative Justice (RJ).

The well-being of individuals, groups, and communities is profoundly shaped by the dynamics of diverse relationships. From the moment of birth, humans enter into networks of interconnected bonds that play crucial roles in their overall wellness. Occurrences in relationships can promote joy and grief, hope and despair, as well as pain and restoration.

Through the years, these authors have immersed themselves in a range of environments and populations, including individuals and families who are or have been incarcerated, those being impacted by homelessness, and those facing other adversities in diverse contexts. Their work is rooted in principles of restorative justice, mental health, and trauma-based practices. Within their engagements with individuals, groups, and communities, they have closely examined the complexities of interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness in relation to the emotional and psychological pain caused by harmful acts. They have also explored the role of accountability and the potential for restoration. This article will delve into some of these complexities, as well as provide ideas that *professionals within the health/human/legal services fields* (i.e., professionals and service organizations involved in delivering health, human services, and legal assistance with the aim of fostering physical, emotional, mental, and social wellness) can consider when aiding those they serve.

This article underscores valuable lessons drawn from the authors' fieldwork across diverse settings (such as prisons, legal, health, social, and human services programs) and various circumstances involving individuals, groups, and communities served. Through numerous observations, the authors have discerned that the intricate nature of forgiveness demands attention, particularly if we aspire to heal longstanding wounds and promote individual and societal well-being. These observations emphasize that facilitating forgiveness with mindful care, attentiveness, and adaptability can serve as a catalyst for preventing further harm. Nevertheless, it's crucial to note that forgiveness cannot be forced, and it might not serve as the immediate mechanism that some individuals, groups, or communities choose to employ in seeking restoration from emotional or mental distress. In essence, forgiveness proves to be a complex process, with no universal timeframe, varying degrees of attainment, if attained at all, and no one-size-fits-all approach. Diverse case illustrations are provided throughout this article to exemplify the content and observations being discussed.

Forgiveness and its Complexities

The exploration and processing of interpersonal forgiveness and intrapersonal or self-forgiveness have traditionally been subjects of consideration and discussions in trauma research and practices (Balkin et al., 2021; Finch, 2006; Kleinot, 2011). These ideas have extended into a variety of service approaches, including Restorative Justice (RJ) programs (Armour & Umbreit, 2018; Shapland, 2016). Initially designed to address the consequences of criminal acts, promote restoration for those who have suffered harm, and ensure accountability for those responsible for the harm (Toews, 2006; Zehr, 2015), RJ practices have transcended their origins within the legal system and has been used in schools, work programs, and communities. Witnessing how attention has been given to the intricacies of forgiveness within the context of the legal system, particularly through RJ practices, as well as other community settings, serves as a key reminder that pain resulting from harm knows no bounds and requires careful attention to its far-reaching effects.

A Perspective of Forgiveness

Viewed through the perspectives of these authors, the experience and practice of forgiveness emerges as multifaceted and multi-layered. Forgiveness, by its nature, possesses diverse interpretations and experiences that vary among individuals. This complexity fosters humility and encourages a thoughtful curiosity in its exploration. While certain shared aspects or similarities may exist in forgiveness experiences or practices, professionals in health – human – legal services must exercise caution to avoid overgeneralization to the extent that unique situations are overlooked. Adopting a generalized approach to forgiveness may hinder the recognition of individualized circumstances, potentially influencing the healing process for the individuals, groups, or communities being served.

Over the years of actively engaging in mental health, trauma, and the legal system, the authors have discerned a set of shared elements associated with the deliberate practice of self-forgiveness and forgiveness toward those responsible for a harm. While the past actions leading to a harm are unalterable, the ensuing consequences can often be approached in a manner conducive to healing. By acknowledging the grief (i.e., a

distressing emotional response related to loss of a loved one, the end of a relationship, significant life changes, etc.), pain stemming from the actions as well as mindfully recognizing the wounds inflicted or reactivated, individuals may diminish the hold or power that the initial act still exerts on them and/or their community. Ultimately, the intentional focus on grief, pain, and wounds can shift one's attention to the need for managing and learning how to dismantle the lingering of agonizing emotions and mental struggles.

Pain (i.e., an uncomfortable – distressful physical, emotional, and/or mental sensation, ranging from mild to severe agony and caused or reactivated by a harmful behavior, action, and/or encounter) is experienced in multiple forms, ranging from the hurt that is produced when one feels betrayed by a friend who has broken one's trust, the agony inflicted by a sexual assault or murder, to the torture produced by systematic forms of injustices (Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2017; Zvolensky et al., 2022). Pain, while uncomfortable and distressful, also serves as a protective factor, a means for alerting the body and mind of potential and/or already inflicted harm as well as stimulating responses to avoid or address the source of the pain. Recognizing that a harmful action can manifest diverse forms of pain (i.e., physical, emotional, psychological) and that pain can generate different experiences, opens the door to acknowledging that the experience of forgiveness can similarly take diverse paths as well. Thus, the experience of forgiveness is complex as is the process of restoration from pain.

Interpersonal Forgiveness and Intrapersonal or Self-forgiveness

Forgiveness has been defined in multiple ways. Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus (1996) defines forgiveness as the act of relinquishing resentment or the inclination to punish, essentially pardoning an offense or offender. Frequently, forgiveness is intertwined with individual endeavors to overcome past interpersonal wounds or injuries by voluntarily letting go of perceived negative emotions (e.g., resentment) or operating pain (Baures, 1996; Hope, 1987). Forgiveness has been perceived as a process involving letting go of the desire to retaliate and inflict harm (Pingleton, 1997). Several researchers have underscored the need to avoid mistaking forgiveness with other interrelated experiences such as pardoning a harm, making an apology, forgetting the event and harmful behavior, or seeking reconciliation (Auerbach 2004; Cherry 2004; McCullough et al., 2000). It is important to recognize that while often interconnected, each of these experiences has its distinct meanings and implications. In a nutshell, forgiveness involves releasing painful and distressful emotions. Importantly, it doesn't necessarily hinge on receiving an apology, granting pardon, achieving reconciliation, or cultivating forgetfulness.

In this context, the authors would like to make a distinction between interpersonal forgiveness and intrapersonal or self-forgiveness. While it is possible for a person, group, or community to, at times, simultaneously experience both dimensions of forgiveness, these processes often entail distinct relationships and focuses. Interpersonal forgiveness is seen as an active commitment that can promote the cultivation of an ability to release oneself from inflicted pain, anger, resentment, or the desire for vengeance resulting from the wrongdoings or offenses committed by others. On the other hand, intrapersonal or self-forgiveness involves genuine remorse or sorrow gradually restored through a gained ability to liberate oneself from the shame and guilt arising from harm or wrongdoing against others or oneself.

While interpersonal forgiveness often plays out in the dynamic interactions between a minimum of two people, intrapersonal or self-forgiveness frequently mirrors the solitary journey of an individual as they grapple with their own actions and strive to recover from the pain they have caused. In the context of interpersonal forgiveness, gaining the ability to heal pain, relinquish anger, hostility, resentments, and thoughts of vengeance means no longer defining one's life journey by the wounds inflicted by others. This gradual emancipation can liberate individuals, groups, or communities from the burdensome preoccupation with potentially hurtful thoughts and sensations.

Interpersonal forgiveness is exemplified through instances where individuals overcome domestic violence victimization. On the other hand, intrapersonal forgiveness implies a process of acknowledging and reconciling with the effects of one's wrongdoings. Within the context of intrapersonal forgiveness, an individual or group may play the roles of both victimizer and victimized. Instances of intrapersonal forgiveness may involve individuals grappling with the repercussions of having victimized another through having committed murder or having inflicted self-harm.

Both interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness do not imply overlooking, justifying, or tolerating the behavior that led to harm. Instead, both can be transformative, encouraging a renewed approach to life. Furthermore, a person, group, or community can be encountering the experiences and processes of interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness simultaneously, as exemplified by a case where a person, group, and/or community is harmed, and the ripple effect is the harming of others. Understanding the unique experiences and processes of interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness helps in recognizing the nuanced aspects of the forgiveness journey.

Barriers to Forgiveness

Research have shown that the practice of forgiveness has benefits, such as decreasing the potential for depression (Brown, 2003), reducing stress and anxiety in our lives (Toussaint et al., 2016), as well as decoding painful memories that can be harmful for promotion of ongoing cognitive wellness (Witvliet et al., 2001). Hence, the process of forgiveness is not to be approached as a simple task.

Approaching Forgiveness

Recently, a colleague asserted that “forgiveness is a simple choice.” Some researchers argue that forgiveness is undeniably impacted by choices, but it is far from being “a simple choice” (Duff & Mikoski, 2013; Lander, 2020; Zembylas, 2012). While decisions regarding forgiveness are often made even in the throes of intense pain, as individuals seek restoration from the remorse or shame stemming from their own actions or the emotions provoked by another's wrongdoing, the act of forgiveness entails a cultivated ability to engage in *emotional flexibility* (Croft et al., 2021-03; Heshmati et al., 2023); that is the capacity to recognize, adapt to, and manage a range of emotions in a balanced and constructive manner. Additionally, the experience and process of forgiveness requires cognitive skills, including the intentional, sensitive, and strategic processing and dismantling of emotions.

Individuals may express a desire to forgive and move on, yet struggle with the process, beginning with not knowing where to start. Take the case of Anthony, a 44-year-old whose father fell victim to a gang-related shooting when he was just 16. Anthony admitted, “For years, my anger consumed me. It wasn't until I lost everything and found myself homeless that I realized I needed assistance.” Anthony acknowledged that his pursuit of retribution often clouded his judgment.

Another colleague put forth the notion that “we all have the ability to forgive.” While this might be a matter of semantics, these authors’ observations have led them to distinguish between having the potential to develop the capacity to learn how to forgive and having an inherent ability to practice forgiveness. While we all may have the potential, not everyone has cultivated an awareness of what that entails or the ability to put forgiveness into practice. Possessing the ability to practice forgiveness suggests that one has acquired strategies and cultivated skills. The authors propose that it is crucial to bear in mind that the practice of forgiveness involves an initial introduction to its complexities and continuous learning. Despite the number of times that a person has been confronted with an urge or need to practice forgiveness, circumstances are likely to require different thought processes, skills, and/or strategies.

Meet Elizabeth, a 55-year-old woman navigating her second divorce triggered by her husband's infidelity. Expressing her emotional turmoil, Elizabeth emphasized, “It feels like I'm learning to crawl again. Going through this experience for the second time doesn't make it any easier.” Elizabeth’s struggles extended beyond the anger and resentment towards the men to whom she had been married. She uncovered that her most profound anger and resentment were directed inward, stemming from her decisions to give both relationships numerous chances fueled by a fear of solitude and experiencing loneliness.

When collaborating with individuals navigating the intricate terrain of forgiveness, the authors suggest that providers in health, human services, and legal fields could embrace mindful engagement as a foundational approach to promote individual health and wellness (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Macaulay et al., 2022). Mindful engagement, in this context, entails a dedicated commitment to actively listen, employing thoughtful solicitation questions like “Can you share about your experiences?” or “Can you help me understand your perspective?” It involves transforming assumptions into inquiries rather than definitive conclusions and judgments.

Adhering to the practice principle of mindful engagement establishes a groundwork for providers to approach each situation with curiosity rather than a mindset confined by the belief of "I know best." The authors have observed that mindful engagement encompasses the development of several skills applicable to health, human, and legal service advocates when serving others. These skills include *intentional attention regulation* – focusing deliberately on what individuals, groups, or communities are expressing and undergoing; *non-judgmental observation* – recognizing emotions and sensations without immediately attaching labels or value judgments; and *emotional regulation* – acquiring skills like mindful breathing, coupled with open-ended questions, to assist those being served in identifying, acknowledging, and addressing their emotions and their impacts (Maroney, 2011; Pinna & Edwards, 2020).

The Ability to Forgive

In the realm of forgiveness, each experience is likely to demand unique attention and, perhaps, distinct capabilities for forgiveness to be effective. Consider Carmen's situation, who sought emotional support following her husband's suicide. While the sorrow Carmen endured was profound, the overwhelming emotion was anger, fueled by a sense of betrayal, as she found herself "left alone with three children and no support." Carmen grappled with the anger towards her deceased husband but also with self-guilt and shame for harboring resentment toward him. Through collaborative efforts, Carmen gradually unveiled that her anger, rooted in feelings of betrayal, extended to other losses, including a sense of betrayal by her mother, who had sexually abused her during childhood. Carmen's case underscores the diverse set of skills often required when engaging in the forgiveness processes. Consequently, variations in the gravity of circumstances, types of relationships, as well as an individual's perceptions and skills, or lack thereof, are likely to influence the focus of forgiveness and approaches.

Regarding forgiving individuals who have caused harm without expressing remorse, taking accountability, or facing consequences, the authors have observed a phenomenon where some individuals who have been victimized have gained a sense of control by holding onto their anger and resentment. A prevailing belief has been that anger and resentment may compel an apology from the wrongdoer or bring about a form of retribution for the pain caused.

In a therapeutic group, composed of male adolescents (14-16 years old) who had experienced sexual molestation, faced sex assault charges, some jail time, and were released on parole, were invited into a discussion on forgiveness. They were tasked with examining the process required to extend forgiveness to those who had inflicted harm upon them, with the aim of gaining insight into the potential prerequisites for others to forgive them for the harm that they caused. The notion that forgiving someone equates to not holding a person who has committed an offense accountable seems to constrain the ability to liberate oneself from the anger and resentment stemming from the harm caused. Furthermore, one's traumatization by the experiences encountered may inhibit an emotional flexibility helpful in forgiving self and others (France et al. 2023).

Opting not to forgive may become a weighty decision, with the individual rationalizing their stance based on the initial harm suffered. The authors have contemplated whether this hesitancy to forgive is influenced by a realization, embedded within the wounded individual, that forgiveness also, to a certain extent, serves the interests of the wrongdoer. Forgiveness can spare them from direct confrontation with potential harm (e.g., retaliation) posed by the person who initially experienced injury. In some instances, the authors have noticed that instead of placing an emphasis on forgiveness, directing individuals towards the cultivation and/or fostering of self-empathy—namely, fostering the ability to connect with, understand, and validate one's feelings, thoughts, and struggles without judgment—has been effective in promoting emotional well-being and personal growth.

Forgiveness Seen as Validating or Erasing the Harm Caused

There are a multitude of barriers to forgiveness. Howard, a 41-year-old man, grappled with the fear that forgiving his "unfaithful wife" might imply a willingness to accept a repeat of her actions. This was a legitimate concern since there are no guarantees that a behavior may not be repeated. Howard continued his relationship with lingering resentment, keeping his guard up, impacting their connection, despite his wife's regret, remorse, and acceptance of accountability for her infidelity. Despite the desire to forgive, it took time for Howard to strike a balance between accepting his wife's sincere apology, reopening his heart, and

establishing boundaries to move forward in their relationship. In the authors' work, the complexity of forgiveness has been observed, highlighting the importance of time, patience, and sustained intentional efforts to confront inner struggles as essential elements in attaining the desired state of forgiveness.

The belief that forgiveness is obligatory can inadvertently exacerbate suffering, prolonging grief and impeding the potential for restoration. Cassandra's son-in law killed her daughter in front of her three grandchildren and then took his own life. She expressed, "I know that my rage will not bring her back.... My pastor continues to suggest that I have to let go and God will take care of the rest. I feel guilty that I can't forgive him; at least not yet. My rage is overwhelming." Cassandra, influenced by her pastor's teachings to "...forgive as God has forgiven us all for our sins," faced the challenge of not being able to hold space for her pain and the harm she has endured. Through interactions with Cassandra, it was observed that accepting a traumatic event without immediate forgiveness is a valid path. Acknowledging the event and embracing a spectrum of emotions can serve as a starting point for the process of moving forward.

It is common knowledge that forgiveness can feel different from one person to another or among communities of people and it is contingent to the way an event is experienced, perceived and the relationship between those involved. Sometimes, forgiveness can come easily, especially when one recognizes that the harm to self or another was caused unintentionally, by accident. Other times, internal wars and/or external conflicts may be experienced before forgiveness of self or others is considered. Interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness are complex and transformative journeys, often linked with the quest for redemption and/or life renewal, symbolizing a potential shift and optimistic change despite past challenges or wrongdoings. Individuals often journey diverse paths in search of redemption, healing, and growth. Yet, what happens when the prospect of forgiveness appears unattainable or seemingly unsuitable? Circumstances and the gravity of inflicted wounds can create emotional and mental trials where individuals and communities may be faced with the challenge of embracing recovery from inflicted wounds without following the traditional script of forgiveness (Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014).

Forgiveness is Complex

A new painful event often reawakens unresolved wounds and can make the process of forgiveness demoralizing. For example, John served 10 years in prison with a record of good conduct. John's reentry into society brought forth a heart-wrenching revelation. Tearfully expressing remorse, John shared an incident from his past where, in the grip of an alcohol/drug-induced blackout, he tragically placed his newborn baby in the oven instead of a turkey, resulting in a murder charge.

The depth of pain surrounding this horrifying event was unimaginable. Yet, when beginning to work with John's grief, it became apparent that the roots of John's distress extended beyond this tragic incident. John's childhood and adolescence were marred by a series of traumatic experiences, including severe poverty, family violence, a parent diagnosed with war-related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, another with bipolar disorder, and even instances of sexual assault by a relative. These unhealed traumas had pervasive ripple effects, contributing to John's mental health challenges and struggles with addiction. In John's case, the journey of forgiveness revealed unresolved wounds that required meticulous attention. The complexity of his struggles extended to the presence of self-hatred and a history marked by inflicted harmful acts. The process of forgiveness, therefore, unfolded as a delicate exploration, navigating through layers of pain and self-inflicted harm that demanded compassionate and thoughtful intervention.

Working with someone like John necessitates a considerable amount of empathy and sensitivity. The journey towards forgiveness, both himself and others, commenced with small, deliberate steps. Symbolically, John found himself learning to crawl as he gained awareness of additional wounds that required him to experience raw vulnerability. The process involved learning strategies to maintain emotional flexibility while navigating and dismantling patterns that were detrimental to his mental and emotional well-being.

Helping someone like John requires the use of innovative therapeutic practices. These may include brief meditations, short contemplations, and letter-writing approaches, as suggested by Toussaint et al. (2016). These practices can provide someone like John with the initial tools to explore and process his emotions, fostering healing and growth in his ongoing journey towards forgiveness and self-redemption.

Interpersonal and/or Intrapersonal Forgiveness cannot be Forced

Encouraging forgiveness for the well-being of our loved ones and society is a noble endeavor. Yet, it's crucial to acknowledge that time and readiness are integral factors when considering forgiveness as a goal. Individuals experience and interpret painful occurrences in diverse ways, leading to variations in the processing and perceived magnitude of the inflicted harm. While supporting others, allowing individuals, groups, and/or communities to come to forgiveness at their own pace, within their own space, and through their unique process can be empowering.

Attempting to rush the forgiveness process may result in incomplete forgiveness or the suppression of traumas (i.e., neurological / biopsychosocial effects of overwhelmingly distressing experiences directly impacting the safety, wellness and coping skills of an individual, community, and/or society) (France et al., 2023). Each person's journey towards forgiveness is deeply personal and influenced by their unique emotional landscape. Therefore, recognizing and respecting an individual's readiness and timing is vital for fostering a more genuine and sustainable forgiveness process.

The Value of Grief

It is important to note that grief – mourning is often experienced before forgiveness of others or self is considered. The dance to the melody of pain is not an easy piece of music to move in sync with; fear and resistance may often arrive, becoming brief or consistent blocks to forgiveness. Forgiveness often involves vulnerability, authentic, honest openness and exposure to unpleasant and distressing emotions. While forgiveness is a release of emotions that may have imprisoned one's mind, grieving is the response to the pain or loss produced by the harm.

Meet Alex, a 17-year-old young man grappling with a tumultuous past marked by involvement in juvenile delinquency and youth gang-related activities. His past included a history of armed robbery, leading him through the doors of various juvenile detention centers. Alex, the youngest of three brothers, all with a legal record, grew up in a challenging environment where poverty and limited resources prevailed. Raised in a family and neighborhood deeply influenced by crime and gang activity, Alex's father has been in prison serving a life sentence since Alex was seven years old. Alex's mother struggled with heroin addiction and was in-and-out of rehabilitation programs. Alex lived with his paternal grandfather since the age of nine. His lack of sufficient stable role models and a strong supportive system gradually led him to a youth gang.

Years of exposure to violence and trauma had left Alex emotionally scarred, impairing his ability to navigate and express vulnerable feelings beyond anger. This anger provided Alex with an impression of power and control. Faced with discussions encouraging vulnerability, Alex adopted a consistent defensive and reactive stance, often resorting to verbal or physical aggression as a protective mechanism.

While Alex exhibited changes after six months of services, frequently using "I" statements and expressing occasional sadness, especially upon hearing of his mother's overdose, his journey towards managing anger and hostility remained a work in progress. Similarly, his ability to engage in self-forgiveness for the wrongs he had caused others evolved. Alex's case illustrates that breaking free from the cycle of trauma, where grief and forgiveness of self and others can promote transformation or life renewal, is a challenging process. While transformation of individuals, groups, or communities can be encouraged and supported, time, readiness, and active participation from those being served are essential elements in the complex journey of restoration.

It is important to acknowledge that in cases where harm is rooted in interpersonal relationships and social injustice, seeking justice, and holding responsible parties accountable can be crucial for healing (Balkin et al., 2021; Duff & Mikoski, 2013; Zembylas, 2012). This approach focuses on external validation and acknowledgment of the harm done, which may be a necessary step before considering forgiveness as an internal process. Genuine remorse and efforts to make amends by the one who created the harm can foster an environment conducive to forgiveness.

Meet Mike, a 52-year-old individual, who found himself entangled in a distressing work situation involving mistreatment by an administrative staff member, Mr. Smith. Mike had invested significant effort, alongside a few colleagues, to develop a successful program aimed at assisting participants in achieving their

academic goals. The situation took a downturn after a series of disputes where Mr. Smith was held accountable for several inappropriate behaviors. In response, Mr. Smith, utilizing his administrative decision-making privileges, obstructed Mike's direct involvement in the program he had contributed to, leaving Mike feeling frustrated and disheartened.

Mike, determined to address the harm inflicted by Mr. Smith's actions and negligence, embarked on a journey for justice. Opting for dialogue over confrontation, he involved other administrative staff members who stepped in and were capable of intervening in the situation, holding Mr. Smith accountable for his choices and behaviors. While no genuine remorse was expressed or responsibility taken by Mr. Smith for his action during dialogs, the situation was rectified by the involvement of other people in positions of influence, initiating the foundation for an environment conducive to forgiveness.

During the process of addressing Mr. Smith's behavior, Mike witnessed that the impact of Mr. Smith's actions was evident. Mr. Smith's behavior also revealed a notable lack of emotional maturity and leadership capability. The actions taken by Mr. Smith not only had consequences, but they also reflected a deficiency in handling emotions and a failure to exhibit the qualities expected of a leader. Mike's case briefly illustrates that while forgiveness is a complex process, creating external conditions where the harm can be addressed while people can feel heard and supported, can foster opportunities for restoration.

Empathy Towards Those that Harmed

Difficulty in understanding or empathizing with the perspective of the person who caused harm, or self-normalization of the harm that one has created, can hinder forgiveness. Without understanding the motivations or circumstances, and lack of expression of remorse, forgiveness may seem unattainable by many. Furthermore, it can become challenging to trust and forgive when there is a history of similar actions or if the harm is repeated (Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014).

It's crucial to remember that forgiveness is a personal experience and doesn't necessarily depend on the presence or support of the individuals who have caused harm. Furthermore, cultural, or societal expectations and norms may influence an individual or group's perception of forgiveness, especially within a context where vengeance is prioritized over compassion. In some cultural contexts, forgiveness may be highly valued, while in others, seeking revenge might be more acceptable. In the gritty and complex world of prison and gang culture, forgiveness often takes a backseat, perceived as a vulnerability that may expose individuals to further harm. The following case illustration sheds light on a situation where the concept of forgiveness is met with skepticism, as it is perceived as a weakness, putting people at risk within this often-unforgiving environment.

Meet Carlos, a 44-year-old inmate entangled in prison life and gang affiliations. Two decades ago, he joined a gang for survival, embracing a culture of perceived strength, dominance, and unwavering loyalty. A clash with rival gang member Miguel left Carlos severely injured, prompting a profound spiritual experience during his recovery. Faced with conflicting expectations in prison—where forgiveness can be seen as weakness—Carlos grappled with his next steps.

Choosing safety, Carlos turned to religious services, gradually shifting his focus while reducing tension. This decision allowed him to avoid retaliation and the dangers of prison politics. Carlos' journey sheds light on the harsh realities of prison and gang life, where forgiveness is often viewed as weakness, complicating the quest for change amidst the struggle to survive.

Like Forgiveness, Accountability can also not be Forced

Encouraging accountability through empathy and educational approaches can raise awareness of the harm that a person or people's actions and behaviors have created. Alternatively, punitive approaches that are designed to force accountability can result in built resentments, promotion of resistance, and/or a defensive attitude among those responsible for harm. A major component of holding one accountable for one's behavior is assuming responsibility for the outcome(s) that one's behavior has created, being willing to being answerable for the outcome. Feeling remorse requires an internal exploration, influencing genuine accountability. This process cannot be forced.

Meet James, a 43-year-old inmate whose life took a tragic turn 15 years ago when he faced a life sentence for fatally shooting a rival gang member during a street gang altercation. In a group discussion focused on understanding the impact of our actions on others, whether directly or indirectly causing pain, James grappled with the weight of accountability for the anguish inflicted on his rival's family. He expressed, "It was his life or mine." Using empathy-based responses, James's statement was acknowledged and respected, recognizing the complexities of self-defense in his situation, "You are right, self-defense is important and often inevitable." The dialogue aimed to navigate the fine line between survival instincts and the consequences of one's actions.

As the conversation unfolded, James engaged in a reflective exercise, contemplating the potential emotional responses of his own family members if he was a victim of violence. This exercise sought to broaden perspectives and encourage James to consider the broader emotional implications of his actions on others' lives. In summary, while James had not fully taken responsibility for his past actions, the exercise became a pivotal moment in his self-discovery journey. It opened the doors for him to witness the possible ripple effects of his behavior, particularly on the family of the deceased.

Sensitively and skillfully encouraging genuine accountability, the exercise planted seeds of compassion within James, prompting him to perceive experiences beyond his confined perspective. James's journey, though still unfolding, highlights the transformative potential when individuals, like James, begin to see beyond their immediate circumstances and plant seeds of compassion for others through self-discovery and accountability.

Forgiveness without Accountability

A person, group, or community engaging in the process of inter – intrapersonal forgiveness is likely to experience opportunities for *emotional renewal* (Dhar et al., 2021). This involves revitalizing one's emotional well-being through self-care practices and activities aimed at enhancing emotional resilience—the ability to bounce back from the harm caused. Yet, the emotional renewal derived from interpersonal forgiveness can be short-lived. This has been observed in ongoing relationships where reciprocity between forgiveness of the harm, genuine remorse for the pain created, and sincere accountability do not exist, and the harmful behavior is repeated. Thus, forgiveness may not always serve as a definitive solution for attaining lasting peace and stability (McNulty, 2010; Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014).

Robert and Mark, a couple seeking assistance following a domestic violence incident where Robert physically assaulted Mark, faced a challenging journey toward healing. A restraining order placed on Robert was lifted after Robert agreed to attempt couples counseling with a new mental health practitioner. While working with Robert and Mark for a few sessions, it became evident that while a restraining order was used only once in their relationship, domestic violence had been a recurring issue over the ten years that they had been together.

Despite Mark 's inclination to forgive Robert and witnessing temporary improvements in their relationship, the cycle of abuse persisted. Mark exhibited a degree of understanding regarding the cycle of abuse, acknowledging the phases of tension building, explosive violence, and subsequent reconciliation accompanied by apologies, promises, and affection promoting hope (Livings et al., 2023). Yet, Mark seemed to, consciously and unconsciously, wrestle with the realization that forgiveness alone might not be sufficient. Mark gradually recognized that forgiveness was a personal process and, on its own, might not break the cyclical pattern of violence in an ongoing relationship unless both partners were sincerely committed to transformation—an aspect that did not appear evident in Mark's relationship. Consequently, separation between Mark and Robert became inevitable.

Forgiveness is not Forgetfulness

While forgiveness is transformative it does not mean condoning, disregarding, rationalizing, and/or allowing for the behavior that caused the harm. Rather, forgiveness encourages acknowledging and potentially changing the behavior that caused the harm. Forgiveness is related to the experience of inflicted emotional and psychological pain / disturbances. Thus, sincere accountability should not be overlooked.

Meet Thomas. His life took a tragic turn at four when his father was killed by Mr. Jones, a gang member. Thomas grew up believing his father had left, blaming himself for what he perceived as his 'bad behavior.' In his twenties, the truth surfaced through a relative, revealing Mr. Jones's role in his father's murder and igniting a desire for revenge. Research led Thomas to Mr. Jones's parole hearing, where he realized Mr. Jones was 18 at the time of the incident, and his lingering anger was hindering his connections with loved ones.

The unresolved questions about his father's death weighed heavily on Thomas, pushing him to seek an opportunity to confront Mr. Jones. He found this chance through a Restorative Justice Victim-Offender Dialog program. Face-to-face with Mr. Jones, Thomas expressed his pain, leading to a surprising heartfelt apology from Mr. Jones, initially genuinely unaware of Thomas's existence. This sincere apology marked a crucial moment of closure for Thomas, freeing him from bitterness and allowing him to move forward, understanding that forgiveness was not about absolving Mr. Jones of guilt or experiences, but freeing himself from the chains of bitterness.

It is understood that unhealthy behaviors and traits (e.g., addiction, unresolved traumas, conditions, etc.) could, directly or indirectly, influence a harmful act or behavior. Yet, for the harmful act or behavior not to be perpetuated, it needs to be modified. Such modification often involves conscious engagement and commitment from the person who has committed the harm, as reflected by Mr. Jones's willingness to meet with Thomas. Holding a person accountable for their wrongdoing can foster the process of eventually encouraging the person who created the harm to reflect on the harm, its effects, experience penitence, engage in self-forgiveness, and encounter restoration. This was reflected by Thomas's action (Wenzel et al., 2012).

When Forgiveness does not Seem to be an Option

The intricate nature of forgiveness demands thoughtful consideration. Some individuals consciously choose to sustain themselves in anger, resentment, and the desire for revenge directed at those who have wronged them. Others may manage to endure the distress by erecting emotional defenses supported by their deeply ingrained belief systems. In the spectrum of responses, some regard forgiveness as an indispensable catalyst for personal growth, recognizing its transformative power. On the contrary, there are those who perceive forgiveness as a vulnerability, a potential weakness that they dare not embrace. For some, in this latter group, the pain inflicted by those who have wronged them may not become a burden, but rather a cause for celebration. In their eyes, hatred may not be a weight to bear; yet it may be perceived as a strategic weapon wielded for self-preservation.

The authors have observed that the paradox of forgiveness unfolds uniquely in everyone, weaving a complex tapestry of emotions, beliefs, and responses to harm. The mystery lies not only in the act itself but in the varied ways people may navigate the intricate terrain of forgiveness or its absence (McNulty, 2010; Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014).

Meet Glen, a 40-year-old inmate who has already spent a decade of a 25-year prison sentence for armed robbery and attempted murder. As he approached the second year of his incarceration, a devastating blow struck him—news that his only son, 14-year-old Michael, had become a victim of senseless violence. The impact left Glen shattered; his heart now imprinted with the indelible ink of grief.

Almost a decade has passed since Michael's tragic death, yet Glen clings tightly to the conviction that, as a father, he bears the responsibility to avenge his son. "I can forgive anything else, but not that. I am taking this hatred to my grave," Glen declares, his bitterness resounding loudly in his communications. Within his time in prison, Glen persists in constructing emotional barriers, fortified by a belief in the righteousness of his quest for vengeance and wishing harm for the wrongdoer.

Normalization of Trauma

The feeling that forgiveness is impossible is sometimes linked to trauma responses, termed by the authors as the "normalization of trauma and desensitization to pain." These responses, often fueled by suppressed emotions, stem from the multiple effects of trauma on the brain's neurobiology (France & Jovanovic, 2022; Thomason & Marusak, 2017). When one becomes desensitized to pain and normalized to

trauma, they may unwittingly accept pain as inevitable, which can lead to potential biopsychosocial illnesses (Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2017; Thomason & Marusak, 2017).

While holding someone accountable for causing pain isn't the concern, the danger lies in believing in the power of anger or rage while internally suffering from destructive emotions. In cases where forgiveness seems impossible after years of anger, resentment, and a desire for revenge, the authors also note an unconscious addiction to the rewards of grievances. This emotional inclination can attract individuals who provide constant sympathetic attention, creating a cycle akin to an addictive emotional substance that may never be fully satisfied.

Self-Compassion

The authors have encountered individuals who choose to maintain distance from those who wronged them, opting instead to embark on new relationships without a focus on forgiveness. These individuals have prioritized self-compassion, dedicating time to healing within themselves. While they may still hold onto dislikes toward those who created the harm, practicing self-care and compassion has led to internal shifts, boosting resilience, and improving confidence. The dislikes or the degree of a grudge has not disempowered them; rather, it has, on occasions, served as a reminder of mistrust towards those who have created pain. The authors have witnessed that broken trust with one individual or group does not automatically result in the absence of trust toward other people who have shown respect and kindness. This suggests that harm from one person may not necessarily hinder overall wellness, as the impact of harm varies individually.

Recognizing the importance of redemption without absolute forgiveness challenges traditional narratives. This approach emphasizes acceptance, facing reality, acknowledging pain's impact, and finding inner peace as steps toward redemption. This perspective redefines forgiveness, highlighting personal growth and emotional well-being. In situations where forgiveness may not seem relevant, the focus can be shifted to forming new connections and engaging in transformative experiences. Shifting attention may not be confused with ignoring or suppressing pain caused by harm. It simply has been observed as mindfully concentrating on experiences and opportunities that are nurturing. Simultaneously, individuals establish boundaries with those who caused harm, creating a healthier environment for themselves and others. This proactive stance allows for understanding without requiring forgiveness, respecting the diverse paths people take towards redemption and restoration.

Recognizing the significance of embracing redemption (i.e., recovery from pain) without necessitating total forgiveness challenges established narratives. A key facet of this approach is grounded in the strength of acceptance. Confronting the reality of a situation, acknowledging the profound impact of pain, and discovering inner peace can constitute meaningful strides toward redemption. Again, this narrative redefines the conventional concept of forgiveness, placing a spotlight on personal growth and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

The authors, drawing from extensive experience with diverse communities, highlighted the complexity of forgiveness and restoration. They describe forgiveness as an evolving process, starting with an initial response to harm and progressing through introspection to healing. Restoration, they note, commonly involves repairing oneself, rebuilding trust, and cultivating resilience.

Numerous methods and strategies exist to facilitate the journey of forgiveness and the subsequent transition towards restoration and well-being. Engaging in regular practices such as daily contemplation and meditation can foster a deeper sense of inner peace and clarity. Practicing self-reflection can open the doors to the recognition of diverse feelings, possible emotional reactive patterns, conceivable contribution to perpetuated pain, as well as options for proceeding. Prioritizing self-care through healthy eating, regular exercise, the practice of additional healing rituals (e.g., fasting, reading, journal writing, drumming ceremonies, Native American vision quests, fire ceremonies where burning written letters or pictures can help with the releasing of emotions, etc.) and developing and maintaining dependable – supportive relationships can be crucial steps toward fostering the experience of forgiveness and restoring into health. Feeling supported by a professional, a family member, a friend, and/or community of people, can make forgiveness

feel less isolating and more achievable. These observations can be useful for *health – human – legal advocates* as they practice mindful engagement (i.e., present awareness guiding intentional fostering services).

Recovering from harm, whether inflicted by self or other, is a complex and multifaceted journey, with forgiveness often playing a central role. However, as stressed earlier, it's important to acknowledge that forgiveness may not be universally applicable or sufficient for everyone. The severity and impact of harm can vary greatly, influencing the effectiveness of forgiveness as a means of restoration. In cases of profound trauma, the process of forgiveness may be intricate and may not provide the complete relief sought by the individual, group, or community. In such instances, setting and maintaining healthy boundaries may be equally or even more crucial to one's healing journey. This is particularly relevant in interpersonal relationships where continued interactions with the person responsible for the harm are necessary.

It's essential to recognize that forgiveness and boundaries are not mutually exclusive; they can coexist and complement each other. Yet, boundaries can serve as a tool for self-preservation and safety, allowing individuals to prioritize their well-being regardless of their decision to forgive. Practicing self-compassion and treating oneself with kindness is vital in this process. Honoring one's own needs and setting firm boundaries are often essential acts of self-respect and care. By prioritizing their well-being, individuals, groups, or communities can navigate the journey of healing with greater resilience and self-awareness.

Again, while forgiveness holds significant value and is widely acknowledged as a healing practice, it's essential to understand that it isn't a universal solution. As service providers or advocates, we bear the ethical responsibility to ensure that our actions do not cause harm to others. Recognizing that there are alternative paths to healing empowers individuals to tailor their approach according to their unique circumstances. By honoring the diverse processes through which individuals navigate their healing journeys, service providers can cultivate and promote culturally sensitive, relevant services and approaches. By acknowledging and respecting the diversity of healing processes, service providers can facilitate the empowerment of individuals, to find the most effective and authentic ways to navigate the complexities of harm, ultimately emerging stronger and more resilient on the other side.

Continuing to study and explore the complexity of forgiveness is a contribution to humanity. To a degree, this article has touched on the complexity of forgiveness at the micro-level of interactions. Yet, other levels of interactions and forgiveness need equal attention. Further understanding of group, community, and/or societal related pain, forgiveness, and restoration associated with accumulative and ongoing oppressive systemic experiences, the mass genocide faced by multiple populations and creation of historical traumas, as well as the devastating agony produced by war, colonization, and imperialist approaches are a few examples. The wisdom in the provision of mental health and trauma related services at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels is founded in the willingness and commitment not to be confined by an ideology or intervention. Rather, the wisdom in provision of services is revealed by relying on and utilizing approaches available, which have demonstrated effectiveness, while consistently being receptive to the emergence of new possibilities and strategies. May we, as humans, always consider the vastness of options unfolding before our eyes. As a final thought, the authors would like to promote the premise that keeping curiosity alive will transform any confined mind.

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