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# THE ART OF FORGIVENESS

By

Carrie Benedict

B.A. The University of Montana, 1998.

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

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## The Art of Forgiveness

Chairperson: Al Sillars 

When people enter relationships, they risk being emotionally harmed. When this happens, he/she may need help dealing with the negative effects of the emotional wound. The victim may seek help with this from a professional such as a counselor or pastor. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to educate these professionals about the concept of forgiveness and why forgiveness is important. Another purpose of this paper is to find ways in which helping professionals can assist the victim with forgiveness. Five pastors and seven counselors were interviewed to find out how helping professionals conceptualized forgiveness, how they viewed forgiveness, as well as how they assisted people with the process of forgiveness. These helping professionals conceptualized forgiveness as ranging from the victim internally letting go of the negative feelings that he/she has against the transgressor to externally releasing the transgressor from an acknowledged debt. Additionally, they view forgiveness as being important primarily for the relationship with the transgressor, as well as others outside the relationship and for the emotional well-being of the victim. Other reasons why forgiveness is important are also discussed in this paper. These professionals also viewed forgiveness as therapeutic because it can help the victim. Some of the ways in which forgiveness can be beneficial to the victim are the increased ability to love, the freedom to move on with life, and improved development of relationships. In addition to this, forgiveness can benefit the victim by improving his/her emotional well-being. Lastly, the professionals in this study agree that there is not any specific formula they use to assist a victim with forgiveness. In order to assist a person with forgiveness the helping professional needs to first look at the personality and background of the victim. Next, he/she needs to assist the victim with acknowledging the event. Lastly, he/she needs to assist the victim with letting go of the negative feelings towards the transgressor.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	p. 1
Chapter One: What is Forgiveness?.....	p. 3
Definitions of Forgiveness.....	p. 3
Characteristics of Forgiveness.....	p. 9
Misconceptions of Forgiveness.....	p. 10
Chapter Two: To Forgive or Not to Forgive.....	p. 18
Trend of More Recent Research on Forgiveness.....	p. 18
Why Do People Forgive?.....	p. 19
Research Questions.....	p. 29
Chapter Three: Methods.....	p. 30
Procedure.....	p. 30
Participants.....	p. 32
Chapter Four: Results.....	p. 36
How Do Professionals Conceptualize Forgiveness?.....	p. 36
Real Life Examples of Forgiveness.....	p. 40
How Do Professionals View Forgiveness?.....	p. 43
How Do Professionals Assist the Victim with the Process of Forgiveness?.....	p. 51
Achievement of Forgiveness.....	p. 59
Chapter Five: Discussion.....	p. 63
How Do Professionals Conceptualize Forgiveness?.....	p. 63
How Do Professionals View Forgiveness?.....	p. 67
How Do Professionals Assist the Victim with the Process of Forgiveness?.....	p. 75
Chapter Six: Summary/Conclusion.....	p. 84
References.....	p. 87
Appendix A: Letter to Participants.....	p. 94
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Pastors.....	p. 95
Appendix C: Interview Questions for Counselors.....	p. 96
Appendix D: Participant Information and Consent Form.....	p. 97

## **Introduction**

It was the wife's job to keep the house in order, including provision of towels, toilet paper, and soap in the bathroom. One day she forgot to replace the soap, an oversight that her husband mentioned in an exaggerated way ("I've been bathing for almost a week without any soap") and that she vigorously denied. Although it turned out that she had indeed forgotten, her pride was at stake and she would not back down. For the next seven months they slept in separate rooms and ate in silence. "Even when they were old and placid," writes Marquez, "they were very careful about bringing it up, for the barely healed wounds could begin to bleed again as if they have been inflicted only yesterday." (Yancey, 1997, p. 97-98)

The above scenario is a paraphrased excerpt from Marquez's (1988) novel, which Yancey (1997) uses to illustrate how a transgression can affect a committed relationship. As we can see in this scenario, a relationship can be easily shaken by a simple transgression that may not have been intended to hurt the person or damage the relationship. Unfortunately, due to lack of communication and pride, one person can easily harm another without realizing it. When one person is emotionally harmed, frequently they do not know how to deal with this productively. Hence, a destructive conflict cycle may start which may wind up hurting the victim, as well as the relationship, even more in the long run than when the hurt originally occurred. This pattern could be a result of neither party being willing to stop the argument, apologize, and ask for forgiveness. The story above illustrates what can happen when neither party is willing to forgive or to let go of the need to be "right."

When a victim has been harmed emotionally, he/she may need help dealing with the negative effects of the emotional wound effectively. The victim may seek help with this from a professional such as a counselor or pastor. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to educate these professionals about the concept of forgiveness and why forgiveness is important. Another purpose of this paper is to find ways in which helping professionals can assist the victim with the process of forgiveness.

## Chapter 1

### What is Forgiveness?

#### *Definitions of Forgiveness*

If one were to ask somebody on the street what forgiveness is, almost every person would have a different answer. The same is true with scholars. A person can read one article and get a definition for it, then read another article and have a completely different idea of what it means to forgive. The definitions and conceptualizations of forgiveness in literature are quite diverse. Worthington (1998) concludes that no consensual definition of forgiveness exists. The lack of consensus on a definition of forgiveness makes studying forgiveness difficult (Elder, 1998; Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright, Freeman & Rique, 1998; Enright, Gassin & Wu, 1992). This lack of agreement is problematic because the way that one defines forgiveness affects the information that they provide. This makes it hard to know why, how, and when to forgive somebody. Although there is a lack of agreement on the definition, Safer (1999) points out that “Forgiveness continues to develop over the whole life, and its meaning constantly evolves” (p. 53). The rest of this section will show the many differing views on what forgiveness is and is not.

Scholars’ definitions of forgiveness fall into three primary categories. Some authors view forgiveness as the abandoning of negative feelings and putting either positive or neutral feelings in their place. Smedes (1984) provides a fascinating picture of what form this may take. He describes it as having “magic eyes.” Another way scholars view forgiveness is in terms of improving a relationship. Hargrave and Sells (1997) view forgiveness as a way in which relationships can be rebuilt after a transgression has



occurred. The third category of forgiveness is as an abandonment of a debt. Pingleton (1997) illustrates this viewpoint by describing forgiveness as “giving up one’s right to hurt back” (p. 404).

### *The Magic Eyes Approach*

Smedes (1984) begins the book “Forgive and Forget” with a fable about a couple named Fouke and Hilda. Fouke and Hilda lived in a village called Faken. Fouke was a righteous man. Fouke was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness from his lips over everyone who came near him. The people of Faken preferred to stay away from him. His wife Hilda, on the other hand, did not keep people at bay with righteousness. Her soft roundness seemed to invite people to come close to her in order to share the warm cheer of her open heart. One day Fouke caught Hilda in the midst of adultery. Although Fouke hated her, he pretended to forgive her so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy. Each time Fouke would feel this secret hate, an angel came down and dropped a pebble into his heart. The more he hated her the more pain he had. Fouke’s heart grew so heavy with the weight of the pebbles that he began to wish he were dead. The angel who dropped these pebbles into his heart came and told him how he could be healed of this hurt. There was only one remedy for the healing of the wounded heart. Fouke would need the miracle of the magic eyes. He would need eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see Hilda, not as a wife who betrayed him, but as a weak woman who needed him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes could heal the hurt flowing from the wounds of yesterday. Fouke insisted that nothing could change the fact that Hilda was guilty. The angel agreed with him that he could not change the past but told him that he can only heal the hurt flowing from the

wounds of yesterday. The angel then started removing the pebbles from Fouke's heart. As Fouke began to heal he started to see Hilda as a needy woman who loved him instead of a wicked woman who betrayed him. As Fouke's heart began to heal, he could then invite Hilda back into his heart and together they began a journey into their new season of humble joy.

This story is an illustration of how some authors view forgiveness. As we can see in this story, Fouke's "magic eyes" allowed him to change how he viewed Hilda. He did not forget what had happened; instead he changed how he saw her. When he stopped seeing her as a woman who betrayed him, the hate that he felt towards her turned into love. This change in the way that he viewed her allowed for a new start in their relationship. Fouke's ability to reframe the incident represents one way of looking at forgiveness. Another way of looking at the "magic eyes" approach to defining forgiveness is Smedes' (1984) notion that, when one person forgives another, what they did wrong in the past becomes irrelevant to how the forgiver feels about the person in the present. The wrong that the transgressor did in the past "does not matter, does not count, has no bearing, cannot be figured into [the forgiver's] attitude towards [the offender]" (Smedes, 1984, p. 28). Smedes (1984) also states:

Forgiving is an honest release even though it is done invisibly, within the forgiver's heart. It is honest because it happens along with honest judgment, honest pain, and honest hate. [True forgivers] do not pretend they don't suffer. They do not pretend the wrong does not matter much (p. 29).

Metts, Pensinger, and Cupach's (2001) idea as to what true forgiveness looks like resembles Smedes' (1984) "magic eyes" approach. True forgiveness is when the negative

emotions are replaced with positive regard and transgression is separated from the transgressor and reframed (Metts et al., 2001). Boon and Sulsky (1997) as well as McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) provide a similar definition of forgiveness. Enright et al. (1998) define forgiveness, as “a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her” (p. 46-47). Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) provide a very similar definition. In addition to this, McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2001) define forgiveness as “intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context” (p. 9). This definition relates to the “magic eyes” approach because in order to have a prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor one needs to reframe the incident in order to change how they see the person.

North (1987) defines forgiveness as a process of letting go of one’s right to feel anger and resentment toward the transgressor and replacing it with feeling compassion, benevolence and love towards the transgressor. North’s (1987) definition also allows the victim to recognize that the transgressor does not have a right to this. In this definition we see the change of feeling towards the transgressor while still acknowledging the transgressor’s wrongdoing. In forgiving somebody, “we might also inhibit the desire to retaliate, think good thoughts about the other person and rehearse positive, rather than negative, memories of the other person” (McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997, p. 21).

As we can see, all of these definitions have one thing in common. As McCullough et al. (2001) point out in the introduction to their book on forgiveness, “When people forgive, their responses toward (or, in other words, what they think of, feel about, want to do to, or actually do to) people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative” (p. 9). Smedes (1984) sums up this section well with the following thought: forgiveness, “love’s antidote for hate,” turns feelings of hate into wishing people well (p. 29).

### *Improved Relationships*

Once a relationship has been damaged by conflict, it can be a challenge to restore. Some people, however, may want to restore or rebuild their relationship. Some authors would say that this is exactly what forgiveness is, a way to rebuild relationships. This way of looking at forgiveness could be seen as an extension of the “magic eyes” approach.

Hargrave and Sells (1997) define forgiveness as (1) allowing one’s victimizer to rebuild trust in the relationship through acting in a trustworthy fashion, and (2) promoting an open discussion of the relation violation, so that the offended partner and the offender can agree to work toward an improved relationship. On a similar note McCullough et al. (1997a) describe forgiveness as “an increase in our internal motivation to repair and maintain a relationship after the relationship has been damaged by the hurtful actions of the other person” (p. 22).

Due to the fact that forgiveness has consequences for past and future relationships, it is a long road of tough work with many potential risks. However, accomplishing this task is perhaps one of the supreme manifestations of relationships

because “it has to involve the work of at least two people willing to trust and rebuild their relationship, even after severe damage” (Hargrave, 1994, p. 4). Hargrave (1994) also notes that the process of forgiving is like starting a relationship over again because it provides a way for love and trust to be your story even if they have never been exhibited before.

As we can see, looking at forgiveness as a way of improving relationships is an extension of the “magic eyes” approach. Safer (1999) sums it up quite well by saying “the definition of forgiveness should be broadened to include any state of mind that enables a person to reconnect psychically with a betrayer and to change the meaning and impact of the trauma, even if considerable anger remains” (p. 52).

#### *Abandonment of Debt*

Some authors have associated forgiveness with the abandonment of debt. In this view, both parties acknowledge that the transgressor is in debt to the victim. However in this description of forgiveness, the victim releases the offender from this debt (Lauritzen 1987; Newman 1987). Pingleton (1997) defines forgiveness as “giving up one’s right to hurt back” (p. 404). In addition to viewing forgiveness as when the victim abandons his/her negative feelings, judgments, and behaviors, Enright et al. (1998) add that forgiveness promotes “the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love” toward the offender (p. 46-47). Additionally, Enright and Coyle (1998) note that when a victim is harmed unjustly, in true forgiveness, he/she voluntarily relinquishes the right to retaliate or resent “and instead offers mercy to the offender” (p. 140). North (1987) notes that forgiveness annuls “not the crime itself but the distorting effect that this wrong has upon one’s relations with the wrongdoer and perhaps with others” (p. 500).

One might also associate abandoning of debt with the cancellation of the debt the person legitimately owes instead of simply letting the person off the hook. Forgiveness does not diminish the moral violation or deny the offender's responsibility (McCullough et al., 1997a). "Forgiveness chooses to cancel a debt that is serious and real. Through canceling the debt, one has the power to balance the moral ledger and break the pattern of passing on pain and anger to others" (McCullough et al., 1997a, p.33).

Henry Ward Beecher illustrates this view of forgiveness with the following quote:

*"I can forgive, but I cannot forget," is only another way of saying, "I will not forgive." Forgiveness ought to be like a canceled note - torn in two and burned up, so that it never can be shown against one.*

As we can see, there are multiple ways in which forgiveness is conceptualized in the literature. These views range from the victim internally letting go of the negative feelings that he/she has against the transgressor to externally releasing the offender from an acknowledged debt. Another way of viewing forgiveness is as a way to restore or rebuild damaged relationships. Although each of these viewpoints has validity, for the remainder of this paper, forgiveness will be considered as the internal letting go of the negative feelings that the transgression has created in the victim.

### *Characteristics of Forgiveness*

In order to help us understand forgiveness, some authors provide us with characteristics of forgiveness. There are two types of forgiveness, interpersonal and intrapersonal. McCullough et al. (2001) help us to understand these two types of forgiveness. The intrapersonal character of forgiveness suggests that the forgiver changes specifically in "his or her thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions" (p. 9). Forgiveness

also has an interpersonal character because it occurs as a result of a violation and the forgiver must forgive in relation to someone else. McCullough et al. (2001) also state that forgiveness is interpersonal because “it has other people as a point of reference” (p. 9). Enright and Coyle (1998) echo McCullough et al. (2001) by saying that forgiveness is a process that occurs between two people, not between a person and an event or inanimate object. In addition to this, North (1998) captures the interpersonal nature of forgiveness by saying that it is “outward-looking and other-directed” (p. 19).

Safer (1999) points out two other types of forgiveness. They are intentional and implicit. Safer (1999) defines intentional forgiveness as “willfully pursued as a goal” (p. 51). An example of intentional forgiveness would be if a conflict had occurred between person A and person B. Person A wrongs person B. Person A wants to restore the relationship so he/she goes to person B, admits his/her wrongdoing, and asks for forgiveness. If person B forgives person A, then he/she does it intentionally.

Safer (1999) defines implicit forgiveness as “a happy incidental, often retrospective, consequence of self examination...” (p. 51). An example of this is when a person who has been wronged realizes over a period of time that he/she no longer hates the offender. He/she is then able to wish the transgressor well or restore the relationship without intentionally going through the process of forgiving.

### *Misconceptions of Forgiveness*

Some people may have a hard time forgiving due to the misconceptions they might have. Understanding these misconceptions can help people to more completely comprehend forgiveness. Some people may associate forgiveness with forgetting, excusing, tolerating, pardoning, condoning, denying, reconciling, overlooking,

smothering conflict, or accepting people. The rest of this section will focus on how the literature compares forgiveness to forgetting, excusing, and reconciling.

### *Forgiveness as Forgetting*

People sometimes associate the word forgiveness with forgetting (Shriver, 1995). Shriver (1995) suggests that the slogan “remember and forgive” would be more accurate than the popular slogan “forgive and forget.” Due to the fact that memory is suffused with moral judgment, it is important to remember the transgression because it is the first step to forgiveness (Shriver, 1995). Smedes (1984) suggests that, “Forgetting, in fact, may be a dangerous way to escape the inner surgery of the heart that we call forgiving” (p. 39).

Some people may not want to forgive a hurt because they feel they should not have to forget the hurt (McCullough et al., 1997a). Sometimes survivors do not want to forgive the ones who have harmed their loved ones because they do not want their loved ones to be forgotten (Lord, 1991). Other people may hang on to the memory of the transgression because they feel like it empowers them or that losing it may spoil their tragic self-image (McCullough et al., 1997a). “Forgiveness does not remove the fact or event of wrongdoing but instead relies upon the recognition of wrong having been committed in order for the process of forgiveness to be made possible” (North, 1998, p. 17).

The “memory works in such a way that sometimes we simply forget” (McCullough et al., 1997a, p. 113). People do not always remember every small transgression that has occurred; however, it can be dangerous when they try to forget about a deep hurt that has happened to them (Smedes, 1984). Sometimes people may find



it difficult to remember trivial things such as people's names or what we learned in high school Spanish class. However, we are frequently able to recall something once we are reminded of it (McCullough et al., 1997a). McCullough et al. (1997a) state, "Those 'forgotten' words [that you learned in your high school Spanish class] aren't gone. They are playing hide-and-seek with you in your mind" (p. 113). If this is the case with Spanish words one can only imagine how hard it would be to forget a traumatic event (McCullough et al., 1997a).

Enright and Zell (1989) point out "A deep injury is rarely wiped from consciousness" (p. 54). In cases like this, memory is important to forgiveness because to begin the forgiveness process, a person needs to be able "to identify what there is to forgive and to identify it in the utmost detail possible" (Shriver, 1995, p.68). Smedes (1984) echoes Shriver (1995) when he states:

If you forget, you will not forgive at all. You can never forgive people for the things you have forgotten about. You need to forgive precisely because you have not forgotten what someone did; your memory keeps the pain alive long after the actual hurt has stopped. Remembering is your storage of pain. It is why you need to be healed in the first place (p. 38-39).

In conclusion, these and many other authors agree that forgiveness is not forgetting (McCullough et al., 2001). Forgiving and forgetting are two separate things. In order to forgive somebody, we have to be able to remember what it is that we are forgiving him/her for. As we have seen, the literature provides us with a new way of looking at forgetting. "Forgetting" may be the end result of forgiving. "You do not have

to forget after you forgive, you may, but your forgiving can be sincere even if you remember” (Smedes, 1984, p. 49).

### *Forgiving as Excusing*

Some people think that if they forgive somebody it means they excuse their behavior. They may not want to excuse the behavior because when we excuse “we understand that they were not to blame” (Smedes, 1984, p. 40). Smedes (1984), however, does not associate excusing with forgiving. He states that these are two separate things. Smedes (1984) states “We forgive people for things we blame them for. We excuse people because we understand why they had to do what they did” (p. 40). Safer (1999) defines excusing as “to explain—or to explain away—a harmful action by understanding the motivation behind it or by citing mitigating circumstances” (p. 45). Safer (1999) echoes Smedes (1984) by stating, “Neither excusing nor overlooking qualifies as forgiveness because both absolve the wrongdoer of responsibility” (p. 45).

While McCullough and his colleagues (2001) say that most researchers agree that forgiveness is not excusing, Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga, and Zungu-Dirwayi (2000) point out that there has been much disagreement regarding this issue. While Enright and Zell (1989), Smedes (1984), and Safer (1999) argue that forgiveness is not excusing, Veenstra (1992) argues that excusing is one of the forms of forgiveness. Veenstra (1992) states, “forgiving as excusing is based on the notion that if the injured person really understood the circumstances, they would view the offender’s actions differently and the offense would no longer be an offense but an unfortunate situation” (p. 162). However, according to Safer (1999) “[excusing] diminishes the perceived severity of the deed without entirely exonerating the offender...” (p. 45). Safer (1999) provides us with an

example of what forgiving as excusing might look like. She states that it would be like “...reducing the charge from murder to manslaughter” (p. 45).

As we can see, there are two different ways of looking at forgiveness and excusing. We do not need to ask for forgiveness for every little misdemeanor that happens, such as being late or not returning a phone call. Things like this are things that are excusable. Smedes (1984) states, “If you need to forgive every minor bruise that you suffer in your run for a place in the sun, you will dam up the ebb and flow of all of your fragile human relationships. We put everyone we love on guard when we turn personal misdemeanors into major felonies” (p. 15). However, there are some transgressions that are so deep that we should not just excuse them. According to Smedes (1984) some of these major transgressions can include disloyalty, betrayal and brutality. In cases such as these, we should definitely not dismiss them as easily. Smedes (1984) states, “Forgiving is tough. Excusing is easy” (p. 44). Smedes (1984) also states “It takes no saving grace to excuse someone. All excusing takes is a little insight” (p. 40). Forgiving is sometimes seen as “being mushy, soft, gutless, and oh, so understanding” (Smedes, 1984, p. 44). It would be a huge mistake if people saw forgiving as being this easy. Excusing is easy, but forgiveness takes a lot of work. “Before we forgive, we stiffen our spine and we hold a person accountable. And only then, in tough-minded judgment, can we do the outrageously impossible thing: we can forgive” (Smedes, 1984, p. 44). Smedes (1984) sums it up best when he says, “You do not excuse people by forgiving them, you forgive them at all only because you hold them to account and refuse to excuse them” (p. 49).

### *Forgiveness as Reconciliation*

Forgiveness can be confused with reconciliation. Although some scholars view reconciliation as the last stage of forgiveness (Pattison, 1965, 1969; Veenstra, 1992; Smedes, 1984), a majority of the scholars differentiate between the conceptualization of reconciliation and forgiveness (Safer, 1999; Stoop & Masteller, 1991; Freedman, 1998; Enright, et al., 1992; Elder, 1998; Enright et al. 1998; Fincham, 2000; Freedman, 1998; Enright & Coyle, 1998; Lulofs & Cahn, 2000). According to Lulofs and Cahn (2000), “Forgiveness is a cognitive process that consists of letting go of feelings of revenge and desires to retaliate. Reconciliation is a behavior process in which we rebuild trust in a relationship and work toward restoration” (p. 326). These definitions suggest that one major difference between forgiveness and reconciliation involves trust. If one forgives, this does not mean that he/she has to trust the transgressor. However, scholars agree that in order to reconcile a relationship, trust is needed (Freedman, 1998; Fincham, 2000; Enright & Coyle, 1998).

Another way in which scholars distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation, is that forgiveness only requires one person, whereas reconciliation involves two people whom desire to reconcile their relationship (Safer, 1999; Stoop & Masteller, 1991; Enright et al. 1992; Elder, 1998; Enright et al. 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989; Smedes, 1996). In addition to this, Freedman (1998) states, “One of the strongest criticisms leveled at forgiveness is that it perpetuates social injustice, particularly in abusive relationships” (p. 206). In order to prevent social injustice, one must only reconcile if “the offender’s destructive behavior and intentions change” (Freedman, 1998, p. 203). In abusive relationships, for example, if the abusive behavior does not change, then it could be dangerous for the victim to

reconcile his/her relationship with the transgressor (Enright & Zell, 1989; Enright et al., 1992; Holmgren, 1993; Cunningham, 1985; Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1996; Fow, 1996; Engel, 1990; Enright et al., 1998).

As we can see, many authors agree that forgiveness is a part of reconciliation; however, reconciliation is not a part of forgiveness. In addition to this, while forgiveness only takes one person, reconciliation takes two because the victim has to be willing to forgive, and the transgressor has to be willing to change his/her behavior. Finally, forgiveness does not necessitate trust, as it is an internal, individual process. Reconciliation, on the other hand, requires that trust be rebuilt between the victim and the transgressor in order for reconciliation to occur.

#### *Other Nice Things That Forgiveness Is Not*

Scholars agree that forgiveness is not *pardoning* (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998; Hunter, 1978). Pardoning is a legal term which is often associated with the releasing of a criminal from jail. However, as Enright et al. (1998) note, “we can forgive and still bring legal justice to bear as required by the situation” (p. 49). In addition, scholars concur that *condoning* should not be confused with forgiveness (Kolnai, 1973-74; Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright et al., 1992; Enright et al. 1998). This is because condoning implies that a transgression was trivial; whereas, forgiveness recognizes the seriousness of a transgression (Enright et al., 1992). In addition to this, forgiveness is not denying (Hunter, 1978; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Enright & Coyle, 1998). smothering conflict, tolerance, or accepting people (Smedes, 1984).

Given these misconceptions about forgiveness, it is amazing that people would be willing to forgive at all. Forgiveness is not supposed to be a quick and easy process. One

could not imagine a person breaking his/her leg and expecting to walk on it the next day. It takes time for the leg to heal. If physical injuries are not expected to heal overnight, then how can one expect emotional injuries to heal quickly? When someone hurts us badly, it takes time for the emotional wound to heal. Forgiveness is not an easy process. People expect to wear a cast for many weeks and possibly undergo physical therapy for complete rehabilitation of a broken leg. People rarely question whether or not this process has benefits for them. However, people are less inclined to put forth the effort and the time to completely rehabilitate an emotional wound. They often question whether or not forgiveness has benefits for themselves.

## Chapter 2

### To Forgive or Not to Forgive

The previous chapter considered what forgiveness is and discussed some misconceptions about forgiveness. The next question I would like to address is how an individual decides whether or not to forgive. The decision regarding whether or not to forgive depends on what people think about forgiveness. People have a wide variety of reasons behind their acts of forgiveness. When people are making the decision to forgive, it may depend on their understanding of forgiveness, their thoughts on why people forgive, as well as on the perceived benefits and risks of forgiveness. In this chapter, we will look at some theories and empirical studies about why people forgive.

#### *Trend of More Recent Research on Forgiveness*

A recent search for the keyword “forgiveness” in the PsychINFO database retrieved over a thousand articles, however, seven hundred and five articles were written after 1997. McCullough, Exline, & Baumeister (1998) note that many of the articles that have been published have focused on confession, apologies, blame and revenge. Therefore, when the search was limited to articles, dissertations, and chapters with forgiveness in the description, the number of items decreased to five hundred eighty-four. Of these items, two hundred fifty-two were published in the years 1998 to 2005. Of these articles, one hundred fifty-three were empirical studies published in journals.

In all of the years prior to 1998 only ninety-seven empirical studies were conducted on or relating to forgiveness. There have been more empirical studies on the subject of forgiveness between 1998 and 2005 than ever before. However McCullough et al. (1998a) state, “The studies that we uncovered employed a wide range of scientific

methodologies, from gaming studies and deception-based laboratory experiments to field interventions” (p. 194). In addition to this, McCullough et al.’s (1998a) annotated bibliography shows how studies, which look primarily at things other than forgiveness (e.g. guilt or blame), can help a researcher have a better understanding of forgiveness.

### *Why Do People Forgive?*

There is not one simple answer to the question, “Why do people forgive?” Scholars and lay people have offered many theories as to why people forgive. Some of the reasons for forgiveness include the healing of “hurt” caused by a transgression (Fincham, 2000; Smedes, 1984), ending the cycle of revenge (Safer, 1999; Smedes, 1984), and maintaining one’s self image (Safer, 1999). In addition, religion, morality, and the amount of distress also play a role in why people forgive (Safer, 1999; Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Meek, Albright & McMinn, 1995; DiBlasio, 1993; DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993; Enright et al., 1989; Fincham, 2000). Other reasons for forgiveness include repairing and maintaining relationships (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993; Enright et al., 1989; Freedman & Enright, 1996; McCullough et al., 1997a; Kelley, 1998; Fincham, 2000; Metts et al., 2001), as well as the desire for power (Smedes, 1984), for conformity with social ideals (Safer, 1999), and for relief of stress (McCullough et al., 1997a). In addition to these reasons for forgiveness, the research on forgiveness provides the following motivations: the person’s personality (Downie, 1971; Mauger, Perry, Freeman, Grove, McBride, McKinney, 1992; Fincham, 2000), their view of forgiveness (Fincham, 2000), strategy of the offender (Metts et al., 2001; Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton, 1995; Weiner, Graham, Peter & Zmuidinas, 1991; McCullough et al., 1997b; Kelley, 1998; Gonzales, Haugen & Manning, 1994; Takaku, 2001; Takaku, Weiner & Ohbuchi, 2001), love



(Kelley, 1998), well-being (Kelley, 1998), reframing one's view of the incident (Kelley, 1998), as well as empathy (McCullough et al., 1997b; Takaku, 2001; Takaku et al., 2001; Konstam et al., 2001), shame and guilt (Konstam et al., 2001).

As we can see, there are many things that may motivate a person to forgive. The rest of this chapter will focus on the healing of hurt; repairing and maintaining relationships; and well-being as motivations to forgive.

### *Healing of Hurt*

*What is hurt?* Hurt is a social phenomenon. According to Vangelisti (1994) "...people feel hurt as the result of some interpersonal event—something they perceive was said or done by another individual" (p.54). There are some transgressions that can be considered trivial and do not require going through the complex process of forgiving, because life is too short to let minor slights weigh a person down. (Smedes, 1984). Coleman (1998) notes that hurts that are deep enough to require the forgiveness process are about one of three things: "loss of love or lovability; such as when a loved one dies or a relationship ends," "loss of self-esteem," or "loss of control or influence" (p.88).

There are two sources of deep hurt that may compel a person to forgive. The first source of hurt is behaviors, such as rape, infidelity, or betrayal (Coleman, 1998; Smedes, 1984). The second source of hurt is verbal "messages that participants perceive evoked their hurt feelings" (Vangelisti, 1994, p.60). The old adage "sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me," implies that words cannot hurt a person as much as physical objects. However, Vangelisti (1994) notes that communication scholars would not agree. Words actually can hurt people like physical objects do (Vangelisti, 1994).

The significance of the transgression varies from situation to situation, or from person to person based on the attributions that he/she assigns to the transgression, such as the motivation and/or intent of the transgressor (Vangelisti, 1994; Fincham, 2000). It also varies based on his/her perceptions of the transgression (Fincham, 2000). For example, a person might attribute a transgression such as an unreturned phone call to another person's busy schedule, therefore this might be perceived as mildly annoying and trivial. However, the victim might attribute several unreturned phone calls to disloyalty on the part of the transgressor (Vangelisti, 1994; Smedes, 1984). In this case the transgression might be interpreted as a moral injury (Smedes, 1984). A moral injury is a major transgression that requires forgiveness (Smedes, 1984). In addition to this, one person might perceive a transgression such as an interruption during a dinner party conversation as a minor offense, while another person might perceive that same interruption as a major felony requiring forgiveness (Fincham, 2000).

*How does hurt occur?* One of the major challenges in relationships is the possibility of being hurt (Fincham, 2000, 2001; McCullough et al. 1997b). Close relationships are paradoxical in that they fulfill our deepest affiliative needs, but also have the potential to cause injury (Fincham, 2000). Fincham (2000) states, "It is a rare person who has never felt 'wronged,' 'let down,' 'betrayed,' or 'hurt' by a relationship partner" (p. 2). He goes on to say that in close relationships people voluntarily make themselves vulnerable; however, this vulnerability can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can provide a profound sense of well-being (Fincham, 2000). On the other hand, due to the fact that people are imperfect, hurt or injury is bound to happen (Fincham, 2000). When it does happen, the hurt is particularly painful because the victim makes

him/herself vulnerable (Fincham, 2000). When an injury happens, the person may have negative feelings towards the offender.

*What is the role of forgiveness in healing hurt?* Smedes (1984) addresses this question. He notes that once a hurt has occurred, the event and the emotions that go with it continue to haunt the victim. Smedes (1984) describes this haunting in the following way:

Your own memory is a replay of your hurt – a videotape within your soul that plays unending reruns of your old rendezvous with pain. You cannot switch it off. You are hooked into it like a pain junkie; you become addicted to your remembrance of pain past. You are lashed again each time your memory spins the tape. (p. 133)

Allowing this to happen only hurts the victim in the long run (Smedes, 1984). This may be because the incident damages how the victim continues to see him/her self. In addition to this, the incident may affect how the victim perceives others' views of him/her. Smedes (1984) suggests that one of the more productive ways to heal this pain might be to forgive the person. This may be a main reason why people choose to forgive.

While this idea of a transgression leaving the person with what Lulofs and Cahn (2000) call "emotional residue" is noted in research, there is very little research on the role that forgiveness plays in healing the "hurts" caused by transgressions.

### *Repairing and Maintaining Relationships*

Relationships can be fragile due to the fact that when people enter into voluntary relationships, they make themselves vulnerable. As Fincham (2000) notes, vulnerability can be both constructive and destructive in a relationship. As relationships develop, partners become increasingly confident that they know each other and what to expect (Metts et al., 2001). However, this security provides the environment for a potential relational transgression to occur (Couch, Jones & Moore, 1999). The expectations that make people secure in their relationships also make them vulnerable to injury because it is when the expectations are not met that people are injured (Fincham, 2000; Metts et al., 2001; Couch et al., 1999). When a transgression does occur, people have to choose what action they are going to take. If they choose retaliation, withdrawal, or avoidance, it could result in the destruction of the relationship. However, if one wants to attempt to repair or maintain the relationship, then he/she may want to consider forgiveness as an option. Forgiveness may not be easy; however, it is an important action to consider because it can help the existing relationship as well as new relationships that may come about in a person's life that might be affected by the previous transgression (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993; Enright et al., 1989; Freedman & Enright, 1996). Forgiveness appears to be the choice that would benefit the person in the long run when overlooking the transgression is not practical (Fincham, 2000).

*How does the nature of the relationship affect a person's motivation to forgive in order to repair and maintain the relationship?* In a study, Kelley (1998) found that the participants' motivation to repair and maintain a relationship depended on the nature of the relationship. In addition to this, the type of relationship affected whether or not the

person felt explicitly or implicitly obligated to forgive. There are two main categories in which relationships can fall: involuntary and voluntary.

In an involuntary relationship, such as a family relationship, if a person chooses not to let go of the hurt he/she is still in that relationship. The person may feel implicitly obligated not to allow a transgression to affect his/her relationship with another family member (Vangelisti, 1994). Therefore, a victim in this type of relationship may feel obligated to forgive in order to maintain the involuntary relationship. For example, a family member who has been hurt might feel obligated to forgive because at family gatherings, he/she is expected to be civil to the other family member.

In a voluntary relationship, such as a friendship, the obligation of forgiveness may not be forced because one need not remain in the relationship. Kelley (1998), however, found that people are more likely to be motivated to forgive in voluntary relationships, such as friendships or romantic relationships because they have a choice. In addition to this, Kelley (1998) found that a person's decision regarding forgiveness in order to maintain the relationship is related to the severity of the offense in comparison to the worth of the relationship. One of Kelley's (1998) respondents reported the following statement "I forgave the person because it was not a major problem that the tape was destroyed. It was not worth risking a friendship over" (p. 262). The romantic partners and friends were more motivated to forgive for the restoration of the relationship than were family members.

*How do characteristics of relationships relate to forgiveness?* Although it has yet to be proven empirically, Fincham (2000) states,

It is a safe bet to assume that [a person's general idea of forgiveness and their decision to forgive a partner] are related empirically. However, as the association is unlikely to be perfect, one can hypothesize that characteristics of the person in relation to the partner are likely to be more powerful determinants of forgiving in the relationship (p. 14).

Several characteristics of relationships may promote forgiveness. McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight.(1998) provide the following characteristics of a relationship that promote forgiveness. The first characteristic mentioned is investment of resources, where both parties are more likely to want to maintain the relationship if resources such as love, time, and money had been invested and returned. In addition to this, the longer one is in a relationship, the more likely one is to forgive. Other factors that contribute to the likelihood of forgiveness are the ability to look at the relationship as a whole rather than as each person for themselves, and how well the partners' interests merge. In addition to this, partners with greater emotional intimacy are likely to have more empathy toward each other. When partners have a high quality relationship, it is easier for them to interpret their partner's transgression as unintentional. Lastly, people who are dedicated to the relationship are more likely to confess and apologize after a transgression has occurred. If a relationship has any or all of the above qualities, forgiveness is predicted to occur more often (see McCullough et al., 1998b, p. 1588).

*How does love affect a person's motivation to forgive in order to repair and maintain the relationship?* In a study done by Kelley (1998), it was found that 15% of respondents provided love as a reason for forgiving people. However, Kelley (1998) separated love and repairing relationships into two distinct categories of motivations for forgiveness due to the fact that love was not always mentioned in conjunction with repairing the relationship. One example of this is the following response: "I forgave him because I love him and he needed my forgiveness to make himself feel better" (Kelley, 1998, p. 262). In this excerpt, one might assume that the person forgave her lover, but the relationship was not restored. Although Kelley (1998) made the distinction between love and maintaining or restoring the relationship, they may go hand in hand as well. For example, if dating partners have an argument, one partner's motivation for forgiving the other might be to restore the relationship because he/she loves the other person.

Love can take many forms; it does not always have to be romantic. Kelley (1998) found that dating partners were more likely than friends or family members to state love as a motivation for forgiveness. One reason for this outcome could be that friends may not report that they love one another due to the connotation of the word "love." Perhaps if people expanded their conceptualization about love beyond the traditional association of love and romance, then family members and friends may be equally likely as dating partners to report love as a motivation to forgive.

*How does reframing affect a person's motivation to forgive in order to repair and maintain the relationship?* North (1998) explains that reframing is more than a way of viewing the transgressor and the transgression in context; it is also "a way of separating the wrongdoer from the wrong which has been committed" (p.26). When people reframe

a transgression, they go through the process of changing the way they view the offender (Kelley, 1998). For example, in Kelley's (1998) research, the offender's action, which may have been originally viewed as intentional, was subsequently viewed by the victim as unintentional. Kelley (1998) provided the following excerpt from a narrative: "I forgave him, primarily because I love him and I know that what occurred was not part of his normal character. He comes from a great family, he's a Christian, and I knew he wasn't the cheating kind" (p. 262-263). In this excerpt the victim used other known facts about the offender to reframe what happened. Kelley (1998) notes that reframing can occur through "... gaining understanding, diminishing the effect of the infraction, [and] viewing the offender as not responsible for his or her infractions" (p. 267).

While Kelley (1998) classified reframing as a motivation to forgive, it may be more appropriate to talk about it in the context of the process of forgiveness. In addition to this, Kelley (1998) distinguishes reframing from repairing and maintaining relationships; however, one might argue that the victim should reframe in order to repair the relationship. When a transgression occurs, it could lead to conflict. Reframing is sometimes useful in resolving conflict. If, in the example provided above, the woman wanted to repair her relationship with her boyfriend, her reframing in order to forgive him was probably useful in repairing the relationship.

Frequently, reframing is used in resolving conflicts. However, when it is used in conflict resolution, it is usually in the form of language reframing, which is turning a negative statement into a positive one (Yarbrough & Wilmot, 1995.) Yarbrough and Wilmot (1995) provide the following example of language reframing:

From: She is selfish.



To: She knows how to get her needs met.

She is able to keep others from controlling her life.

She sure can keep herself going by never being depleted. (p. 136)

In Kelley's (1998) research on the other hand, instead of reframing the language, the victim reframes the whole situation, as shown by his example mentioned earlier.

### *Well-being*

According to Kelley (1998), the well-being of the victim and/or the transgressor motivates the victim to forgive. One of the ways that forgiveness helps the victim's well-being is by lowering his/her anger (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Fitzgibbons, 1998; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Konstam et al., 2001). Kelley (1998) provides the following example, which illustrates the effect that a transgression may have on a victim: "Then I began to realize that this anger was not only torturing him, but myself as well. It was eating me up inside and making me more of an angry person..." (p. 262). In addition to this, studies have shown that when people forgive, their depression lowers; therefore possibly increasing their well-being (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Al-Mabuk, Enright & Cardis, 1995; Hebl & Enright, 1993). The third way in which forgiveness can affect a person's well-being is by lowering their anxiety (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993). Finally, Coyle and Enright (1997) have found that forgiveness helps lower the victim's grief, which may increase their well-being.

### *Research Questions*

Thus far, the literature reviewed has discussed how transgressions can harm a person and his/her relationship and how forgiveness can be beneficial to the relationship. In addition to this, the literature has discussed what motivates people to forgive. However, the literature has not demonstrated what forgiveness might look like in day-to-day life.

As human beings enter into relationships, they often risk being hurt. When people get hurt, they frequently go to pastors or counselors for assistance in dealing with the pain that they feel. In order to assist pastors and counselors with helping victims to deal with the pain of transgressions that have occurred, the following research questions have been proposed:

RQ1: How do professionals conceptualize forgiveness?

RQ2: How do professionals view forgiveness?

RQ3: How do professionals assist the victim with the process of forgiveness?

## Chapter 3

### Methods

#### *Procedure*

My first task was to select the participants. I first made a list of five counselors whom I knew personally. Two additional counselors were referred to me by an acquaintance. Originally, I intended to interview six counselors with one additional interview conducted as a practice interview. Due to the fact that the practice interview went smoothly, I decided to use it as well. In order to find the pastors<sup>1</sup> for the study, I looked in a phone book. Originally, I intended to interview six pastors. Due to the fact that I was unable to schedule appointments with two of the pastors whom I originally chose to interview, I scheduled an appointment with a different pastor who was a pastoral acquaintance. Therefore, my participants consisted of seven counselors and five pastors.

Next, I sent each pastor or counselor a letter (see Appendix A), then upon receiving their consent to participate in the study, I scheduled an interview. The interviews were recorded and conducted in quiet, secure and mutually agreed upon settings. During each interview the participants were first asked a series of questions to determine the nature of a typical client or parishioner. In addition to this, counselors were also asked about their method of counseling. Pastors, on the other hand, were asked whether or not they counseled people. The participants were then asked questions directed towards finding out how they conceptualize forgiveness, their view of forgiveness, as well as how they would assist a person with the process of forgiveness. Clarification and redirection questions were asked as needed (see Appendix B and C).

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<sup>1</sup> The word pastor is used to refer to all leaders of Christian churches within this study.

The next step was to listen to each of the tapes and transcribe the interviews. As the tapes were being transcribed, pseudo names were assigned to each person. In addition to this, each pastor and/or counselor was assigned a number at random. The counselors were numbered one through seven, and the pastors were numbered eight through twelve. Once the interviews were transcribed the tapes were then destroyed for confidentiality purposes. Then each transcript was divided into six parts, which matched the six questions that were asked. These were then copied into six separate documents labeled question #1, question #2, and so forth.

The next step was to read all of the answers to question #1, question #2, and so on. The answers to each question were then thematically coded using the headings provided by the results. For example, for question #2, "How do Pastors and Counselors view forgiveness?", some of the codes were *important relationships*, *important well-being*, *help moving on/freedom*, and others. The quotes were grouped into major headings and minor headings at the same time. For example, all of the quotes that were labeled *important relationships* were grouped together. Each main group and sub group was then labeled with the common code. For example, all of the quotes that were coded *important* were placed under a major heading entitled, "Why is Forgiveness Important." All of the quotes under this category were then labeled according to the second word in common. For example, all of the quotes that were coded *important relationships* were placed under a sub heading entitled *relationships*. Once the quotes were grouped and labeled, each group was analyzed and reported in the results section.

## *Participants*

### *Pastors*

All of the pastors whom I interviewed were males. I interviewed two Catholic priests, one traditional and one who had a more “contemporary” style. In addition to this, I chose one Episcopalian pastor, one Presbyterian pastor, and a non-denominational Evangelical pastor.

Two of the five pastors counseled people in addition to their duties as a pastor. One pastor considered himself more of a pastoral counselor and one was more of a spiritual director. The final pastor who was interviewed was primarily in charge of organizing retreats for groups.

The pastors whom I interviewed had a very broad age-range of parishioners with whom they worked. One of them worked mostly with teen-agers; two of them worked mainly with the adults in their congregations (20-plus years of age). One pastor said that he worked with people anywhere from 5 years to 90 years of age. Unfortunately, I was unable to find out what his typical age-range for parishioners was. The other pastor worked with the adults (30-40 years of age) in the congregation.

As with age ranges, the reasons that people come in to talk to a pastor were varied. For example, they might see a pastor about finding a place in the church or parish. Another reason to see a pastor is to share personal experiences of God, maybe even going to confession. Some people come if they are having struggles with their faith, spirituality, prayer, or with their academic work. In addition to this, parishioners came to the pastors because they were having difficulties in relationships. The types of relationships in which people experience problems include friendship, family, and marital relationships. They

also may go to a pastor if they want an annulment. Finally, parishioners come to their pastors to talk about anything they want to. For example, what they want to do, or be.

### *Counselors*

Of the counselors I interviewed, only one was female and six were male. Four classified themselves as clinical psychologists and had Ph.D.'s in psychology. Of the clinical psychologists, one specialized in neuro-behavioral psychology and three were general psychologists. In addition to this, I interviewed three counselors who classified themselves as general counselors, with M.A.'s in counseling. One had an M.A. in Christian counseling, one was a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), and one of the general counselors focused on pre-marital counseling.

Some of the counselors said they use client-centered or cognitive-behavioral approaches. One counselor explained client-centered therapy in the following way:

Client-centered is a type of therapy developed by Carl Rogers in the 50's that's... based on reflection and clarification of... client statements, helping them to understand themselves better. It's a non-directional form of therapy. (Counselor #3)

Another counselor explained cognitive-behavioral counseling as:

Focusing on thoughts or cognitions and the way that relates to behaviors and the fact that our behaviors are dependent on the way we perceive things and view things internally and vice versa... It's very much [an active] problem solving approach... (Counselor #6)

One of my counselors also used the Adlerian/Constructivist approach, which:

...suggests that we create our own reality, and we create our own problems and we kind of construct our world based on our early childhood experiences and our cultural environment... we construct our world and we start going in a certain direction because of this kind of personal construction of reality... what we need to do with clients is to help them see where their construction of the world, or the way they view the world, and what they expect from other people, what they expect from themselves, what they hope for, where those things aren't working so well. (Counselor #4)

Most counselors, however, combine methods, depending on the client.

The counselors whom I interviewed had a variety of clients who they counseled. Two of them specified that a majority of their clients are male teen-agers. One counselor works with females and males and he typically works with clients who are teenagers. Two of the counselors work with males and females and both counsel people between the ages of 30 and 40. One of the counselors only sees adult, female clients. The last counselor I interviewed works with adult males and females (primarily in couples counseling).

Due to the fact that they have many different struggles, the reasons that the counselees seek therapy are varied, like the ages were. They seek counseling because they are struggling with depression, impulsive behavior, behavioral choices, and delinquency. In addition to this, people also see these counselors if they are having family issues (i.e., childhood trauma and abuse, parenting issues, or spousal abuse). Some counselors work with individuals who do not agree about religion. Anxiety, sexual orientation, and job-related stress can also interfere with relationships. Finally, the

counselees may have difficulties dealing with peers, personality issues, problems related to substance abuse, eating disorders, or learning difficulties.



## Chapter 4

### Results

#### *How Do Professionals Conceptualize Forgiveness?*

When the counselors and pastors were interviewed, they were asked a series of probing questions to find out how they conceptualized forgiveness. The majority of the professionals use metaphors to conceptualize forgiveness. In order to clarify the conceptualization of forgiveness, the professionals were asked to provide a real-life example of forgiveness.

Due to the fact that forgiveness is such an abstract concept, several professionals provided metaphors to help illustrate the concept of forgiveness. The two primary metaphors that professionals used were letting go and releasing.

#### *Letting go*

When a person cannot forgive, it is like “having a big weight tied around your leg and you fell into the sea. And if you don’t come to forgive, you just go further and further down into the depths” (Pastor #12). This metaphor shows what can happen if people do not let go of the transgression. When people enter into relationships, they enter the sea of life. When a transgression happens in a relationship, the person has a choice of whether or not to hang on to the hurt, or to let it go. If they choose to hang on to the hurt then it gradually becomes so heavy they cannot hold on to it with their hands, and they end up tying it to their leg so they will not lose it. However, the only danger with tying this weight to their leg is that it will become so heavy they can no longer stay afloat. If they want to survive then they have to let go of that weight.

According to one counselor, “Many folks carry with them a lot of negative baggage from previous experiences... Those negative experiences then continue to interfere with the way they interact with others or perceive others” (Counselor #6). This counselor also states that once people have had a transgression done to them, forgiving involves emotionally letting go of that negative experience. According to another counselor, the process of letting go would consist of accepting what happened, having some understanding of what the transgressor’s motive was, coming to terms with it, moving on, and making better decisions in the future. Another part of letting go is “to change what you can, and learning to let go of what you can’t change” (Pastor #9). Another counselor feels that the end result of forgiveness is when a person is at peace with the transgression, even though the consequences are still present.

### *Releasing*

Several professionals use releasing metaphors when describing forgiveness. One professional gives us the following metaphor:

...lack of forgiveness...is like a sailboat that is sitting in the water, and its sails are full, and [yet] it’s straining to move forward and there is a stern rope that is still tied to the dock. And forgiveness is cutting that [rope]. (Pastor #10)

The above metaphor represents why forgiveness could be associated with releasing. After a transgression occurs, it may be a challenge for the victim to move forward because when the transgression happens, it is like tying a boat up so that it will not float away. When an owner ties a boat to the dock, it is usually because he/she does not want it to float away unexpectedly. When a transgression occurs, the transgressor does not usually intend to have control over the victim. However, the transgressor may not realize that

when the wrong is committed, the victim ends up being bound to that past transgression. Unlike a boat, which is at the mercy of the person who secured it, the victim is not at the mercy of the transgressor in deciding where he/she wants to go. Victims have the ability to cut the rope that the transgressor has wrapped around them. Victims can cut this rope by using a very sharp knife called “forgiveness.” When the victim forgives, he/she cuts the rope and is free to live and do whatever he/she pleases.

Another pastor provides a different way to view releasing. He claims that it is like “ripping up a [promissory] note...like a mortgage...” (Pastor #11). When a person rips up a promissory note, it means the person is no longer held responsible for repaying his/her debt. This metaphor implies that when a person forgives, he/she no longer holds the transgressor accountable for his/her actions.

One counselor believes that when people release the transgression they release the transgressor from any additional consequences. They are no longer holding the transgression against the person, because they do not want to punish the transgressor anymore than necessary. According to another counselor, when victims release their transgressor, they release the emotional hold that the transgressor has over him/her.

#### *Other ways of conceptualizing forgiveness*

In addition to conceptualizing forgiveness as releasing or letting go, some professionals have provided three other ways of looking at forgiveness. They are looking each other in the face, change in picture, and reconciliation.

*Looking each other in the face.* According to one pastor, most forgiveness occurs inside the person. However, when it occurs between two people, he described it as two people being able to look each other in the face and for both of them to know what needs

to be decided. The decision that needs to be made is about how they are going to handle their relationship given the transgression that has occurred.

*Change in picture.* “Forgiveness looks like two people scowling at each other at one edge of a series of photographs, and at the other edge shows them relaxed and comfortable with each other” (Counselor #3). This metaphor shows the transformation that a person goes through from the beginning of the forgiveness process to the end. At the beginning of the forgiveness process, the person may not be able to look the transgressor in the face and smile at him/her. If the transgression was severe enough to require the forgiveness process, the person would not be able to be around the transgressor willingly, immediately after the conflict occurred. As people work through the process of forgiveness they may be able to gradually change their expression towards the transgressor. As time goes on, the comfort level gradually increases so they are more relaxed the next time when they interact with the transgressor. This relaxation process occurs as a result of letting go of the emotion.

*Reconciliation.* One pastor describes forgiveness as looking like “a genuine hug... not a formal being social hug, but a real warm embrace” (Pastor #8). Using the metaphor of a genuine hug indicates that the two people must have reconciled their differences. In order to give somebody a genuine hug, a person needs to have no negative feelings toward the transgressor. In order for a person to return the hug, he/she must reciprocate the feeling. The hug could lead to the relationship being reconciled; or the hug could be the end of the relationship. The relationship could end if the transgressor was abusive; the victim might be scared to continue the relationship for fear of being

abused again. In this situation, the victim could hug the transgressor as a symbol of closure to the relationship.

### *Real Life Examples of Forgiveness*

When the professionals were asked for a real-life example of forgiveness, the professionals' responses fell into three major categories: major global happenings, minor personal occurrences, and major personal occurrences.

#### *Major Global Happenings*

When a major transgression occurs on a global scale, often forgiveness on a national level needs to take place because the event affects many people other than those directly involved in the transgression. One pastor provided the after effects of the Vietnam War as an incident that required global forgiveness. The Vietnam War not only affected the soldiers who fought in it and their families, but it also affected the whole nation. Almost everyone lost a relative, friend, or acquaintance to the war. Though the information was often delayed, the American media constantly covered events happening in Vietnam. Therefore, Americans could not escape from hearing about the Vietnam War even though they were not present. Americans reacted by organizing mass demonstrations on American campuses and in major American cities. American males lived in constant fear of being drafted; many young men chose to go to Canada rather than fight, which caused even more division within the country. After the Vietnam War, soldiers were not given a warm welcome upon their return home. They received no respect for their participation, and many were treated as if they were enemies rather than heroes even though they were not to blame. This caused much guilt and anger among the returning veterans, as many either felt somehow responsible for the war or were angry at

the way they were treated after the war. The whole nation was divided on whether or not American troops should be in Vietnam.

Even today, talk of the Vietnam War evokes strong emotions in Americans who lived through this time. Historians continue to battle over the horrors that took place in Vietnam, and many people have not reconciled with the events of the war. This counselor also mentions that the country never really forgave the people who participated in the war, nor did they forgive themselves for participating in it. As a nation, America largely moved on from the Vietnam War without really understanding or fully processing the war and its effects. As a result, events and circumstances surrounding the war still haunt many Americans.

For those of us who were not around when the Vietnam War took place, another national tragedy that happened during our generation was the attack on the World Trade Center. When the planes flew into the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>, the terrorists were not going after just one person; rather they were attacking a whole nation. This attack not only affected the people that actually were in the World Trade Center at the time of the attack, but it affected their families as well as the whole nation. Even people who did not have family members who died in the attack were affected. The attack interrupted everybody's lives. For a couple of days after the attack, everyone's attention was on the impact of the situation. It was the main topic of conversation for weeks. The event was so incredible that it interrupted the daily programming on television. Every time someone turned on the television to a nationally syndicated station such as NBC or CBS, all that could be seen was the after effects of the attack. Everywhere a person went, he/she was forced to see coverage of what was going on.

When a transgression like this has occurred, it can be a challenge for people to forgive because so many lives were negatively affected.

### *Minor Personal Transgressions*

Transgressions that require forgiveness can also happen on a personal level. When these transgressions happen on a more personal level, these transgressions only affect the people who are directly involved in the transgression. Some transgressions can be minor while others can be major. One counselor mentioned that a situation in which a very minor transgression may require forgiveness is when a person arrives five minutes late for a scheduled appointment.

Another pastor provided the following situation in which forgiveness might be more of a challenge to grant: "...when one of my daughters displeases me, and when she recognizes that she has displeased me, she asks for forgiveness..." (Pastor #11). When his daughter asks for forgiveness he grants her forgiveness. If his daughter does not ask for forgiveness then he

...[has] to recognize that she is [his] daughter and [he needs] to give love to her regardless of whether she sees that wrong, and [he] just [has] to hope that God will help her see what she's done without [him] withholding love from her.

(Pastor #11)

In this situation the pastor did not have to forgive his daughter if she did not apologize, but if he did not then it would be harmful to their relationship.

### *Major Personal Transgressions*

Some transgressions that occur can be major. However, since these transgressions only affect the person who is involved, these transgressions happen on a personal level as

opposed to a global level. One counselor mentions that abuse is one situation that represents a personal transgression that is major. In abusive situations, the person who survived the abuse may be traumatized for life. In this case, the forgiveness process is harder and longer to go through than for a minor transgression. He also states that being able to let go of the event and move on without blaming others for their difficulties can help the victim move through the forgiveness process.

### *How Do Professionals View Forgiveness?*

In the interviews that were conducted, participants were asked a series of questions to find out how they viewed forgiveness. It was found that professionals primarily view forgiveness as being important because it gives victims the freedom to move on with life and it can help the victim maintain relationships with the transgressor as well as others outside of the transgression. Forgiveness is also important because of the victim's spiritual beliefs. In addition to this, professionals believe that forgiveness is important for the emotional well-being of the victim and for other reasons. Professionals also feel that forgiveness is therapeutic because it helps the victim. It benefits the victim because it can help him/her to have the freedom to move on with life, increase his/her ability to love, and improve his/her emotional well-being.

### *Why is Forgiveness Important?*

*Freedom.* Forgiveness is important because it gives the victim freedom from the past. As one counselor notes, "forgiveness... is the baseline for freedom" (Counselor #7). He also mentions that forgiveness gives people freedom in life instead of taking their life away. One pastor notes that forgiveness allows the individual the freedom to move forward and to grow into his/her potential as a human being. According to another



counselor, forgiveness frees people to deal with issues that are currently affecting them rather than focusing on issues from their past.

*Relationships.* According to one pastor, it is inevitable that human beings are likely to hurt one another while they are in relationships, whether knowingly or unknowingly. He also states that this hurt is going to sever the relationship between the victim and the transgressor. Therefore, several professionals agree that forgiveness is important in maintaining the relationship with the transgressor. One pastor notes, "... You can't be yourself until those relationships are in the process of being repaired" (Pastor #9). This statement implies that in order to truly be oneself, one has to repair the relationship. However, I argue that one does not have to repair every relationship in order to be him/her self again. If a hurt occurs, then it affects our ability to be ourselves.

In addition, transgressions affect our ability to relate with the transgressor. According to one counselor, in order to restore the relationship, one needs to start the process of forgiveness. While the victim may forgive the transgressor, as another counselor recounted, this does not mean that he/she has to trust that person immediately. The transgressor needs to earn back the victim's trust. This counselor also notes "... [the] person who has offended [the victim] needs to earn [his/her] trust back through their actions." He continues, "...I may forgive my wife, but I may not exactly trust her right away..." (Counselor #1).

An important part of maintaining healthy relationships is forgiveness; however, in order to forgive, the transgressor needs to truly repent. As this counselor notes, "True repentance is 'I'm not going to do it anymore. I'm sorry, ... there's no [excuse]. I shouldn't have said it. I shouldn't have done it...that's true repentance; I'm not going to

do it anymore” (Counselor #1). Once trust is in the process of being restored, the relationship has the potential to progress. Another pastor mentions, when forgiveness does not occur, a problem is created. According to him, almost all of our relationships will have areas where forgiveness is needed in order to continue the relationship.

According to one pastor, forgiveness is also important in order to have healthy relationships with other people outside the transgression. As he mentions, “... withholding forgiveness affects the way we relate to everything, because it will change the way we look at life, it will change our orientations with other people” (Pastor #11). Another counselor mentions forgiving other people is important because it allows them to involve themselves in relationships with others in the future. He also notes that in order to be an upbeat person in other peoples’ lives, we need to forgive; for those who are unable to forgive are often not free to place their energy into healthy relationships. According to another counselor, this is because “when we carry grudges along with us it tends to affect, in a negative way, how we interact with other people” (Counselor #6). Finally, another counselor concludes, “At some point where there is a wrong, or perceived wrong, it doesn’t just influence one individual or two individual parties, but it usually influences greater spheres” (Counselor #7).

*Spiritual beliefs.* According to one counselor, many Christians believe that forgiveness is intricately woven into their relationship with Christ. Another pastor also notes people should forgive “seventy times seven,” since this is what Christ demands of us in Matthew 18:21-22 (NIV). He interprets this to mean a person is supposed to forgive infinitely, no matter what the situation may be at the time. Another pastor emphasizes that forgiveness is part of being a Christian and having a relationship with God.

This counselor also notes that forgiveness is a practical implication of a person's professed faith in Jesus Christ. People will be offended by others but this counselor believes "[Christians] have to continually be living for Christ, [because] he lives in [them] and if [they] don't forgive [they] stop up the flow of grace, life becomes about pleasing [them] not God" (Counselor #1). He concludes that "...it's a necessity for those who want to abide in Christ" (Counselor #1).

*Emotional well-being.* One counselor noted that forgiveness is important for some people to forgive and move on, because they do not need to be consumed by the past. Being consumed by the past might hinder some people's peace of mind. One pastor also notes that if we cling to things others have done against us it creates an emotional drain that can suck the life right out of us. When we are drained of life, our emotional well-being is decreased.

Another pastor notes that if people are not willing to forgive, it affects their spirit by causing it to wither and die. As the spirit of the person dies, he/she starts to "become less human" (Pastor #12). Another pastor mentions that it is important because if a person refuses to forgive someone, it will destroy that person's emotional well-being. As one counselor notes, when a professional tells a victim to "release" the offender, the victim may have a misconception of what "release" means. The victim may think it means to release the offender from consequences, when in reality the victim is actually releasing him/her self from the offender's behavior. As this counselor notes, by not allowing the offender's actions to affect his/her emotional well-being, the victim is able to find peace.

*Other reasons why forgiveness is important.* Some professionals mention healing, reconciliation, and benefits to society as also being important reasons to forgive. In

addition, one counselor mentions it is important for a person to express his/her hurt before moving on with the rest of the forgiveness process.

Professionals collectively suggested seven reasons why it is important for the victim to forgive their transgressor. Eight out of the twelve professionals suggested that forgiveness was important in order to maintain relationships with the transgressors with an equal number of pastors and counselors making this comment. Six professionals agree that lack of forgiveness can have a negative effect on a person's emotional well-being, again with an equal number of pastors and counselors. Two other reasons why it is important for people to forgive, that were mentioned by more than one professional, were spirituality and freedom. Three professionals agreed that forgiveness is important if the victim has spiritual beliefs. Of the three professionals who mentioned spiritual beliefs as the reason why it may be important for a victim to forgive, two were pastors and one was a counselor. Three professionals mentioned freedom as an important reason why people need to forgive. Of the three professionals who mentioned freedom as the reason why it may be important for the victim to forgive, two were counselors and one was a pastor. In addition to this, there are four more reasons why forgiveness is important. They are: hurt, healing, reconciliation, as well as benefit to society. Each of these ideas was only mentioned once by four different professionals. Interestingly, counselors were the only participants to mention these reasons as to why forgiveness is important.

#### *How Does Forgiveness Help the Victim?*

*Freedom to move on.* Several professionals feel that forgiveness helps the victim by giving him/her the freedom to move on with life. One counselor adds that forgiveness initiates a process of allowing freedom for the victim, by giving him/her a new start in

life so he/she is not encumbered by the past transgression. Another counselor adds that forgiveness does not change the history, but it initiates the process and it compliments the process of bringing freedom from the effects of the past event. Two professionals note that the freedom to move on is important because it does not allow past events to burden the victim. One pastor mentions that moving on also helps “restore [a person] to wholeness” (Pastor #10). According to some professionals, the freedom to move on involves working on present issues rather than focusing on issues from the past. In addition to this, the victim should also focus his/her energy onto a more positive task. As one pastor mentions, moving on is beneficial because it helps the victim move through life, as well as think more clearly and not focus on the wrongs that have been done to him/her. According to another pastor, if the victim can “close the file” on the transgression, this will help him/her be more successful and move through life more efficiently.

*Relationships.* Some professionals mention that forgiveness helps with the development of a relationship. One pastor states that when we are in relationships a transgression can harm people because they cannot have broken relationships in their lives and be happy as well. According to one counselor, forgiveness is beneficial because it initiates the process of a relationship being restored. Finally, another counselor points out that forgiveness helps with maintaining relationships.

*Emotional well-being.* Some professionals feel that forgiveness helps the victim improve his/her emotional well being. According to one pastor it is important because an unforgiven transgression in one’s life “is like a huge sack of stones that they’re carrying around, or like a terrible pain in their spirit that they feel” (Pastor #12). After the victim

has forgiven the transgressor then he/she can start to “empty the sack of stones.” This is beneficial to his/her well-being. In addition to this, another pastor thinks that people seek help because they want to feel healthy and happy. A professional can assist these people by encouraging them to forgive, because this counselor feels people who can forgive have a tendency to be healthier and more content with life. One counselor notes that letting go of the negative feelings caused by the transgression is important so people can focus on healing and deciding they are not going to let others affect their emotional well-being. According to another counselor, forgiveness also “improves [one’s] quality of life; it removes a negative power that many folks carry with them” (Counselor #6).

*Love.* Two professionals feel that forgiveness helps the victim to be able to love. One counselor states that choosing to forgive helps a person to grow and mature even more because it enhances his/her ability to love. According to one pastor people are unable to love if they have the burden of unforgiveness toward their transgressor. Therefore, he believes that when people forgive, it releases the burden and allows their spirit to be free so they can love again.

*Other ways forgiveness helps people.* One counselor noted that if the person is a Christian, forgiveness can also help the victim to maintain his/her relationship with God. Another counselor feels that forgiveness could hurt the victim if it is done prematurely, or if it is something with which the victim does not agree. This counselor provides the following example to illustrate this idea:

A woman comes from a large Catholic family and she was the youngest of nine or ten children and was sexually abused by an older brother. Her mother was sending [the counselor] literature on forgiveness, and having her priest call her up and

telling her that she should forgive. She was getting all this pressure about “don’t go to therapy, don’t be angry, just forget about it and forgive your brother and be able to do what we want you to do so everybody is happy.” (Counselor #2)

According to this counselor if the person says, “I forgive my brother,” without validating his/her own experience then forgiveness would have been destructive. This counselor claims that this is because the person was not ready to forgive, however he/she felt pressured to forgive before being emotionally prepared. Another counselor notes that when a person allows forgiveness to occur instead of holding onto a grudge it initiates reconciliation.

Professionals collectively suggested seven different benefits of forgiveness. Only four of the seven benefits were mentioned by more than one professional. The most frequently mentioned benefit was giving the victim the freedom to move on. Giving the victim the freedom to move on was mentioned by nine of the twelve professionals, of the nine professionals, seven were counselors. Well-being was mentioned by four of the twelve professionals with an equal number of pastors and counselors making this comment. Relationships were mentioned as a benefit of forgiveness by three out of the twelve professionals. Of the three professionals that mentioned relationships as a benefit of forgiveness, two were pastors and one was a counselor. Love was mentioned as a reason why forgiveness is beneficial by two professionals with an equal number of pastors and counselors making this comment. In addition to this, the following ways forgiveness may or may not be beneficial to the victim are: hurt, spiritual beliefs, and reconciliation. Each of these ideas was only mentioned once by three different

professionals. Interestingly, counselors were the only ones to mention these benefits of forgiveness.

*How Do Professionals Assist the Victim with the Process of Forgiveness?*

In order to find out how a professional would assist the victim with the forgiveness process the participants were asked a series of questions. Even though not all of the questions were explicitly directed toward how to assist a victim with the process of forgiveness, all of the responses were integrated into this section. In addition to this, professionals were asked how the personality and background of the victim would affect their discussion of the possibility of forgiveness. This follow-up question was asked because all the participants in this study took background and personality into consideration prior to assisting the victim with the process of forgiveness. After professionals have looked at the background and personality of the victim, they then need to assist the victim with the process of forgiveness. The professional suggested that the following ideas are important when assisting someone with the process of forgiveness, including listening and telling stories. In addition to this, some professionals suggested that an important part of the process of forgiveness is acknowledging the event. Additionally, several professionals suggested that another important part of assisting the victim with the process of forgiveness is helping the victim to let go of the negative feelings that the transgression has created.

*What Factors Would a Professional Need to Take into Consideration?*

The way in which a pastor or counselor would assist the victim with the process of forgiveness varies from person to person based on their personality and background. There is no formula; it is different for each person. "... If you want to get to the top of a



mountain there are lots of different paths” (Counselor #6). With some people, forgiveness is too big of a task. These people require a gentler, slower approach. With others, a professional can take a more direct and challenging approach.

*Pride.* According to one counselor, pride is a personality characteristic that professionals have to take into consideration when leading a person through the forgiveness process. According to this counselor, pride affects people in two different ways: people can experience positive arrogant pride, or they can experience reverse pride. Arrogant people may have a “holier than thou attitude” (Counselor #1). An arrogant person is likely to judge the person who wronged him/her and refuse to forgive. This is because in the victim’s eyes the other person is not worthy of forgiveness. This affects the way a professional would approach forgiveness, because in this case, the victim “is less likely to see the need for forgiveness” (Counselor #1).

As this counselor notes, the second way that pride affects people is called reverse pride. Reverse pride is “... where they engage in beating themselves up quite a bit...therefore they’re harder on themselves than other people” (Counselor #1). They hate themselves, which can send them into a depression. One counselor adds that when people blame themselves, when people have low self-esteem, or when they let the others take advantage of them, this can lead to depression.

Reverse pride might also lead someone to be quick to forgive. According to two counselors, if the victim blames him/her self for the offense, then he/she may want to quickly forgive the transgressor. One of these counselors commented that some people think that they should be able to snap their fingers and instantly say “I forgive you” without processing the hurt. Professionals agree that the way to help a person like this is

to help the victim recognize that it's not his/her fault and help the person to slow down enough to process the hurt. Another counselor commented that some people are too quick to forgive others because they have anger at themselves. If this happens, professionals suggest that in order to assist the person with the process of forgiveness, he/she needs to help the person realize it is okay to be angry with other people. In this case, the pastor or counselor would try to redirect the victim's anger so that he/she could go through the proper process of forgiveness.

*Vulnerability.* Vulnerability is another factor professionals need to take into consideration when working with someone. Many professionals would not suggest that a person who is vulnerable forgive too quickly. Vulnerable people may allow others to walk all over them. If people are vulnerable then they may want to forgive and move on with life. One pastor suggests encouraging them to wait because they need to learn how to be "more assertive and stand up for themselves and not to be too willing... to simply let it go and say, 'It's okay, I understand he was/she was... in a bad mood or something'" (Pastor #10). Several professionals warned that vulnerable people need to be careful they do not get hurt again. One counselor provided the example of a case where a child has been molested by his/her father, the child might say when older: "I forgive you" to the father and then let his/her children go over to their grandfather's house. He commented that this was the wrong concept of forgiveness because when you forgive somebody, it does not necessarily mean you should trust them from that point forward. The victim can look at the transgressor and wish the person well with his/her life, but not have the person be a part of the victim's life anymore. He also comments that the molested child should say: "I forgive you, but I don't trust you."

Some professionals state the way they would help a victim would depend on how vulnerable the person was at the time. One counselor comments that if the victim were in danger of being re-victimized, then she would not advise a movement toward forgiveness. Many professionals imply they would walk a person through the forgiveness process only if the victim suggested that he/she wanted to forgive.

Professionals also work with victims who are not vulnerable. One pastor mentions that some victims are more likely to want to hang on to their hurt, therefore, it might take longer to assist this type of victim with forgiveness. This pastor also feels that these victims are more likely to desire justice. According to another pastor, if the victim does not want to talk about forgiveness; then he/she may just want to talk about the anger and the injustice that has been inflicted upon them. Another pastor would encourage victims who appear not to be vulnerable, vindictive, intolerant, or see things as black and white to forgive in order to, “free up their souls more... Recognize that... not everybody’s perfect... people make mistakes” (Pastor #10).

*Other Factors.* Some other things that may affect the way in which a counselor or pastor leads a person through forgiveness are gender, context, timing, and spiritual beliefs. One counselor thinks *gender* is a significant factor because men and women differ in their ways of processing events, both emotionally and cognitively. According to this counselor, men “generally [do not have] as much emotional content or charge” to direct towards the process of forgiveness (Counselor #1). Another counselor mentions that the *context* of the relationship between the victim and aggressor, the *context* of the victim’s life, as well as the *context* in which the transgression took place are all important factors to consider when guiding a person through the forgiveness process. *Timing* is the

third factor that may affect the way in which a professional approaches forgiveness with a client. One counselor says that frequently forgiving is the last stage; first the victim needs to feel anger in order to acknowledge the wrongdoing. According to another counselor people need to be ready to take a certain step; therefore, if people are unable to consider forgiveness, then the professional is “not inclined to suggest forgiveness” (Counselor #4). In addition to this, one counselor notes that if the victim’s *spiritual beliefs* strongly suggest that the victim forgive then it is important to take into consideration these beliefs.

*How Can the Professional Assist the Victim with the Process of Forgiveness?*

There are two main ways in which a professional can assist the victim with the process of forgiveness. They are listening and telling stories.

*Listening.* One way in which several professionals assist the victim with the process of forgiveness is to listen. According to one pastor, listening involves asking questions while letting the victim lead the conversation. He comments that while listening, the professional also needs to respond to the victim through supportive comments and give feedback, which the victim may or may not want to embrace. Another pastor says that listening can also help a professional to determine why the victim is having difficulty with forgiveness. He also notes that it is important for the professional to just listen and let the victim vent his/her hurt, vent about what is bothering him/her, and what the transgressor did that hurt so badly. Finally, he commented that just letting the victim verbalize is very helpful in assisting the victim with the process of forgiveness.

*Telling stories.* One pastor suggested that telling the victim stories of other people who are similar to the victim is a good way of assisting him/her with the process of forgiveness.

*How Does Acknowledging the Event Assist the Victim with the Process of Forgiveness?*

Some professionals agree that it is important for the victim to assess the event by reviewing and making a clear description of what has occurred. Once he/she has done this, then he/she needs to “[recognize] the wrong that was done” (Counselor #4). This counselor also commented that recognition is important because it is helpful in releasing the victim from the emotional hold that the event has on them. One pastor commented that acknowledging the event could help a person determine why he/she is having difficulty with forgiveness. One counselor suggests that by helping victims to acknowledge the event a counselor can help them realize that holding on to the anger and resentment allows the other person to continue to have control over their life.

*How Does a Professional Assist the Victim with Letting Go of the Negative Feelings?*

The next important step in assisting victims with the process of forgiveness is helping them to let go of the negative feelings. There are several ways in which a professional can help a victim to let go of the negative feelings. They are the victim’s spiritual beliefs (if applicable), changing how the victim views the transgressor, and articulating feelings about the transgression.

*Spiritual beliefs.* One way in which a professional might wish to help the victim is through his/her spiritual beliefs. One counselor suggests that if the feelings well up when a victim remembers what a person has done to him/her, the person needs to turn to the Lord and confess his/her pain and inability to forgive. The next step he refers to would be

to ask God for healing. Some Christians believe that when Jesus died on the cross he paid for everybody's sins and transgressions; therefore, he also notes that they need to ask God for help in accepting Jesus' payment for the offender's transgression in order to help the healing process. This is followed by receiving that healing. Then the victim needs to "Take a deep breath, surrender to the spirit within them and go forward" (Counselor #1). According to this counselor, this is a process that he/she needs to do repeatedly until the pain diminishes. Finally, the person needs to thank the Lord for His assistance in helping with the healing process.

One pastor would find out where the person was in his/her relationship with God. He would then direct the person to passages in the Bible that shows people what forgiveness looks like. He says God relates to us with compassion so we need to relate to others with the same compassion. He also believes forgiveness is an unusual thing that Christians have the ability to do. He states that non-Christians cannot forgive to the same extent. According to another pastor, part of the process of letting the hurt go is asking God for help.

*Changing the victim's view of the transgressor.* One pastor suggested that a way of helping people to let go is to help them change their view of the transgressor. In order to change how one views the person one has to look at the person and determine the admirable qualities of the person. This pastor suggests that a person focus on what he/she likes about the person and what is good about the person. In addition to this, a counselor suggested that you need to look at the other person's point of view and what he/she may have been going through when they committed the offense.

*Articulating feelings about the transgression.* Another way to help the victim with the forgiveness process is to acknowledge the feelings that the victim had about the transgression. According to one counselor, if the transgressor is available to have a one-on-one conversation with the victim, this gives victims a chance to admit that they have been harmed and why they have been harmed. The other person can then have the opportunity to validate and show some sort of understanding of the pain that the victim felt. If the transgressor is not accessible for a face-to-face interaction, another counselor suggests that the victim write a letter, make a phone call, or send an e-mail, in which he/she articulates his/her feelings about the transgression. He also suggests that if the victim is not able to communicate with the perpetrator, then he/she may still write the letter and just give it to the perpetrator in some sort of symbolic way.

Another counselor advises that in order to repair a relationship, both the victim and the transgressor need to be able to talk about how they have been hurt and come to some sort of understanding. One of the problems with this situation is that the perpetrator is frequently not able to talk to the victim face-to-face (if at all). "Many times, people need to work on forgiveness as a separate issue from repairing the relationship" (Counselor #3).

One pastor advises that once the victim is able to state the problem clearly, the victim has to be assured that he/she has been heard correctly. One counselor adds that the victim needs to articulate in some form or another: "I forgive you." Several professionals agree this will make the healing process go more smoothly once the victim feels like he/she has been understood.

*If/then model.* One counselor proposed the “If/Then Model.” The “If/Then Model” is as follows: If certain conditions are met, then forgiveness can happen, because the person doing the forgiving frequently has the ability to forgive. However, he says the “If/Then Model” doesn’t work for everyone, because if the person refuses to let go of the anger and holds a grudge, then this makes it harder for the person to forgive.

*Other ways of assisting people to let go of the hurt.* Professionals came up with other ways of helping the victim to let go of the hurt. One counselor commented that another way that pastors and counselors can help the victim to let go of the pain is to ask a lot of questions, and be very careful that the victim does not get in a situation where he/she can be victimized again. One pastor says that pastors and counselors can listen to the story and then ask probing questions about whose responsibility the transgression was—did the victim participate? He comments that the victim may have played a part in the transgression. Did the victim participate knowingly or willingly in the offense? He also points out that if the victim chooses not to say anything or do anything about the hurt, then that is also a choice. Another counselor has the person think about what the result would be if he/she does not forgive. Finally, one pastor suggests asking the victim “What is that doing,...If you don’t forgive this person, what’s that doing to you? ...What is happening to you as you do that?” (Pastor #10).

#### *Achievement of forgiveness*

After a person is done with counseling or talking with his/her pastor or counselor, how does the victim know that he/she has achieved forgiveness? The professionals whom I interviewed came up with several ways that a person can tell if he/she has achieved forgiveness. These are: noting a change in heart, having the ability to let go, having more



energy and more life, not feeling the need to seek revenge, feeling at peace, and sensing it on a spiritual level.

### *Change in Heart*

One counselor suggests that a change in a person's heart is one way the individual knows that he/she has achieved forgiveness. He adds that the person could experience a change of heart through having love and compassion for the other person. This is where he/she is able to look past the transgression that was done in the past, and instead view the person as a human being who is worth forgiving.

### *The Ability to Let Go*

Many professionals agree that when the victim has let go of the emotional hold the transgressor has on him/her, it is yet another way the individual knows he/she has achieved forgiveness. According to more than one professional, when a person lets go of the emotion, it will not keep coming up. One counselor says, "I know that I have forgiven when [in] my own heart I am not holding it against them anymore." Letting it go, according to this counselor, also means that the offense does not influence a victim's decision regarding the transgressor. The victim will not hold it against him/her in his/her thoughts, and the victim will not withhold grace from the transgressor. Another counselor adds that when people let go of the bitterness, they interact with the transgressor humbly, without pride, and they no longer act as if the person is still in debt to them or owes them anything because of the offense. One counselor suggests that when people let go, they no longer think about the transgression as much as before they forgave. Another counselor explains that the event no longer defines who the transgressor is in the victim's eyes or the way in which they interact.

### *More Energy /More Life*

One counselor suggests that when the victim has forgiven the perpetrator, he/she has more energy and more life. This energy can be used to do more “constructive, positive things in the world” (Counselor #4).

### *No Revenge*

One counselor suggests that if people have achieved forgiveness, they will no longer want to seek revenge on the offender. They do not want to get even with the transgressor.

### *Peace*

Some professionals suggest that another sign that shows a victim has achieved forgiveness is when he/she is at peace about the offense. One pastor explains that when a transgressor is in the same room as the victim who has not forgiven the offender, they both feel uncomfortable. The victim does not want to be in the same room as the transgressor; they do not want to face each other; and they keep the conversation superficial. This pastor adds that when forgiveness happens, you can almost feel a release of tension and then the two people can be together in the same room. When the tension is lost, it is possible for the victim to feel renewed warmth and a renewed desire to spend time with the transgressor. Another pastor says, “Ordinarily [after forgiving the offender] they have a great sense of peace, and a great sense of release, relief, and a sense of being reconnected” (Pastor #12).

Although one counselor says that after achieving forgiveness the victim will feel physically calmer, another pastor comments that the only real sign of peace is internal. This pastor says internal peace means when everything is calm within us. It is especially

evident when it comes after an event with a great deal of turmoil associated with it. When people experience peace, he explains, there is nothing physical about it that others can see. It is purely internal. It brings with it a sense of freedom. It is “[like a] bird just being able to fly off” (Pastor #10).

### *Spiritual Experience*

One counselor suggests that achievement of forgiveness is a spiritual experience. He does not think that it is something that a person knows intellectually; it is something that a person just knows spiritually. “It’s a gut experience” (Counselor #3). It is not something a person can measure with logic. A person can begin to know that they have achieved forgiveness when they say “I accept your forgiveness” or “I accept your apology”, but in the end, he says, a person only knows in his/her own spirit that forgiveness has been achieved.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The findings of this study lay the groundwork for how professionals can assist a person with the forgiveness process. The first framework illustrates how professionals conceptualize forgiveness. Another framework identifies the reasons why forgiveness is important in the opinion of these professionals, as well as how forgiveness can help the victim. The final framework explains how professionals assist a person with the process of forgiveness. These frameworks will be compared to the implications described in the literature.

#### *How Do Professionals Conceptualize forgiveness?*

The first framework discusses how professionals conceptualize forgiveness. This is a difficult concept for lay people as well as scholars to comprehend. Forgiveness is very complicated because “it has to do with what goes on inside of another person who’s hurt” (Pastor #9). The concept of forgiveness varies from person to person and scholar to scholar. Many professionals felt that a metaphor would be an effective way to describe forgiveness. Metaphors can often be used to conceptualize an abstract thought by using symbolic pictures (Haley, 1976; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Wilmot & Hocker 1998).

Participants in this study collectively suggested five ways in which one might conceptualize forgiveness. The two most common ideas suggested which may help people to conceptualize forgiveness are: 1) A person may visualize forgiveness as letting go, 2) A person might also see forgiveness as releasing. At first glance, one might think that letting go and releasing are similar. In some cases they may very well be the same thing. It is interesting to note that these findings show that there is a slight difference

when conceptualizing forgiveness as letting go versus releasing. These slight differences can be seen easily when examining the metaphors that many of the participants used when describing forgiveness.

When one thinks of letting go, he/she might associate letting go with the victim retaining control of the situation. One metaphorical example of letting go would be "... taking something out of the package, putting it on the ground and walking away from it" (Counselor #5). One reason that a person may want to take something out of the package is if the object is making the package too heavy. If the package is too heavy, then the person has the choice of either taking something out and putting it on the ground or continuing to carry the heavy package. If the person decides to take something out of the package, then he/she will experience "a little lightening of the load of what [he/she is] carrying" (Counselor #5). The negative emotions that a person might feel, such as revenge and retaliation, are much like the object that is making the package heavy. A victim needs to decide whether he/she wants to hold onto the negative feelings and be miserable for the rest of his/her life, or forgive and let go of the transgression and move on freely with life. Ultimately, letting go of the negative feelings is the victim's decision. If the victim lets go of the feelings, then one may assume that the victim has released the transgression as well.

Releasing, on the other hand, implies that the freedom of the person or object is being controlled by someone else. In order for a person or object to gain freedom, the person or object has to be released from whatever is holding him/her back. In the following metaphorical example, a victim who struggles with forgiveness will be compared to "a sailboat that is sitting in the water and its sails are full, and [yet] it's

straining to move forward and there is a stern rope that is still tied to the dock”

(Counselor #10). When a sailboat is tied to the dock, the rope is in control of the boat’s freedom. A transgression is like the rope because it prevents victims from having the freedom to lead a normal life by tying them to the past. However, unlike the boat, the victim can cut the rope of control with the “forgiveness knife” and lead a normal life if he/she desires. Thus, the victim gains control over his/her destiny. However, victims may not realize that the transgression is controlling them, and that the “forgiveness knife” can be useful if they use it properly.

North (1998) agrees with this idea for conceptualizing forgiveness. She describes a scenario in which a woman was assaulted and robbed while walking home one night. Three years later, the woman is still on edge when walking alone, day or night. In addition to this, she no longer works and cannot have a relationship with a man because she is unable to trust him due to fears of another attack. North (1998) states, “She has allowed the original attack... to define her very existence” (p. 18). If the woman were to forgive, the pain and the hurt caused by the original transgression would be released (North, 1998).

Another way in which one can view releasing is in terms of the transgressor being released from having to pay for the transgression that occurred. For example, one pastor views forgiveness in terms of ripping up a promissory note. This metaphorical way of conceptualizing releasing may be alarming to people because they still may want the person to have to pay the consequences of his/her actions. If they “rip up” the promissory note then the transgressor will be released from having to pay the consequences of his/her actions. Therefore, the victim may be hesitant to consider forgiveness. If the victim were

to view forgiveness as the releasing of the negative feelings instead of the transgressor, then he/she might be more willing to consider forgiveness as an option. Some scholars describe this view of releasing as abandoning a debt (Lauritzen, 1987; Newman, 1987; Pingleton, 1997; North, 1987; McCullough et al., 1997a).

In addition to this, professionals provided two other metaphors to conceptualize forgiveness. They are a “change in picture” as well as a “genuine hug.” Another metaphor for viewing forgiveness is a change in what the picture looks like, “[...] two people scowling at each other at one edge of a series of photographs, and at the other edge shows them relaxed and comfortable with each other”(Counselor # 3). This metaphor refers to how a victim’s perception of the transgressor changes over time. Scholars have also alluded to this way of conceptualizing forgiveness (Metts et al., 2001; Boon & Sulsky, 1997; McCullough et al., 1997b; Enright et al., 1998; Enright et al., 1991; McCullough et al., 2001; North, 1987; McCullough et al., 1997a; Berry & Worthington, 2001). One pastor used the metaphor of a hug to describe forgiveness. This metaphor alludes to forgiveness being associated with reconciliation.

Some scholars also associate forgiveness with a way to rebuild relationships (Hargrave, 1994; Hargrave & Sells, 1997; McCullough, et al., 1997a). This can mislead the victim because he/she may think that if he/she does not have the desire to rebuild the relationship, he/she cannot forgive the transgressor. This way of conceptualizing forgiveness was not found in this study. This may be due to the fact that the participants in the study were pastors and counselors. These professionals do not want to place the victim in harm’s way. Rebuilding the relationship may be detrimental to the person, especially in abusive relationships. Lulofs and Cahn (2000) claim that forgiveness and

reconciliation are not the same thing. Forgiveness is letting go of feelings of revenge and desires to retaliate. On the other hand, reconciliation is a behavior process in which people work to rebuild trust in a relationship (Lulofs & Cahn, 2000).

As we can see, several professionals agree that forgiveness is more than just abandoning the debt, rebuilding relationships, and changing the perception of the transgressor. According to these professionals, forgiveness is best conceptualized as letting go or releasing. When a transgression occurs, it may leave the victim with negative feelings. These negative feelings can either weigh the person down or have control over the victim. If the person is feeling weighed down, they can relieve this pressure by letting go of the negative feelings. The victim may not realize that the negative feelings are controlling him/her. However, once the victim realizes that these feelings are controlling him/her, the person can then choose to use the “forgiveness knife” and release him/her self from the negative feelings that are controlling him/her. After reading about these two new ways of viewing forgiveness a victim who may have been hesitant to forgive may now consider forgiving the offender.

#### *How do Professionals View Forgiveness?*

The second framework discusses how professionals view forgiveness. Professionals view forgiveness as important even though it can be a tall order for some people. Forgiveness may be difficult for some people to even consider because the transgression may be devastating to their emotional or spiritual well being. For example, if somebody lost a family member in the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, the person may have difficulty forgiving in this situation. The following hypothetical



response is a response that a person might receive when inquiring about losing a family member:

... “Do you forgive the members of Al Qaeda?”, I imagine you’d find some people who say, “I can find it in my heart to do that,” but I would bet most people would be saying, “Hell no, I don’t forgive [‘em]. What’s this all about? I’m angry. They go to work and they’re killed, for what? For what cause and end did this event happen?” (Counselor #5)

In this case, the terrorists may have attacked the World Trade Center to “get” the nation’s attention. However, the terrorists’ actions resulted in not only grabbing the nation’s attention, but in injuring and killing innocent people as well. This transgression had a direct effect on the victim’s family members. Therefore, the family members took on the role of being secondary victims in this scenario. While this transgression was directed towards the nation, transgressions that occur in relationships can be equally harmful and difficult to forgive. Relationship transgressions that can be especially harmful are disloyalty, betrayal, and brutality (Smedes, 1984). When these transgressions occur, the victims may find forgiveness to be “a tall order.” However, professionals feel that forgiveness is important even if it is difficult for the victim.

Professionals feel that forgiveness is important for two main reasons. The first reason forgiveness is important is to maintain the relationship with the transgressor as well as other people outside of the transgression. The second reason that forgiveness is important is to improve the victim’s emotional well-being.

When a person links forgiveness and relationships, he/she may think that the only relationship that is involved is the one between the transgressor and the victim.

Therefore, one might think that the only reason forgiveness is important in relationships is to restore or maintain the relationship with the transgressor. Due to human nature, every relationship may not be easily repaired. For example in a case of domestic violence, a battered wife might not want to restore the relationship with her husband because it might endanger her. In order to be true to herself and at peace with the situation, she is not required to restore the relationship; however, scholars suggest that it is beneficial for her to forgive the transgressor (Freedman, 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989; Enright & Gassin, 1992; Holmgren, 1993; Cunningham, 1985; Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright et al., 1996; Fow, 1996; Engel, 1990; Enright et al., 1998). It is interesting to note that several professionals feel that forgiveness is important because unforgiveness can inhibit the victim's relationship with the transgressor as well as relationships with others outside the transgression. Therefore, forgiveness is important even if the relationship with the transgressor is not restored.

Furthermore, the lack of forgiveness cannot only affect the relationship with the transgressor, but it can affect other relationships as well. This may be due to the fact that the person may have "bottled up" anger that might "spill over" into these secondary relationships. This may cause the person to become over-reactive with others, and the person may become more sensitive to things that other people say or do. The negative feelings harbored from one relationship may drain the victim of physical as well as mental energy. The inevitable result is that many of the victim's relationships will not thrive. In order to maintain healthy and viable relationships, forgiveness is a key component.

The results of this study concur with how scholars link forgiveness to relationships. According to the literature, there are three ways in which forgiveness is linked to relationships. First, if people are in relationships, forgiveness is inevitable because transgressions are bound to occur (Fincham, 2000; Metts et al., 2001). Second, forgiveness is important in order to maintain or restore the relationship with the transgressor (Kelley, 1998; Fincham, 2000; DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993; Enright, Santos & Al-Mabuk, 1989;). Third, the literature mentions that forgiveness is also important for “the unencumbered initiation of a new relationship” (See Metts et al., 2001).

Professionals add that forgiveness is also important because the transgression not only affects the relationship the victim has with the transgressor, but it can also affect relationships with others who may not be involved in the transgression.

Several professionals agree that the lack of forgiveness can affect the emotional well-being of the victim and therefore they concur that this is why forgiveness is important. Being consumed by the past can harm a person because it can weigh him/her down emotionally. When this happens, the individual is unable to move on. This is because lack of forgiveness may often cause people to have a negative outlook on the present, which decreases his/her quality of life. Therefore, in order to improve his/her well-being and move on, forgiveness is essential.

The literature that links forgiveness and well-being focuses on the ways forgiveness can help the victim. When the literature refers to the way forgiveness helps the victim, it refers to the fact that it helps lower anxiety (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993). It helps lower depression (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Hebl & Enright, 1993)

and lowers anger (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Fitzgibbons, 1998; Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001; McCullough & Worthington, 1995). In addition to this, it also helps the victim to reduce their level of grief (Coyle & Enright, 1997).

The participants in this study did not mention lower depression, anxiety, anger, and grief as reasons why it is important to forgive. However, the participants in this study did mention it was important to forgive because the lack of forgiveness can have ill effects on emotional well-being that may not be apparent on the outside. As we have seen above, pastors and counselors suggest that being consumed by past transgressions can affect the victim's ability to forgive. The inability to forgive inhibits the victim's ability to move on. Forgiveness will also improve the individual's quality of life. Kelley (1998) is the only author to connect forgiveness with the well-being of the victim. He mentions "the desire to restore well-being of self and/or other" as one of five reasons that people are motivated to forgive (p. 267).

From these findings, it is interesting to observe that pastors think that forgiveness is important for reasons beyond those that the Bible gives. Two well-known reasons in the Bible why forgiveness is important are found in the book of Matthew. One reason is the "Golden Rule," which says "Do unto others as you would have done to you." A place where the Bible refers to this is in Matthew 18:21-35, when Jesus tells "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant" (NIV). In this parable, Jesus indicates that people should forgive each other because they have been forgiven of their own transgressions infinitely. The following scripture provides another reason why it is important for a Christian to forgive. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus tells his disciples, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men

their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (NIV). This passage implies that forgiveness is important in order to be forgiven by God.

Professionals also view forgiveness as therapeutic because it helps the victim. Some ways in which it is beneficial to the victim include giving him/her the freedom to move on and giving the victim the ability to love. In addition to this, forgiveness also helps the victim to maintain relationships. Although forgiveness is beneficial to the victim in many ways, several professionals agree that the way in which forgiveness helps the victim the most is by giving him/her the freedom to move on with life without being burdened by the effects of the past transgression.

When a transgression occurs, it takes the victim prisoner. When a person becomes a prisoner, he/she is chained in a jail cell and hence is at the mercy of the guard for their freedom. The victim may think that he/she has the transgressor chained and holds the key to the transgressor’s freedom. However, the transgression is actually chaining the victim to the past, thus controlling him/her. The victim may not realize that he/she does not have to be at the mercy of the transgression because he/she has the “forgiveness key” to free him/her self. When the victim is able to unlock him/her self from the chains of the transgression, he/she is able to have a fresh start on life. In addition to this, freedom allows the victim to have a new outlook on the future by changing his/her present circumstances. When the victim is truly freed from the effects of the past transgression, he/she is no longer chained down.

Once the victim is freed from his/her past, the victim is then able to move on with his/her life. The ability to move on is important because it does not allow past events to burden the victim. One pastor provides the following illustration of what moving on may

look like: “its like letting go of a weight, that’s dragging you down to the bottom of the ocean, you let go of that weight, you can go up to the surface” (Pastor #10). A transgression is like the weight because it can drag a person down. When a person has let go of the transgression, he/she is no longer burdened by the past or its emotional effects; he/she is able to focus on present issues. In addition to this, moving on also helps the person think more clearly and positively. Forgiveness helps the victim to move through life more efficiently.

The findings in this study reveal that while some benefits of forgiveness were mentioned more often by counselors than pastors, the opposite was observed in other areas. One reason why moving on and freedom may have been more frequently mentioned by counselors than pastors is because people may often associate counselors with assisting clients with letting go of the past and acquiring the ability to move on with their lives. On the other hand, it is surprising that more pastors than counselors mentioned well-being and relationships as a way in which forgiveness can help the victim. This may be due to the fact that there is limited data due to the size of the sample. If a larger sample had been available, the results may turn out to be drastically different. This may also be the reason why love was suggested only by one pastor and one counselor.

It is surprising that the findings also showed that none of the pastors mentioned that forgiveness helps a person spiritually. This shows that pastors can be multi-dimensional when it comes to forgiveness. People may often associate pastors with church, and when one thinks of a church member, one might think that this person upholds all of God’s law to the letter. In the Bible, Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus says, “...if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (NIV).

One might also think that Christians believe that if they do not forgive, then God will not forgive them. If one thinks that pastors are supposed to hold the parishioners accountable for what the Bible says, then one might assume that a pastor would think that the main benefit of forgiveness would be that God forgives those who forgive others. However, due to the fact that none of the pastors mentioned this as a benefit, this study shows that pastors are concerned with other dimensions of forgiveness besides those based on the Bible.

While the literature claims that forgiveness helps the well-being of the victim by lowering depression, anxiety, anger, and grief; the participants in this study claimed that forgiveness helps the well-being of the victim by not allowing the transgression to inhibit his/her ability to live happier and healthier lives. It is apparent that the participants of the study did not concur with the literature in regards to how forgiveness can help the victim’s well-being. The literature focuses on improving the physical as well as the psychological aspects of well-being for the victim. The participants, on the other hand, focused on improving the victim’s emotional well being by increasing his/her ability to enjoy life. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that the subjects of this study assist people with the task of forgiving, a subjective process by nature, while the researchers in the literature used measurable, objective data obtained through quantitative analysis. Overall, the participants agreed that forgiveness is important because of the effect that a transgression has on a victim’s relationship with the transgressor and others outside the transgression, as well as the effect that the transgression has on the individual’s emotional well-being. As we can see, there are a wide variety of reasons why forgiveness is

important. Forgiveness not only benefits the transgressor, but it primarily benefits the victim.

Another link that was found in both the literature and in the interviews was between forgiveness and love. In these findings, pastors and counselors stated that the enhanced ability to love was a benefit of forgiveness. Whereas, when love was mentioned in the literature, it was only mentioned as a reason why we forgive, and not a benefit. Kelley (1998), in his research on the communication of forgiveness, found that love was one of five reasons why people forgive. In addition to this, pastors and counselors mentioned other benefits of forgiveness, which included the ability and the significance of moving on, the increased ability to love, and the gaining of freedom. It was also mentioned briefly that forgiveness can help people maintain their relationship with God, if such a relationship is important to them.

#### *How Do Professionals Assist the Victim with the Process of Forgiveness?*

The third framework discusses how a professional assists a victim with the process of forgiveness. According to several professionals, there is no specific formula to assist a person with this process. Before attempting to assist a person with the forgiveness process, it is important for a professional to look at the personality traits and background of the victim. It is also important for the professional to assist the victim in acknowledging the transgression that has occurred. Once the victim acknowledges the transgression, the professional may then assist him/her with letting go of the past.

When assisting the victim with the process of forgiveness, it is important to take into consideration the personality traits and background of the victim. Several professionals agree that two of the most important personality traits of the victim that



should be taken into consideration include pride and vulnerability. There are two types of pride: positive arrogant pride and reverse pride. Positive arrogant pride is manifested by victims who believe they are better than others. People who struggle with positive arrogant pride may have difficulty seeing the need to forgive. Therefore, the professional may need to assist the victim with seeing the need to forgive by helping him/her realize that the person is human and does make mistakes. Once the victim realizes the human nature of the offender, then he/she may be willing to consider forgiveness as an option. On the other hand, victims may also struggle with reverse pride, which is manifested by victims who believe that others are better than them. These victims may desire to forgive too quickly. Forgiving too quickly could be dangerous if the individual has not processed the event, therefore the counselor or the professional may need to assist the victim with acknowledging the event. If the event was traumatic then it may also be important for the professional to assist the victim with processing the events that occurred in the transgression. Once the victim has processed the event, the professional may then assist the victim with letting go of the transgression and moving on.

Another factor which may affect the way a professional assists someone with forgiveness is the victim's level of vulnerability. If the victim is vulnerable, then he/she may be in danger of being hurt again. Due to the fact that a vulnerable person may desire to diminish the significance of the transgression, a vulnerable person may be more willing to simply let go without processing the transgression. The professional may need to slow this type of person down in his/her forgiveness process so that the victim can let go of the negative feelings that may fester under the surface. On the other hand, some victims might be angry and feel the need for justice. In addition to this, the victim may

feel the need to protect his/her self from being hurt. This type of victim may not allow themselves to be vulnerable to hurt. Therefore, it might take longer for the victim to see the need to forgive.

It is interesting to note that only one out of twelve professionals mentioned spiritual beliefs as a factor that professionals might want to take into consideration when assisting the victim with the process of forgiveness. It is surprising that this comment came from a counselor instead of a pastor. The counselor who made this comment worked not only with the spiritual public, but with the secular public as well. Pastors did not mention spiritual beliefs as an important factor to take into consideration when assisting the victim with the forgiveness process. This may be because pastors have the preconceived idea that all of the victims that seek their help are Christians. Therefore they might not consciously take the victim's spiritual beliefs into consideration when assisting a victim with the process of forgiveness. However, some of the pastors did mention spiritual beliefs as a part of helping the victim to let go of the negative feelings that the transgression has created.

After a professional has looked at the background and the personality of the victim, they would then start to assist the person with acknowledging the transgression and how it has affected them. Scholars agree that acknowledging the transgression is an important part of the forgiveness process (Close, 1970; Enright, 1996; Rowe, Halling, Davies, Leifer, Powers, & van Bronkhorst 1989). Fincham (2000) claims when we are in close relationships, we voluntarily make ourselves vulnerable to others. When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to others, transgressions such as disloyalty, betrayal and brutality can cause injury. When an injury does occur, it may affect a person's ability to

be in a relationship with the transgressor because he/she is likely to feel anger, resentment, and disappointment (Fincham, 2000). As a result of these negative feelings, Fincham (2000) suggests that people may become motivated to “withdraw or avoid the source of harm...” (p. 2). In addition, Fincham (2000) also suggests that people may have the desire to seek revenge or to retaliate. The victim may want to heal his/her injury so that he/she can restore their relationship with the transgressor if he/she so desires. Therefore, acknowledging the transgression is crucial in order to assist the victim with forgiveness. It is important that the victim recognizes that the transgression has harmed him/her emotionally because it releases the emotional hold that the event has on the victim. In addition to this, it can help the victim to determine why he/she is having difficulty with forgiveness. Acknowledging the event can help the victim to realize that the transgression is controlling his/her life.

The professional may assist the victim in acknowledging the transgression by truly listening to what the victim is saying and not taking an active role in the conversation. It is important to let the victim lead the conversation because it allows him/her to explore his/her feelings freely. Another reason it is important for the professional not to direct the victim while he/she is talking about the transgression that has occurred is that directing the victim may prevent the victim from saying what he/she thinks the professional wants to hear. In addition to this, it may allow the victim to vent about what the transgressor did to hurt him/her so badly without being interrupted.

As the victim is trying to acknowledge the event, the victim might struggle with articulating his/her experiences. If this occurs, the professional might be able to assist the victim by telling him/her stories of other people’s similar experiences. One of the reasons

that a professional may choose to tell a story in order to help the victim open up is to show the victim that he/she is not the only one to whom this has happened. Relating stories to the victim may also assist him/her with knowing that their reactions were valid. In addition to this, it may help the victim to feel comfortable and safe opening up because it may reassure the victim that he/she is not going to be ridiculed.

Once the victim has acknowledged that he/she has been hurt by the transgression, it is then important for the victim to let go of the negative feelings that the transgression has created in him/her. There are several ways in which a professional can assist someone who is ready to let go of these negative emotions. These include working with a victim's spiritual beliefs, changing how the victim views the transgressor, and helping the victim to articulate his/her feelings about the transgression that has occurred.

One of the ways that professionals suggest for the victim to let go of these negative feelings is through spiritual beliefs, if they so desire. If the victim is a Christian, then he/she would let the Lord help him/her with the forgiveness process. It is important for a Christian to remember that God relates to us with compassion, therefore Christians should attempt to find it in their heart to show compassion to the transgressor. The following example shows another way in which a victim's spiritual beliefs helped her to successfully achieve forgiveness:

[This woman's] ... seven year old daughter was kidnapped and murdered and what she began to do is simply pray. She wanted to kill the person, and her husband likewise would have killed the person if [he] could find him, but they couldn't and so she began to pray...her pray[er] was very simple. "God, I give you permission to change my heart"... a year to the day on the hour and minute that her daughter

disappeared the kidnapper called her on the phone and she was able to forgive him. Of course it was about an hour and a half conversation and then she [left it up to God] that eventually he would call back [again] ... through those phone calls the FBI eventually was able to find the person... (Pastor, #12; See also: Jaeger, 1998)

As we can see in this case her Christian beliefs helped her to forgive because she believed that God could change her heart. One might presume that during the year after she gave God permission to change her heart, her heart did change. Once God had changed her heart, God then allowed the kidnapper to call her because she no longer had vengeance in her heart. One might also assume that while she was on the phone with the kidnapper, God assisted her with letting go of her negative feelings.

Another way in which a professional can assist the victim in letting go of the negative feelings towards the transgressor and move on with life, is to help him/her change his/her view of the transgressor. If the victim was severely hurt by the transgressor, then he/she might have ill feelings towards the transgressor. In order for the victim to let go of these ill feelings towards the transgressor, he/she must change the way in which he/she views the transgressor.

In order for a victim to successfully change how he/she views the transgressor, there are certain things that he/she can do, including considering the extenuating circumstances surrounding the situation in which the transgression has occurred. The victim may also want to look at the transgression from the transgressor's point of view. Takaku (2001) provides the following example that explains the transgression that has occurred from the victim's point of view:

You and your classmate were preparing for an important final exam. A day before the final, your classmate asked you if he/she could borrow your notes from the previous week to make copies. You agreed to the request and told him/her to bring them back as soon as possible. An hour later, he/she had not returned from making copies. You waited for another hour. You were getting very anxious and frustrated because you could not study without those notes. Because you could no longer wait for your classmate, you decided to leave a note on the door of the study room, asking for the notes back as soon as possible. Three hours later, your classmate returned to your apartment and brought back the notes, which were torn. You were very angry and asked him/her what had happened. (Takaku, 2001, p. 499)

Takaku (2001) also provides the account of the transgression from the transgressor's point of view:

The copy machine on campus was not working. So, I went to an off-campus copy store. That took an hour. But the copy machine there ate your notes and damaged them. I returned as soon as possible. I apologize. I am so sorry. It is entirely my fault. I feel awful and terribly guilty; I must have caused you a lot of aggravation.

I will do anything to make up for this. (Takaku, 2001, p. 499)

As we can see in this example, the transgressor had a reason why the transgression happened. The ability for the victim to see the transgression from the transgressor's point of view might help the victim to empathize with the transgressor. If the victim is able to see the transgressor in a different light, then the victim may be more willing to change

his/her views of the transgressor and may be more willing to let go of the negative feelings he/she has towards the transgressor to forgive him/her.

The third way in which a professional can help the victim to let go of the negative feelings that the transgression has created is to help the victim articulate his/her feelings about the transgression that has occurred. If the victim wants to restore the relationship, then he/she needs to articulate how he/she feels about the transgression to the transgressor. This is important because it allows the transgressor to validate the victim's feelings. In addition to this, the victim needs to be assured that the transgressor has heard him/her clearly because sometimes a transgressor can apologize without truly comprehending how he/she has hurt the victim; and thus, the transgression is more likely to happen again. The transgressor may not always be available to have a conversation about the transgression face-to-face with the victim. If the victim still desires to restore the relationship, then he/she could write the transgressor a letter or send an email expressing his/her feelings about the transgression that occurred.

In the literature on forgiveness, there are no empirical studies regarding the way in which a professional would help the victim through the forgiveness process in order to restore the relationship with the transgressor. All of the academic literature focused on theoretical models of the internal processes in which people need to go through in order to forgive. Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga, and Zungu-Dirwayi (2000) have compiled the many models into four different categories. These models include typological models (Nelson, 1992; Trainer, 1981; Veenstra, 1992) and task stage models (Augsburger, 1981; Benson, 1992; Donnelly, 1982; Loewen, 1976; Martin, 1953; Pattison, 1965; Pettitt, 1987; Rosenak & Harnden, 1992; Smedes, 1984; Thompson, 1983). There are also models

based on theories of personality and psychopathology, such as psychoanalytic (Bradsma, 1982; Lapsley, 1966), Jungian (Todd, 1985), object relations (Gartner, 1988; Pingleton 1997; Vitz & Mango 1997), existential (Pattison, 1965), personal construct (Smith, 1981), cognitive (Droll, 1984), and family systems (Hargrave, 1994) theory. In addition to these models, Kaminer et al. (2000) note the fourth model of forgiveness is the developmental model (Enright and The Human Development Study Group, 1991; Nelson, 1992; Spidell and Liberman, 1981). As we can see, there are no models that provide empirical evidence of what needs to happen in order for a counselor or pastor to assist a person with the process of forgiveness in order to have the possibility of restoring the relationship. Therefore, the participants that were interviewed provided empirical evidence of things which need to happen in order for forgiveness to occur and possibly restore the relationship.

As we can see, the participants in this study provided empirical evidence that there are certain things that are essential in assisting a person with the forgiveness process. Prior to assisting a person with the forgiveness process, a professional should look at the victim's background and personality. After the professional has looked at the background and personality of the victim then he/she can assist the victim with acknowledging the event. Once the victim has acknowledged the event, then a professional assists him/her with letting go of the negative feelings that the transgression has created.



## Chapter 6

### Summary/Conclusion

There are multiple ways in which forgiveness is conceptualized in the literature. These conceptualizations range from the victim internally letting go of the negative feelings that he/she has against the transgressor to externally releasing the offender from an acknowledged debt. Another conceptualization of forgiveness in the literature is viewing it as a way to restore or rebuild damaged relationships. In this study, the pastors and counselors affirm many of the conceptualizations of forgiveness mentioned in the literature. In addition to this, the professionals suggest other conceptualizations of forgiveness not mentioned in the literature. Thus far, there have not been any empirical studies that have focused on how professionals conceptualize forgiveness. The empirical studies that have been done to find out how people conceptualize forgiveness use laypeople as participants.

There are several reasons that scholars note why people forgive; however, this study mainly focuses on three of those reasons. They are healing of emotional wounds, maintaining and restoring relationships, and the well-being of the individual. Despite the fact that literature clearly states that transgressions can cause emotional harm to a victim, there is very little research connecting forgiveness with healing of an emotional wound. Additionally, healing of an emotional wound was not mentioned by more than one professional as a reason why forgiveness is important. When the literature links forgiveness to relationships, it primarily focuses on the role that forgiveness plays in restoring and maintaining relationships; however, the results from this study showed that transgressions not only effect the relationship that a victim has with his/her transgressor;

it is also shows that transgressions can effect a victim's relationships with people other than the transgressor. A majority of these studies focus on how forgiveness can be beneficial to the victim. In addition to this, some studies have looked at what motivates people to forgive. This study targets the reasons why professionals believe forgiveness is important as well as the benefits of forgiveness. The professionals concurred with scholars regarding maintenance and restoration of relationships as a reason why forgiveness is important. In addition to this, professionals suggested that forgiveness is important because it helps a victim sustain a quality life through an enhanced emotional state of well-being. In addition to lowering anxiety, anger and depression, professionals also mention other ways that forgiveness can benefit a victim. These benefits include an increased ability to love, freedom to move on with life and improved development of relationships. In addition to this, forgiveness can benefit the victim by improving his/her emotional well-being.

Research shows the internal process that a person goes through in order to forgive the offender, however this study focuses on how professionals externally assist a victim with the process of forgiveness. This study found that professionals must first look at the background and the personality of a victim prior to assisting him/her with the process of forgiveness. Next a professional needs to assist the victim acknowledging the event. The professional does this by listening and telling the victim stories. Next, a professional assists a victim by helping him/her to let go of the negative feelings that the transgression caused. Professionals do this by using a victim's spiritual convictions if he/she has any. Another way in which a professional assists a victim with letting go of negative feelings is changing how he/she views the transgressor. Lastly, a professional assists a victim with

letting go of the feelings he/she has towards the transgressor by helping him/her to articulate his/her feelings about the transgressor.

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## **Appendix A: Letter to Participants**

June 23, 2003

My name is Carrie Benedict. I am currently working on my Master's Degree in Communication Studies. I am writing a professional paper on forgiveness and reconciliation in order to complete my Master's Degree. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how forgiveness is seen by helping professionals such as counselors and pastors. I am interested in the following aspects of forgiveness in religious and lay counseling: the concept and misconceptions of forgiveness, the pros and cons of forgiveness, the process of forgiveness, and possible road blocks to forgiveness

In order to learn more about forgiveness, I hope to find out what you know about the topic. In addition to this, I would like to find out in what situations you would encourage forgiveness as well as how you would go about encouraging people to forgive.

I am writing this letter to request an interview with you. I will call to see if you are willing to be interviewed and to arrange a time and a location for an interview. If you prefer, you may call me at 543-4582.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Carrie Benedict

## **Appendix B: Interview Questions for Pastors**

### *Introductory Questions*

1. What is the age range of people that come to talk to you?
2. What types of issues do they discuss with you?
3. Do you counsel people?

### *Forgiveness Questions*

1. What comes to mind when you think of forgiveness? (Possible probes: How do you interpret forgiveness? What do you associate forgiveness with? How would you describe what forgiveness looks like? What are some examples?)
  - a. Describe how an individual knows that he or she has achieved forgiveness.
2. What is your view on forgiveness?
  - a. Do you think that forgiveness is important? Why or why not?
  - b. Do you think that forgiveness is therapeutic? Why or why not?
  - c. Does forgiveness help the victim? Why or why not?
3. Do you ever talk about forgiveness with your parishioners? If yes, how does it come up?
4. Do you encourage your parishioners to forgive? Why or why not?
  - a. When do you talk about the possibility of forgiveness with your parishioners?
  - b. Describe a situation where a parishioner has been encouraged to forgive and how they were able to achieve forgiveness. What was the outcome of the situation?
  - c. Describe a situation in which your parishioner chose a method other than that of forgiveness to handle the hurt from a relationship. What was the outcome of the situation?
5. How do you help your parishioners to go through the forgiveness process?
  - a. Describe how you would walk a person through the process of forgiveness in order to repair a relationship.
  - b. Are there any circumstances in which you would not suggest forgiveness? If yes; what are they and why?
  - c. When you talk to parishioners about forgiveness, do you take into consideration their personality? How exactly does a person's personality affect whether or not you talk about the possibility of forgiveness?
6. Do you have any additional comments about the role of forgiveness in your profession?

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions for Counselors**

### *Introductory Questions*

1. What type of counseling do you do?
2. Describe your typical client. (Age range, gender, etc.) What types of issues do they discuss with you?
3. What is your method of counseling?

### *Forgiveness Questions*

1. What comes to mind when you think of forgiveness? (Possible probes: How do you interpret forgiveness? What do you associate forgiveness with? How would you describe what forgiveness looks like? What are some examples?)
  - a. Describe how an individual knows that he or she has achieved forgiveness.
2. What is your view on forgiveness?
  - a. Do you think that forgiveness is important? Why or why not?
  - b. Do you think that forgiveness is therapeutic? Why or why not?
  - c. Does forgiveness help the victim? Why or why not?
3. Do you ever talk about forgiveness with your counselees? If yes, how does it come up?
4. Do you encourage your counselees to forgive? Why or why not?
  - a. When do you talk about the possibility of forgiveness with your counselees?
  - b. Describe a situation in which a counselee was able to achieve forgiveness in order to handle the hurt from a relationship. How did they do this and what was the outcome of the situation?
  - c. Describe a situation in which your counselee chose a method other than that of forgiveness to handle the hurt from a relationship. What was the outcome of the situation?
5. How do you help your counselees to go through the forgiveness process?
  - a. Describe how you would walk a person through the process of forgiveness in order to repair a relationship.
  - b. Are there any circumstances in which you would not suggest forgiveness? If yes; what are they and why?
  - c. When you talk to counselees about forgiveness, do you take into consideration their background and/or their personality? How exactly does a person's personality and or background affect whether or not you talk about the possibility of forgiveness?
6. Do you have any additional comments about the role of forgiveness in your profession?

## **Appendix D: Participant Information and Consent Form**

### **The Art of Forgiveness**

Study Investigator: Carrie Benedict  
Department of Communication Studies  
The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812  
Phone: (406) 543-4582, E-mail: [care0116@yahoo.com](mailto:care0116@yahoo.com)

Faculty Advisor: Alan Sillars  
Department of Communication Studies  
The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812  
Phone: (406) 243-4463, E-mail: [sillars@selway.umt.edu](mailto:sillars@selway.umt.edu)

#### **Purpose**

This is a study to investigate how forgiveness is seen by helping professionals, such as counselors and pastors.

#### **Procedures**

In this study you will be interviewed for 30 to 45 minutes regarding your knowledge of forgiveness, the situations where forgiveness is encouraged, as well as the way in which you encourage people to forgive. If you do not wish to answer a question you may decline at any time. The interview will be audio taped. If you do not wish to be audio taped, you may decline.

#### **Risks/Discomforts**

There is minimal risk to you from the interview. However, the interview questions may bring up situations where you will need to word an answer carefully to protect the confidentiality of your clients.

#### **Benefits**

While you may not personally benefit from this study you will help educate other professionals in increasing understanding of forgiveness in the helping professions.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your personal privacy will be protected by using pseudonyms when you are quoted in the research results. In addition, the interview will be conducted in a closed conference room, or somewhere that is convenient, yet confidential. I will keep the tapes in a locked file cabinet. The only people who will have access to the tapes are my scribes and myself. After the paper is completed, I will destroy the tapes. When taking notes from the tapes, I will use pseudonyms in the notes. Your identity will never be revealed at any time. I will not use your real name on the tape. The records of the interview will be kept private and will not be released without your consent except as required by law.

#### **Compensation for Injury**

Although I do not foresee any risk in taking part in this study, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms: "In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims representative or University Legal Counsel." (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel, July 6, 1993).

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Your decision to take part in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in or you may withdraw from the study at any time.

**Questions**

If you have any questions now, or during the study, you may contact: Carrie Benedict, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. Phone: (406) 543-4582, E-mail: care0116@yahoo.com; or faculty advisor Alan Sillars, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, Phone: (406) 243-4463, E-mail: sillars@selway.umt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact Tony Rudbach through the research office at the University of Montana at (406) 243-6670.

**Subject's Statement of Consent**

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

---

Printed (typed) Name of Participant

---

Participant's Signature

Date

Please sign if you agree to allow the interview to be audio taped:

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

Date