5

Practicing Forgiveness

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My boyfriend called me up one Saturday night after being out with his friends. He had been drinking, and wanted me to come over. I kept saying "no," and he was getting mad. At one point he hung up on me and never called back, so I just went to bed. The next day he called and acted as if nothing was wrong. I explained to him I was upset with him and why I was upset. He said "sorry," and would I forgive him. The situation did not appear to be very serious to him. I also did not believe his apology was very sincere. He just wanted the argument to be over. I told him I needed a couple days to think about this. A few days later he called and was asking again for my forgiveness. I explained to him my reasons once again for being upset, and finally accepted his apology. Our relationship has suffered greatly because of this particular night.

—Jill, age 23

Based on Jill's account, her boyfriend is not very accomplished in the art of seeking forgiveness. His failure to appreciate the relational significance of his boorish behavior, the failure to acknowledge wrongdoing, the apparently insincere apology—in Jill's mind these communicative shortcomings put the relationship at risk. For her part, Jill responds with delaying tactics. She gives her boyfriend a chance to reframe his behavior. Later she reinforces the reasons for her outrage before finally accepting what was (presumably) a more convincing apology. We can only speculate about the long-term consequences of this episode, but the pair's prospects seem to have dimmed in part because forgiveness was practiced ineffectively.

The communication of forgiveness is often associated with concrete relational consequences, as it was by Jill. For that reason, this chapter takes a practical turn. Having reviewed a broad spectrum of research and theory in earlier chapters, we now turn our attention to the question of effectiveness. What communication practices are likely to promote positive outcomes for individuals and relationships? Does the forgiveness literature yield any sensible advice, any defensible prescriptions, or any practical wisdom that might be helpful as we practice forgiveness in our own relationships? To put it simply, what works? And, just as importantly, what doesn't?

We approach this chapter somewhat gingerly. Researchers are often loath to offer prescriptions, because we know that each forgiveness episode is shaped by so many unique factors, including the relational history of the parties, their individual communication skills, and cultural differences, among others. No generic "rulebook" can guide us through the complex maze of forgiveness interactions. No set of simple instructions can relieve us of the responsibility for creating our own communication, responding to the circumstances and meanings that arise in a given situation. Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous of us to simply "pass" on the opportunity to help readers apply forgiveness research to their own relationships. After all, some of the most intriguing writing on forgiveness comes from therapists and applied researchers who are developing and testing interventions that will be of use to people who are recovering from relational trauma. Moreover, in our own research, we have often asked the parties relating a transgression to reflect on the communication behaviors that helped them forgive and move on. In short, the forgiveness literature has evolved to the point where we feel confident in offering our own cautious synthesis of how forgiveness might be practiced effectively.

We proceed with these caveats in mind. First, as we noted in Chapter 1, we are primarily interested in the practice of "ordinary" forgiveness, the kind that inevitably arises from the interactions of families, friends, and romantic partners. Our focus is on nontherapeutic relationships and settings, not clinical interventions. Second, we have not studied, and our conclusions do not apply to, those who have survived incest, serious crime, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse. The process of recovery from these extremely serious transgressions is well beyond the scope of this book. Third, although we address forgiveness at the psychological and communicative levels, the latter continues to receive more attention in this chapter. Fourth, we continue to conceptualize forgiveness and reconciliation as separate but related processes. But in this chapter we orient more of our material to those who are seeking to *both* forgive and reconcile. Finally, our intent in this chapter is to help relational partners think more deeply about the processes and practices available to them in forgiveness situations, not to endorse one particular approach.

We begin with a brief discussion of *why* people forgive, with a focus on motivations and goals. Then we review the prominent prescriptive models proposed by psychologists such as Robert Enright and Everett Worthington. These models focus primarily on individual processes. We then turn to the communicative tasks proposed in Chapter 4, with the intent of blending psychological and communicative approaches. Along the way, we present data from our own studies linking communication tactics with relational outcomes and share lessons learned from our interviews with long-term couples. Finally, we consider the role of forgiveness in promoting reconciliation, drawing heavily from the work of Hargrave (1994).

❖ FIVE REASONS TO FORGIVE

Perhaps the first step in practicing forgiveness is developing the motivation to forgive. As we discussed in Chapter 1, forgiveness has been associated with a variety of benefits, including relationship repair, improved mental health after a distressing event, and even some physiological measures of health. In other words, in addition to moral imperatives or altruistic tendencies, there are several good reasons to forgive (Witvliet, 2001; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

1. Forgiveness May Repair Broken Relationships

For some time, scholars have argued that the practice of forgiveness increases the chances of positive relational outcomes after a serious transgression (Hargrave, 1994). Forgiveness may "restore the peace" in families, friendship networks, and work teams. Much of the evidence for this claim comes from the literature on marriage. In a recent review, Fincham, Hall, and Beach (2005) suggested that forgiveness was correlated with "relationship and life satisfaction, intimacy, attributions, and affect, and . . . it predicts psychological aggression, marital conflict, and behavior toward the spouse after a transgression" (p. 208).

We also found that forgiveness can have positive relational consequences in romantic relationships. Kelley (1998) found that 72% of respondents reported that forgiveness episodes resulted in relationship changes. Among those experiencing change, relationship strengthening (26%) was nearly as likely as relationship weakening (29%). Another 28% reported that the episode resulted in a change of status or revised relational rules. Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, and Finkel (2005) argue that posttransgression relational quality and dyadic adjustment are both affected by the forgiveness processes. According to these authors, positive outcomes are more likely if the offended party relinquishes hurt feelings, makes positive attributions about the transgression, and extends forgiveness. The offender can initiate reconciliation by apologizing, making amends, and pledging not to repeat the transgression.

In short, forgiveness seems to *matter* in personal relationships.

2. Forgiveness May Restore Individual Well-Being

In Kelley's (1998) study of narratives, the restoration of personal well-being was a common reason for forgiving. Holding on to the bitterness and anger that accompany *unforgiveness* (Worthington, 2001) appears to erode feelings of mental and even physical well-being. One of Kelley's respondents wrote:

> 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. Why should I suffer for what he has done? So I wrote him . . .

Reflecting an altruistic impulse, some of Kelley's (1998) respondents forgave out of concern for the offender's well-being. Offenders often experience severe guilt and pain until they are forgiven.

3. Forgiveness Can Be an Expression of
Continued Love and Commitment

When asked why they forgive, many people describe forgiveness an expression of *love* for the offender. "I forgave him because I loved him so deeply," said one young woman. For some people, forgiving seems to be an intrinsic part of loving. For others, the key word is *commitment*. Remaining committed to a friendship or marriage means finding a way to forgive, to "take the good with the bad."

4. Forgiveness Recognizes Conciliatory Behavior

Kelley (1998) described individuals being influenced to forgive when an offending party expressed conciliatory behavior, such as apologizing, taking responsibility for his or her actions, or showing remorse for the damage caused by his or her actions. In essence, the goal of forgiving in these situations becomes, in part, the desire to reciprocate conciliatory actions. Reciprocated behavior is a sign that the parties are working cooperatively to develop understanding and move past the transgression.

5. Forgiveness Can Restore Relational Justice

As we suggested with our *Negotiated Morality Theory* in Chapter 3, forgiveness is a means by which parties acknowledge violations of relationship values and potentially recommit themselves to a shared moral framework. Thus, the desire to restore justice and fairness in the relationship is sometimes cited as a reason for seeking or granting forgiveness.

❖   THE DARK SIDE OF FORGIVENESS

In addition to the motives just listed, forgiveness can be initiated for a variety of unhealthy reasons. Apparent acts of forgiveness can actually be verbally aggressive behaviors designed to exploit the offended partner's position of control. Said in a *nasty* tone, the following response to an apology is designed to hurt: "I understand that you're just doing the best that you can and that you're just not as psychologically healthy as I am right now." Likewise, conditional forgiveness can be used in a controlling manner: "I'll forgive you on the one condition that you promise to always (or never!) . . ." As is discussed later in this chapter,

there are good reasons to set boundaries when renegotiating the relationship. However, Waldron and Kelley (2005) found that conditional forgiveness is often related to relationship deterioration.

Individuals who forgive too readily may be maintaining an unhealthy codependent relationship with a repeat offender. Low self-esteem and/or low relational power may discourage them from fully confronting wrongdoing. Forgiveness is potentially harmful because the goal is to maintain the relationship at the price of continuing unhealthy patterns of behavior. Of course, we argue that these approaches are merely a kind of pseudo-forgiveness. They resemble acceptance or tolerance more than they do genuine forgiveness.

❖   PRESCRIPTIVE MODELS OF FORGIVENESS

This section examines prescriptive approaches to forgiving. We focus on two prominent models that have been used in clinical settings and made available to the broader public through accessible publication. In both cases, research suggests they are potentially effective in helping people forgive (see Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Both models are psychological in nature, focused on the cognitive and emotional steps in the forgiveness process. After reviewing them briefly, we integrate these psychological models with our own communicative approach. Table 5.1 presents a summary of the key steps in each framework. Our approach differs in that it focuses on seven tasks that the partners must accomplish jointly. These tasks correspond to the communicative processes described in Chapter 4, Figure 4.1.

The Enright Process Model

Enright and the Human Development Group (1991) developed a process model of forgiveness that occurs in 20 units organized around four phases. During the *uncovering phase,* the offended party recognizes the pain he or she is experiencing because of the transgression, and examines how this injustice has affected him or her. Commenting on this part of the process, Malcolm, Warwar, and Greenberg (2005) emphasize the emotional work that must be accomplished before forgiveness can proceed. Enright (2001) recommends full acknowledgment of the anger and negative emotion. In the *decision phase*, the injured party assesses whether forgiveness is a viable option given the nature of the transgression and the value of the relationship. Interestingly, one may make the decision to forgive in this stage even if the individual

Table 5.1   Practicing Forgiveness: Three Prescriptive Models

Enright et al. (1991, 1992)	Worthington (1998, 2001)	Waldron & Kelley
Four Phases	*Five Steps*	*Seven Tasks*
Uncovering	Recall hurt	Confront transgression
Decision	Empathize	Manage emotion
Work	Give a gift	Make sense
Outcome	Public commitment	Seek/invite forgiveness
	Hold on	Grant/accept forgiveness
		(Re)Negotiate rules/values
		Monitor transition

does not yet *feel* forgiving (Freedman, Enright, & Knutson, 2005). Enright (2001) emphasizes committing to the path of forgiveness. This commitment often stems from the realization that vengeful strategies are not working to the advantage of the victim or the relationship.

The third phase, *work*, is characterized by conscious reframing. Similar to the cognitive process described in Kelley's (1998) forgiveness narratives, reframing allows the injured party to recontextualize the offense and feel empathy and compassion for the offender. In the Enright model, reframing is the critical step, because it leads to "acceptance and absorption of the pain and is seen as the heart of forgiveness" (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Freedman et al., 2005, p. 395). The psychological "work" requires gaining perspective, developing understanding, and reclaiming positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This shift culminates in an act of mercy. This may be expressed as a tangible gift, such as a card or object that symbolizes healing, or it can be less concrete, such as an expression of continued love. The *outcome phase* represents the experience of healing and psychological health. Elsewhere, this is referred to as the *deepening phase* (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). For Enright, this phase is a release from an emotional prison. The wounded partner finds meaning in the traumatic experience. Examples might include a renewed appreciation for one's capacity to survive trying circumstances, the recognition that all humans are capable of

mistakes, or a sense that preserving important relationships is more important than gaining vengeance.

After years of applying this framework, Enright (2001) has offered several observations to keep in mind. He reminds us that not everyone forgives in the same fashion or at the same speed. In addition, individuals may find themselves mired in one of the phases before eventually moving on. Finally, he noted that emotional healing can be a very long process. We would add several of our own observations. First, it may be that the forgiveness process involves loops and cycles, rather than straightforward phases. For example, the decision to forgive may trigger a new round of "uncovering" as emotions such as fear (of a repeated violation) replace anger and resentment. Second, it seems very likely that the phases might occur out of sequence. The decision to forgive may be made before emotions are really dealt with, out of a cognitive commitment to the relationship. Third, we would emphasize that progress through the stages is often a joint accomplishment, propelled by the communication of both partners. For example, emotional states may be addressed more readily when the partner listens respectfully to emotional expressions.

The Worthington Pyramid Model

Worthington (1998, 2001) proposed a pyramid model of forgiveness grounded in research on empathy (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough et al., 1997). The *Pyramid Model to Reach Forgiveness* included five steps: (1) recall the hurt, (2) empathize, (3) the altruistic gift of forgiveness, (4) commit publicly to forgive, and (5) hold on to forgiveness. *Recall the hurt* emphasizes remembering the transgression as objectively as possible. This is to be done in a supportive environment, often with the help of a therapist. The objective is to confront the reality of the transgression while keeping one's emotional responses in check. The next step, and perhaps key element of the Pyramid Model, is to *empathize.* Empathy involves perspective taking and (re)humanizing the offender. Worthington describes a process of seeing things from the offender's perspective and feeling the offender's feelings. The offender becomes a "person" as well as the object of anger.

Step three is the *altruistic gift of forgiveness,* which involves a three-part process. First, the offended parties contemplate their own past transgressions. Second, they concentrate on the feelings they had when forgiven (e.g., gratitude). According to Worthington, awareness of one's own guilt and gratitude creates a heightened state of arousal that can trigger a desire to forgive. In therapy, a facilitator might capitalize on this state by inviting the client to forgive, as follows: "You can see

that the person needs your forgiveness. You can see what a gift it is to have received forgiveness yourself. Would you like to give him (or her) a gift of forgiveness?" (Worthington, 1998, p. 125).

The fourth step, *commit publicly to forgive*, helps the forgiver persevere when doubts arise. The commitment can be expressed to friends, shared in therapy, or written in journals. When the forgiver's resolve diminishes, public commitments provide reminders of the original motives behind the decision to forgive. According to Worthington (2001), these reminders potentially replace the natural desire to ruminate and dwell on negative emotions, with a more constructive process characterized by less pronounced emotion, empathy, sympathy, love, and compassion (Worthington, 2001).

The final step, *hold on to forgiveness*, recognizes that forgiveness is a long-term process. Worthington describes several ways to sustain forgiveness, which we paraphrase: (1) remember that it is not "unforgiving" to remember the hurt you experienced, (2) try not to dwell on negative emotions, (3) remind yourself why you chose forgiveness over revenge, (4) seek reassurance from outside parties, and (5) review journals or other expressions of your decision to forgive.

As does Enright's model, Worthington's approach provides specific guidance for those seeking a path to forgiveness. Worthington effectively simplifies a complex process and identifies useful tools for the forgiver (e.g., journaling). Worthington's model is accessible to the layperson and has apparently been used with some success in therapeutic settings.

❖ COMMUNICATION TASKS OF FORGIVENESS
    (CTF): A NEW PRESCRIPTIVE MODEL

In proposing a communication-based approach to the practice of forgiveness, we embrace the work of Enright, Worthington, and their colleagues, even as we shift attention away from individual psychology to the communicative behaviors used by families, work teams, or romantic couples to "perform" forgiveness. We find considerable practical value in Enright's four stages and Worthington's five steps, but we are more comfortable with a framework based on communicative *tasks.*

By focusing on tasks, we ease assumptions about linear sequencing. In our view, forgiveness is a process comprising multiple tasks, but they needn't be completed in a particular order (even if they frequently are). A comparison of the other two models reveals sequential variability. For example, empathy has a pivotal role at the beginning of Worthington's process; Enright places empathy at phase three, *working*

on forgiveness, after the decision to forgive. We would agree that developing empathy is an essential element, but we view it as a task that may be repeated at various points in the process.

We see forgiveness behaviors as potentially multifunctional, as when the act of confessing ("I bought a new computer because it was on sale, even though we usually talk about large purchases before deciding.") functions to acknowledge a transgression even as it helps the partner make sense of the reasons behind it. In other words, forgiveness tasks can be addressed simultaneously. Moreover, we recognize that certain communication tasks may be partially accomplished, returned to later, or simply repeated until the partners "get it right." The anecdote Jill shared in the introduction of this chapter conveys the sometimes messy and halting nature of forgiving communication.

As each communicative task is introduced, we identify examples of potentially effective communicative behaviors (for more detailed descriptions, see Chapter 4). These include acts that should be initiated or avoided by individuals and patterns of interaction. We also reference psychological processes, with particular emphasis on those proposed by Enright and Worthington. We remind the reader that we are suggesting these tasks on the basis of our own reading of the literature, our preliminary studies of the communication behaviors associated statistically with positive outcomes, and our discussions with experienced romantic couples. We have not yet systematically tested the suggestions provided here, and readers should apply them to their own relationships cautiously.

Task 1: Confront the Transgression

Most forgiveness models start with the recognition of wrongdoing. Responsibility for the wrongful act may be shared, but the key for both

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Task 1: Confront the Transgression

Brief description: Both parties must acknowledge that wrongdoing has been committed and that at least one partner has been badly hurt. Responsibility for the transgression must be taken and (sometimes) shared.

Communication behaviors: Question unethical behavior; confess; request self-disclosures; truth telling; make suspicions explicit; question insincerity; describe offensive behavior; discuss violated rules and moral values; demand/claim responsibility.

Psychological processes: Acknowledge hurt; assess magnitude of violation; decide relational and personal impact; identify violated rules and values.

parties is to acknowledge that rules have been broken, values have been flouted, and harm has been done. In our model, denying, mini-mizing, or evading responsibility for the act is considered ineffective.

Task 2: Manage Emotion

Emotion is an individual experience, but its meaning and relational importance must be socially negotiated. "Managing emotion" involves such communicative tasks as listening, expressing, labeling, and recip-rocating emotion (or choosing not to). Extreme emotion may hamper the performance of other forgiveness tasks, so the partners must coop-erate in an effort to absorb the emotional impact of the transgression.

Task 2: Manage Emotion

Brief description: Strong negative emotion must be expressed, labeled, acknowledged, legitimized, accepted, and deintensified. Emotions may include shock, anger, and fear, among others.

Communication behaviors: Give voice to strong emotion; ask about emo-tions; listen for emotions; avoid interruption; curtail defensive communica-tion; assess nonverbal emotional cues; affirm the right to be emotional; use labels for emotional states; resist the tendency to reciprocate negative emo-tions; request a "cooling off" period; allow time for emotions to dissipate; edit destructive emotional expressions.

Psychological processes: Become aware of emotions; identify source of emotion; classify emotional reactions; legitimize emotional response; give yourself permission to express emotion.

Task 3: Engage in Sense-Making

Transgressions are disruptive events that create uncertainty, call moral values into question, and force partners to reconsider relational assumptions. As a communication process, sense-making refers to efforts to "make meaning of" and "manage uncertainty about" the transgression. This information feeds psychological assessments of the magnitude of the act, attributions about why it occurred, and what the act means for the future of the relationship. This task may involve an initial assess-ment of whether or not the act is "forgivable" given the value system governing the individuals and their relationship. As most psychologi-cal models note, the information gathered from these interactions can help parties reframe the offense, sometimes in a manner that reduces its perceived magnitude.

> ### Task 3: Engage in Sense-Making
>
> *Brief description:* The wounded partner invites information-sharing about motives, situational details, and explanations, all in an effort to manage uncertainty and assess the magnitude of the offense. The offender provides an honest explanation. The parties jointly construct the meaning of the offense by considering it in the context of past behavior, current relational understandings, and implications for the future.
>
> *Communication behaviors:* Seek/offer explanations and accounts; manage uncertainty through open questions, examples, honest answers, and paraphrasing; explore motives for the offense; question intent; engage in perspective taking; discuss extenuating circumstances; construe the relational meaning of the offense; jointly assess personal and relational harm; consider offense in context of relational past (is the offense part of a larger pattern?); create a vision for the hypothetical future (could we maintain our relationship in light of this offense?).
>
> *Psychological processes:* Assess motives and intent; make attributions about the cause of the offense; weigh mitigating circumstances; contrast magnitude with value of the relationship; understand the offender's perspective; reframe the offense; determine if offense is "forgivable" within your value system; assess predictability of the relational future.

Task 4: Seek Forgiveness

Table 5.2 summarizes common forgiveness-seeking and forgiveness-granting tactics and their association with relational outcomes. These are based on reports from romantic partners (see Kelley & Waldron, 2005; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Explicit acknowledgement (including apology and expressions of remorse), nonverbal assurances (which communicated sincerity), and offers of compensation were the approaches associated with positive outcomes. Task 4 requires both parties to agree that forgiveness is at least a possibility and to communicate in a manner that advances the process. The forgiveness seeker may accept responsibility, express regret, and apologize. The wounded party typically expects such behavior and assesses the degree to which the message sufficiently redresses the transgression. Negotiation or delay may follow (as in Jill's interaction reported above) until the issues are resolved.

A central component in the Enright and Worthington models is the development of *empathy.* Empathy is "an active effort to understand another person's perception of an interpersonal event as if one were that other person." (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000, p. 180). The wounded

Table 5.2   Self-Reported Forgiveness Strategies and Romantic Relationship Outcomes

Strategy	Examples	Outcome
Forgiveness-seeking strategies		
1. Explicit acknowledgement	Apology; remorse	Positive
2. Nonverbal assurance	Eye contact; hugs	Positive
3. Compensation	Gifts; repeated efforts	Positive
4. Explanation	Reasons; discuss offense	None
5. Humor	Joking; humoring	None
Forgiveness-granting strategies		
1. Explicit	"I forgive you"	Positive
2. Nonverbal displays	Facial expressions; touch	Positive
3. Conditional	"I forgive you, but only if . . ."	Negative
4. Discussion	Talking about the offense	Positive
5. Minimize	"No big deal"; "Don't worry"	None

SOURCE: From Kelley, D. L., & Waldron, V. R. (2006). Forgiveness: Communicative implications in social relationships. In C. S. Beck (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 30* (pp. 303–341). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Table reprinted by permission.

partner may develop empathy by considering the frailty of human nature or recalling his or her own transgressions, thus identifying with the offender. Empathy can foster a more open response to forgiveness requests. Ultimately this openness can be communicated verbally (e.g., "I accept the apology") or nonverbally (e.g., through a hug, a nod, or a cessation of defensive posture).

Task 4: Seek Forgiveness

Brief description: The wounded partner convincingly apologizes, expresses regret, and (where appropriate) offers to make amends. The forgiver assesses the request for forgiveness, develops empathy, and communicates openness to the possibility of forgiveness.

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> *Communication behaviors:* Explicitly acknowledge fault (apology, remorse); grant control to the offended party; offer nonverbal assurance; offer compensation (make amends); express openness to forgiveness request; listen nondefensively; acknowledge offender's communicative effort; express empathy if appropriate; when appropriate, explain why initial forgiveness-seeking efforts are inadequate (e.g., fails to fully acknowledge blame); let mutual friends know of your culpability and desire for forgiveness (when appropriate).
>
> *Psychological processes:* Decide that forgiveness is possible and potentially desirable; weigh the relative benefits of revenge and the benefits of mercy; identify with the offender; develop empathy; assess offender's behavior in light of one's own past failures; focus on learning, not defending; see offender as a person, not an object of anger; assess offender's sincerity; assess the likelihood of a repeat offense; determine if compensation is necessary; assess "fit" between forgiveness-seeking behavior and seriousness of the transgression; assess one's willingness to take a risk.

Task 5: Grant Forgiveness

Granting forgiveness is the task that Enright and Worthington refer to as "giving a gift." The gift metaphor apparently stems from the sense that the wounded partner can legitimately choose to withhold forgiveness, but chooses instead to exercise mercy. As with gifts, forgiveness is often granted as an expression of love. As indicated in Table 5.2, explicit statements of forgiveness, nonverbal displays, and willing to discuss the path to forgiveness were associated with positive relational outcomes.

> **Task 5: Grant Forgiveness**
>
> *Brief description:* The wounded partner indicates a willingness to forgive. Forgiveness may be extended immediately and unequivocally or a long-term process may be initiated. To reduce risk, conditional forgiveness may be offered and third parties may be involved.
>
> *Communication behaviors:* Extend mercy to the offender; use explicit forgiveness statements where warranted ("I forgive you"); use conditional forgiveness statements to enhance psychological safety and reduce risk; use nonverbal behavior (e.g., hugs, eye contact) to supplement the verbal message; resist the temptation to minimize serious offenses; offer to discuss the possibility of forgiving; suggest seeking assistance from third parties to increase chances of success (when appropriate).
>
> *Psychological processes:* Decide to "give a gift" of forgiveness; decide what kind of mercy is appropriate (e.g., does it include a change in relationship

status along with forgiveness?); consult your personal values (e.g., religious or moral principles); accept the gift of forgiveness; release negative feelings; clarify reasons for forgiving (e.g., in a journal), such as love for the partner, commitment to the relationship, and personal well-being; make public commitments to forgiveness if appropriate; let go of the grudge; focus on the relationship, not the self; decide to replace negative emotions with positive; find reasons for hope.

Task 6: Negotiate Values and Rules

As we suggested in Chapter 3, forgiveness can be conceptualized as a process of negotiating relational morality. As Hargrave (1994) suggests, forgiveness often leads to a new "relational covenant." Task 6 makes this process explicit, as the partners reaffirm their commitments to one another, negotiate new values that will inform their future behavior, and agree to behavioral and communication rules that will guide them. For example, in negotiating forgiveness after a serious curfew violation, parents and children may agree that (1) safety and predictability are important values, (2) "home by 11:00 p.m." is a standard they can agree to, and (3) a phone conversation should precede any decision to change the rule on a given evening. Ultimately, the task is to create a system of justice and moral responsibility that will govern the relationship in the future. Completion of this task may require the parties to reinvent their relationship; third-party assistance may be needed to imagine new ways of relating.

Task 6: Negotiate Values and Rules

Brief description: Clarify the values and rules that will govern the relationship during the postforgiveness period. Renegotiate the "relational covenant." Create the moral structure that ensures fairness and justice in future interactions (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of the Negotiated Morality Theory of Forgiveness).

Communication behaviors: Clarify existing communication rules by proposing hypothetical applications and paraphrasing; affirm and recommit to relational values and beliefs; propose new rules and ways of relating; discuss a mutual plan for rebuilding trust; communicate respect for your efforts to forgive; discuss the shared values that will define your relationship in the future (e.g., the courage to confront problems head-on).

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> *Psychological processes:* Reimagine your future in this relationship; antic-
> ipate possible roadblocks and setbacks; decide which relational changes are
> needed to enhance psychological safety and maintain an acceptable rela-
> tionship; clarify the conditions that would lead to relationship termination;
> learn about improved methods of relating (e.g., via therapy, books, experi-
> enced friends and family members).

Task 7: Transition: Monitor, Maintain, or Renegotiate

In Chapter 4, we imagined a transitional period between the for-
giveness episode and the resumption of a stable (if redefined) relation-
ship. The key objectives here may be to monitor the success of new
relational agreements, to maintain new behavior patterns, and to
rebuild trust and hope. Partners must actively create positive relational
experiences to replace negative emotions. Part of this process may
involve constructing a new relational narrative that celebrates the rela-
tionship's perseverance in the face of great difficulty. A focus on the
future replaces rumination about the negative experience in the past.
Resolve, relational stability, and confidence may be cultivated by
resuming familiar rituals (like meeting regularly over lunch), review-
ing the reasons for forgiveness (consulting a journal), and seeking con-
tinued support from friends, spiritual leaders, or professionals. It
should be expected that the process may cycle back to an earlier for-
giveness task that has yet to be completed (e.g., managing emotions).
This may be the period when it becomes clear that, regardless of for-
giveness, the relationship must be terminated or deescalated because
of recurring transgressions, irresolvable moral differences, or concerns
about the psychological safety of the relationship.

Task 7: Transition: Monitor, Maintain, or Renegotiate

Brief description: Monitor and maintain relational agreements; build trust,
confidence, and hope; derive meaning from the experience; focus on the
future; consider a redefined relationship if the process fails.

Communication behaviors: Note successes in complying with new rela-
tional agreements; return to previous communication tasks as needed (e.g.,
manage resurgent emotions); jointly reconstruct "lessons learned" from the
forgiveness episode, but edit discussions of bitterness and blame; discuss
whether forgiveness is "holding" and why; adjust your relational narrative to

incorporate the forgiveness episode (i.e., create a subnarrative about surviv-ing the hardest of times); add forgiveness to discussion of relational identity (e.g., "forgiveness makes our relationship last"); use positive communication experiences to replace negative feelings (e.g., offer compliments); talk about increases in trust, hope, and stability as they are experienced; resume com-forting relational rituals (e.g., regular dinner dates); seek continued support from friends and professionals.

Psychological processes: Be mindful of your behavior and that of your partner; allow oneself to experience renewed trust (when warranted); accept appropriate levels of uncertainty about the relational future; (re)affirm one-self for seeking/granting forgiveness; remind oneself of the reasons for seek-ing or granting forgiveness (e.g., review journals); add forgiving to one's self-identity; focus on future benefits of the relationship; build a psycholog-ical safety net with counselors and friends; consider deescalation or termi-nation of the relationship (if new agreements are violated).

❖ RECONCILIATION: A POSSIBLE OUTCOME OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness can lead to reconciliation, or what is often called *relation-ship repair.* In fact, the desire to reconcile sometimes drives the decision to forgive. However, as do many scholars, we find value in separating these related processes. It is quite possible to forgive without fully rec-onciling. In fact, reconciliation may be a poor choice in relationships marked by abuse or codependence. In our own research, we find that some parties intensify and strengthen their bonds after negotiating forgiveness, others just "return to normal," and still others choose to change their relational status (e.g., from friends to "just coworkers"), lower the level of intimacy (e.g., from lovers to friends), or terminate the relationship altogether. Nevertheless, forgiveness scholars have speculated about why and how forgiveness might lead to reconcilia-tion. We find some helpful suggestions in our discussion with long-term married couples. In this section, we draw on both of these sources to develop guidance for those seeking reconciliation.

Contributions From Forgiveness Scholars

Several scholars have theorized about how forgiveness might facil-itate relationship repair. For example, Rusbult et al. (2005), operating from an interdependence theory perspective, argue that reconcilia-tion is dependent on restoring commitment and trust. *Commitment* is

defined as "the extent to which each partner intends to persist in the relationship, feels psychologically attached to it, and exhibits long-term orientation toward it" (p. 187), whereas *trust* is defined as "the strength of each partner's conviction that the other can be counted on to behave in a benevolent manner" (p. 187). Practically speaking, commitment is the motivation to act in a prosocial manner, such as accommodating, sacrificing, or affirming one's partner. Trust is the degree to which one believes the other person will act prosocially. Thus, in order to effect lasting repair, both partners must make mutual prosocial investments in the relationship. For example, the offended party may act with goodwill, setting aside accusations in the hopes of starting anew, while the offender simultaneously decides to take responsibility for the transgression and tries to make amends. From Rusbult et al.'s work, we conclude that forgiveness is a process that cultivates prosocial action, creating the conditions for reconciliation in turn.

Gordon and colleagues (Gordon & Baucom, 2003; Gordon et al. 2000) describe a three-stage process that may facilitate reconciliation after an extramarital affair or other major betrayal. The first stage, *impact,* is characterized by feelings of uncertainty, violated trust, and increased risk. Often with the help of a therapist, during this stage the wounded partner places boundaries on his or her interactions with the offender, practices self-care, uses time-out and venting strategies, copes with flashbacks, and discusses the impact of the transgression with the offender (Gordon & Baucom, 1999). The second stage, *meaning,* is characterized by communication behavior intended to reduce uncertainty and increase mutual understanding. A goal is to restore losses of control and security while determining whether the relationship can be safely reconciled. This phase is characterized by (1) explanations and accounts, (2) questions, and (3) assurances and promises (Kelley & Waldron, 2005). The third stage is *recovery* or *moving on.* The understanding that has been developed at the *meaning* stage hopefully leads to a "nondistorted view" (Gordon & Baucom, 2003, p. 182) and less intense negative emotion. The offended party may recognize that forgiveness is preferable to revenge because the latter will not "rebalance" the relationship. During this stage, the pair may negotiate forgiveness and work through problematic issues that could affect their reconciliation. For these authors, the task of forgiveness is embedded within a larger process of reconciliation.

Hargrave's (1994) reconciliation model contains two central components: exoneration and forgiveness. *Exoneration* is a process of gaining insight into the causes of one's emotional pain while also understanding the offender's fallibility. The offended party may learn

to identify with the offender and ultimately reduce feelings of superiority and blame. Hargrave emphasizes that acknowledging the offender's fallibility does *not* release her or him from responsibility.

In his therapeutic approach, Hargrave (1994) argues that *forgiveness* is relevant only after the offended party is willing and ready for healing and perceives that the offender is ready to act in a responsible and trustworthy manner. At that point, the forgiver offers the *opportunity for compensation.* The forgiver does not demand an apology or restitution, but communicates a willingness to explore possibilities for reconciliation. Ultimately this process culminates in an *overt act of forgiveness.* As Hargrave (1994) puts it, this act "is unique in the work of forgiveness because it focuses immense effort and importance on one point in time between the innocent victim of family violation and the perpetrator of the violation" (p. 346). This act can be the result of the hard work of rebuilding love and trust or can begin the process. In either case, making forgiveness an overt act can "facilitate acts of compassion, courage, and commitment between family members" (p. 346).

Thus far we can see that forgiveness is closely intertwined with reconciliation, although its placement varies in these therapeutic approaches. For Rusbult et al. (2005), forgiveness provides the foundation for the prosocial behavior that may facilitate reconciliation. For Gordon and Baucom (2003) along with Hargrave (1994), forgiveness is predicated on the decision to reconcile. However, a key element of each of these approaches is the transformation of negative emotion into positive affect and/or prosocial acts. Malcolm et al. (2005) argue that this emotional transformation process is central to both forgiveness and reconciliation. Individual Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT; Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2003) posits that "the suppression or blocking of primary biologically adaptive emotions subverts healthy boundary setting, self-respectful anger, and necessary grieving" (Malcolm et al., 2005). From this perspective, engaging in forgiveness requires the forgiver to acknowledge the legitimacy of emotions, such as hatred and resentment, in response to a relational transgression. Even the desire to retaliate is seen as part of a normal response to being hurt. This approach encourages individuals to work through their emotions, rather than avoiding them by excusing or condoning the offender's behavior or by focusing all of their energies on blaming the offender. Eventually, "a maladaptive emotion state is transformed best by replacing it with another, more adaptive emotion" (Malcolm et al., 2005, p. 383).

We suggest that reconciliation is also facilitated by communicative processes that cultivate more adaptive emotional expressions. One practice long-term married couples described to us involves the initiation

or resumption of familiar relational rituals. One couple resumed their practice of joining friends for a night out once each week, even though it felt awkward at first. Several couples used joint prayer to regenerate positive feelings. As one wife told us, "We prayed and the next day we felt different, you know." Another couple resolved to attend family gatherings together. In each case, the renewal of ritual seemed to stimulate some degree of positive feeling and reduced the tendency to dwell on negative emotion.

As discussed at length in Chapter 3, we believe that values must be renegotiated as part of the forgiveness/reconciliation process. Successful renegotiation of values should result in a new moral structure for the relationship, if the relationship is to continue. This moral structure identifies *right* and *wrong* behavior within the confines of the relationship. In addition, it may define consequences for following or breaking these new or reinstated relational rules. The ability to renegotiate this new moral structure will influence the extent to which relationships are reconciled, weakened, or strengthened. As discussed later, renegotiating values is also central to reestablishing meaning in the relationship.

❖ CONTRIBUTIONS FROM LONG-TERM COUPLES

Before leaving our discussion of reconciliation, we would like to share some of the advice long-term couples offered us. This section is adapted from a chapter we are preparing for a book on effective interpersonal communication (Waldron et al., in press). Of course, most couples bother little with theoretical distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation. However, we view them as "forgiveness experts" in the sense that their relationships persevered through very difficult circumstances. These couples survived affairs, financial irresponsibility, business failures, drug and alcohol abuse, serious difference in parenting, public embarrassments, vicious arguments, and other major transgressions. We well know that longevity is only one measure of relational success, as it is possible to maintain a dysfunctional relationship for a very long time. Moreover, the forgiveness practices learned by older couples, in this case those married in the 1930s–1960s, may not be entirely applicable to younger couples. The forgiveness attitudes and practices of these couples were shaped by the cultural values of their generations. For example, couples married before the 1960s sometimes felt compelled to forgive their spouses, in part because divorce was a cultural or religious taboo. Despite obvious "cohort differences," we found cross-generational consistencies in the interviews. We focus

on these as we share their prescriptions for staying together after serious transgressions.

Acknowledge wrongdoing

Nearly all couples agreed that a key to negotiating forgiveness was taking responsibility for hurting your partner. The sufficient *acknowledgment* of wrongdoing is both a necessary part of forgiveness (in our communicative view) and an important step in reasserting relational justice. As a communication process, forgiveness expresses, changes, or reinforces the moral order of our relationships. It is the process by which injustice is identified and "owned up to." In some cases, offenders are forgiven unconditionally. Admitting wrongdoing and taking responsibility for transgressions are often enough to assure our partners that commonly agreed-on values will be respected in the future— that "justice will prevail."

In many cases, the responsibility for a transgression is mutual. As an example, Judith admitted continually overspending the family budget and hiding the creditor notices from her husband, Adam. As they discussed the matter, Adam realized that his sometimes harsh criticism encouraged Judith to be evasive about financial problems. Only when they both acknowledged their culpability could they move the forgiveness process along.

Apologize sincerely

Apology is the form of communication most likely to be associated with successful forgiveness. Usually issued with words such as "I am sorry," apologies communicate remorse and acknowledge a shift in conversational power to the wounded partner. Only the victim can "accept" an apology. Whereas transgressions can shatter the victim's sense of control, apologies put them in a position to determine the nature of the relationship. As previously indicated, apologies must be authentic to advance the forgiveness process. Jill's scenario, which started this chapter, illustrates the consequences of an apology that was insufficiently sincere.

Address emotion explicitly

Serious transgressions result in shock, embarrassment, anger, and hurt. Communicating these emotions is an important part of the early stages of forgiveness. Communication is the means by which emotion is vented. "Get it out on the table," one wife advised, "don't hold it in." The offender's acknowledgement of the type and depth of emotion is

important as well: "I know I hurt you badly." Sometimes couples help each other label emotions: "I didn't realize how ashamed I was until he asked why I hid the bills from him." For many couples, honest discussion of emotion was a prerequisite for progress.

Request outside assistance

Many couples recommended outside assistance as an important step in the forgiveness process. Particularly during the early stages of relationships, serious transgressions overwhelmed the couples' relational skills. Pastors, counselors, and older family members were among those consulted, particularly when the partners found it impossible to resolve issues of accountability or manage volatile emotions. One couple described the grudges that developed over repeated financial problems. They finally made progress by "talking with some of the other people that I've been very close to. How do they handle it? We'd go ask other people who have done these things." Friends helped identify the reasons for their financial distress and urged the partners to release feelings of resentment.

Forgive and remember

Some couples claimed that the key to a successful marriage was to "forgive and forget," to simply excise past transgressions from current discourse. However, as they discussed the history of their relationships, it became clear that forgetting was selective for most couples. Couples "actively forget" in the sense that they no longer experience the emotional pain when remembering the transgression, and they put discussions of blame in the past. Yet they "actively remembered" the lessons learned from past transgressions as they negotiated through a long-term process of forgiveness.

Use time to advantage

An advantage of interviews with long-term couples is their appreciation for the importance of time. They told us that forgiveness can be an ongoing negotiation, one that sometimes takes months, years, and in some cases, even decades. In Chapter 3, we introduced Ray (married to Doris for 32 years), who recalled a time when he brawled with some local "punks." Doris was humiliated when she was forced to bail him out of their small town jail, but as a traditional wife, she believed she should suffer in silence. As Doris told us, she had nurtured a grudge over the incident until recently. In fact, the couple revealed that only weeks before (nearly two decades after the event) had Doris shared her

feelings with Ray. In response, Ray belatedly acknowledged that he was wrong. Even as we interviewed them, the couple seemed to be mulling over the event and how it affected their marriage. Doris has not fully released her feelings of resentment, but she feels the couple is on stronger emotional footing now. "With time" Doris feels she can fully forgive Ray. She feels more hopeful about the retirement years, because she is putting the past behind her.

In addition, time may be used strategically in forgiveness negotiations. Angry partners sometimes "need time" to cool off before deciding if and how to forgive. "Taking time" to think and reduce high arousal levels sometimes helps partners put a transgression in a larger relational perspective. Hal described how he sometimes left the house briefly before realizing he needed to ask for forgiveness. "It gave us time to cool off . . . I jump in the car and go raring off and drive around a little bit and come back and realize that I was really [a] stupid idiot for doing that, you know."

Invoke spiritual values

For some couples, the difficulty of forgiveness is eased by shared spiritual values. In some interpretations of Christian theology, forgiveness is viewed as a mandate from God. For these couples, the discourse of forgiveness involves a revisiting of sacred teachings. As one Christian wife said to her husband in a joint interview, "if God forgave all of our sins, I guess I can forgive you for being a jerk sometimes." In some cases, couples seemed overwhelmed by the gravity of the offense. Together they sought insight, comfort, and guidance from shared religious texts and spiritual principles. The invoking of "higher order" values and a "higher power" may have allowed them to transcend the emotions and confusions that accompanied the relational crises. One couple was originally overwhelmed when the husband admitted his infidelity and alcoholism:

"I'm sorry," he said, "I want [you] to read the book of Mormon with me every day," so we did. We read it every day together for at least three years . . . And we would read it every day and honestly it was bringing the Lord into our life and that's what brought us together.

Revisit communication rules

Transgressions often call into question the implicit agreements that govern relationships and make them predictable. Forgiveness often

involves a reassertion of those rules. The offender must assure the wounded party that rules will be followed in the future. One young woman told us she greatly distressed her parents by staying out all night and not checking in by phone (as was the custom in her family). She apologized for the upset she caused and pledged to "never do it again." In other cases, new rules are proposed. A wife felt she could forgive her husband for an affair only if he pledged to let her "know where he was at every minute of the day." By complying with this new rule, the husband would reduce her uncertainty and gradually restore her trust.

The Role of Outside Assistance in Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Although to this point we have made few references to outside influences, these older couples recognized the important role that third parties play as individuals manage their relationships. Every relationship is embedded within a broader context of relationships. For example, a married couple is embedded within a network of in-law, child, and work relationships. This relational embeddedness has two important ramifications for managing relational transgressions. First, when transgressions become public they must be managed within the larger social network. For example, when a couple experiences marital problems due to one partner's affair and the affair becomes known within the social network, each individual is now faced with new communication tasks as they seek to manage their identity goals (e.g., save face for self or partner) and place appropriate boundaries on potential involvement from third-party individuals. Toward the end of the forgiveness and reconciliation process, the disputants may circulate individual or co-created narratives that provide a final public account of the process and what it means for the relationship, the individual participants, and their future involvement in the social network.

Our couples often called on third parties for help when working through forgiveness and reconciliation: counselors, clergy, family, and friends. Third-party assistance may be needed with any of the forgiveness tasks presented earlier in this chapter. For example, one wife who left her husband early in their marriage described her mother's invaluable assistance with sense-making, as she struggled to understand the reasons for her spouse's apparently insensitive behavior. Others used counselors to help them articulate their emotions, negotiate responsibility, and create new relationship rules as they worked on reconciliation. As one wife remembered

We went into counseling after that. We did go in for, you know, marriage counseling and we had assignments even, you know, to learn to communicate and learn the cause of our problem—communication. And so we just learned through that process.

Another emphasized how her counselor taught her "how to confront him (her husband). And then he finally went to one session and since that, things have really gone well. That was another turning point in our marriage."

❖ CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As individuals seek or grant forgiveness, and possibly move toward reconciliation in their relationships, they operate within a moral worldview. These moral assumptions inform beliefs about respect, justice, and how relationships *should* work. They are important components of personal identity and links to larger communities and cultures. It is because relationships are a primary site for the enactment, testing, and collision of values that we view forgiveness as a process of moral negotiation. For us, the nature and degree of reconciliation achieved between parties is largely a function of the extent to which they can agree on the moral framework that will guide their future interactions. This is perhaps the most fundamental communication task in the process of relational repair.

Our perspective is consistent with Flanigan's (1998) insight regarding victims of intrafamilial trauma. She argues that forgiveness is most difficult when the transgression undermines one's fundamental system of beliefs and values, when "people's beliefs in personal control and rules of justice are shattered along with their self-worth and belief in the goodness of others" (p. 99). Flanigan goes further: "Forgiveness is not given to events, but to people who have altered a person's perceptions of his [sic] internal or external world and of how this world will be in the future" (Flanigan, 1998, p. 100). In essence, recovering from severe relational transgression means finding a way to reconstruct one's moral worldview, restoring a sense that one's actions can lead to just outcomes, and creating confidence in the potential goodness of the other, even as we accept the fallibility of all humans. The resolve to forgive comes not from the simple need to fix a relational problem but also from a willingness to address the moral positions that allow us to respect ourselves and those we relate with.

In this chapter, we have proposed a series of practical forgiveness tasks. Although they certainly are shaped by the behaviors of individuals, their accomplishment ultimately stems from cooperative interaction. In our view, forgiveness tasks are not strictly sequential. They mutually influence one another in their development, can progress in parallel, and may be revisited repeatedly. We also made distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation, although these processes clearly can overlap. Through the identification of both forgiveness tasks and reconciliation tasks, we hope to provide important insight into the debate concerning the relationship between these two important concepts. It is simply impossible to chart a single psychological or communicative path through the complicated landscape of distressed human relationships. The process of forgiving a serious transgression is an intensely personal and trying relational journey. We hope we have provided useful navigational assistance by describing key tasks, providing examples of concrete communication behaviors, and sharing the advice of experienced travelers.