

Grief and Forgiving Others

I can't remember when we first promised a post on grief and forgiveness and I couldn't bring myself to look through old posts to figure it out; let's just say, I hope no one was holding their breath. Actually, I've started the post several times. In fact, I wrote so much at one point that it became clear to me I had a two-parter on my hands, but then I scrapped everything and decided to start again.

Nevertheless here we are (finally!), ready to deliver part one in our two-part series on forgiveness. In part one, we will talk all about forgiving others. Later on, in part two, we'll discuss forgiving ourselves. Got it? Good.

Anger

Grief is a storm of emotions and one of the most common is anger. Depending on the circumstance, that anger can radiate in a thousand different directions – anger at someone else, anger at yourself, anger at God, anger at the universe, anger towards the person who died, and so on.

Anger towards the person who died

For some, anger is a new and confusing emotion. Because anger is often considered a negative emotion or attribute, many feel like it's something shameful that needs to be hidden away; this is especially true if a person feels anger towards a person who's died. With age-old expressions like 'don't speak ill of the dead,' it's no wonder some might feel that acknowledging their anger is as good as besmirching their loved one's memory.

Of course, there are many instances where people are openly willing to acknowledge their anger towards the deceased; but fully owning one's anger doesn't make it any easier to deal with. Instead many choose to avoid their anger, ruminate on it and, in many cases, allow it to complicate their grief and impact their emotional health.

First, we're here to say that feeling anger towards a deceased loved one is totally normal. There are a zillion reasons why you might feel this way, but let's just mention a few.

- An old, unresolved hurt that you never reconciled before their death. This can be almost anything because, let's be honest, people do a lot of messed up stuff that hurts.
- A death by suicide, in which you feel anger that a loved one intentionally ended their life.
- A death by overdose, drunk driving, etc. in which you feel anger that they used a substance and put themselves in harm's way.
- A death by risky behavior (high-speed driving, risky sports, riding a motorcycle, etc.) in which the death feels avoidable.

- Anger that someone didn't 'fight' hard enough, common if someone opted to stop treatment, or not seek treatment, for an illness.
- Anger that someone didn't take care of themselves, common if a death was due to heart disease, diabetes, lung cancer or other diseases in which you feel a different lifestyle choices could have prevented the disease or outcome. This could include anger about a late diagnosis because someone didn't go to the doctor.
- Information comes out after a death that causes anger. This could be anything from anger about an estate and will to learning of infidelity to a million things in between.
- Anger about things that a person said or did while they were ill. This could also take the form of anger about things they didn't say or didn't do.

Anger towards someone other than the person who died.

Grief can involve anger towards many people, not just the person who died. Again there are numerous reasons for this anger, but a few examples may include:

- Anger at a doctor for not catching a disease process early enough, or not being able to cure the disease, or a medical error.
- Anger at others who may be perceived as contributing indirectly to the cause of death, including people your loved one used drugs with, rode motorcycles with, etc.
- Anger at someone who contributed directly to the cause of death, like in a case of homicide.
- Anger at friends and family who were not there to help and support you or your loved one during an illness.
- Anger at family members for how they handled end of life decision making, including disagreement over decisions around continuing treatment, hospice care, withdrawing support, etc.
- Anger at family for how they handled issues after a death, including funeral planning, estate issues, etc.

Here is the thing about anger; though it gets a bad rap, anger can actually be healthy and important. Anger can be useful, but it becomes a problem when it remains unresolved and starts to inhibit your ability to live in a healthy and content way with healthy and content relationships.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness can go a long way to soothe the burn of anger, but for many reasons it can seem out of reach; especially when the person you're angry at has died or when there is deep-seeded pain and hurt. People often have misgivings about forgiveness because they think it isn't attainable, puts them at risk for future hurts, or makes them weak – but none of this has to be true. This is why we think it's so important to have an in-depth discussion about forgiveness; to explain what it is and what it isn't and hopefully make it feel like a realistic and desirable possibility.

The definition of forgiveness

This may seem obvious, but in reality philosophers, psychologists and others in academia have spent years debating what exactly forgiveness is and (no surprise) they still don't agree. So for the purposes of our discussion, I will tell you the definition that we find the most useful. This definition will serve as a guide as we discuss forgiveness further.

The definition we prefer emerged from the *Human Development Study Group* at University of Wisconsin. This group met weekly for years to explore the concept of forgiveness from philosophical, psychological and psychiatric perspectives before finally settling on a definition. They define forgiveness as,

"A willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior to one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him or her" (Enright et al in Enright and North 1998).

So this means forgiveness is not...

Forgiveness is not *eliminating* the wrong that someone has done nor does it mean that we *excuse* a person for what they have done. As Joanna North has stated in her writings on forgiveness,

"We still see him as the perpetrator of the wrong and the one who is responsible for it . . . there must be a real sense of the wrongdoer as responsible and the wrong as real if forgiveness is to be meaningful at all. After all, if there is no wrong and no wrongdoer, then there is nothing and no one to forgive," (North in Enright and North 1998).

This is an important point so I am going to restate it one more time: forgiveness doesn't mean that you no longer think someone did something wrong!

Another thing that happens in grief that isn't quite forgiveness, but is important just the same, is that people sometimes realize their anger has been displaced or unreasonable. Let's face it, grief can make you feel and act a little crazy. In your acute grief, your emotions may take precedence over logic and reason; then, later on, you may realize some of your judgements were a little off. In certain situations you may ultimately realize that it wasn't forgiveness you needed, but merely to see things differently.

For example, someone might feel anger or blame toward a friend who used drugs or rode motorcycles with their loved one. After some time griever may come to recognize that ultimately their loved one made their own choices and they might release some of the anger and blame they felt towards their loved one's friend. This release can be healthy and valuable, but it is important to recognize that it is not the same thing as forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about realizing blame or anger was misplaced. To review, forgiveness is about recognizing that

a wrong has been done and someone has the right to be angry, yet they actively forgive anyway.

A model for forgiveness

One thing we know from research is that using a specific model as a guide to achieving forgiveness, is actually more effective than relying on general therapy alone (Enright et al in Enright and North 1998). Though there are several different models out there, the one I am going to talk about is Robert Enright's model which has further been expanded on by others. Why this model? Because I like it! But don't let that stop you from exploring other models on your own or with your therapist.

Enright's model involves 20 steps, so I won't go in to full detail here, but these steps are broken into 4 phases – the uncovering phase, the decision phase, the work phase and the deepening phase (or the outcome phase). Applying this model of forgiveness has shown clear outcomes in helping people find forgiveness (often people who initially thought they would never be able to forgive). The below graphic reflects the 4 phases.

Enright Forgiveness Process

(Enright et al 1998)

Uncovering Phase

- 1. Examination of psychological defenses (Kiel 1986)**
- 2. Confrontation of anger (Trainer 1981)**
- 3. Admittance of shame, when appropriate (Patton 1985)**
- 4. Awareness of cathexis (Droll 1984)**
- 5. Awareness of cognitive rehearsal of the event (Droll 1984)**
- 6. Insight that that injured might be comparing self with the injurer (Kiel 1984)**
- 7. Realization that one may be permanently & adversely changed by the injury (Close 1970)**
- 8. Insight into a possibly altered 'just world' view (Flanigan 1987)**

Decision Phase

- 9. A change of heart, conversion, a new insight that old resolutions are not working (North 1987).**
- 10. Willingness to consider forgiveness as an option.**
- 11. Commitment to forgive the offender (Neblett 1974).**

Enright Forgiveness Process

(Enright et al 1998)

Work Phase

12. Reframing, through role taking, who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context (Smith 1981)
13. Empathy toward the offender (Cunningham 1985).
14. Awareness of compassion, as it emerges, toward the offender (Droll 1984).
15. Acceptance and absorption of pain (Bergin 1988).

Deepening Phase

16. Finding meaning for self and others in the suffering and forgiveness process (Frankl 1959)
17. Realization that the self has needed others' forgiveness in the past (Cunningham 1985).
18. Insight that one is not alone (universality, support).
19. Realization that the self may have new purpose in life because of the injury.
20. Awareness of decreased negative affect and, perhaps, increased positive affect if this begins to emerge toward the injurer; awareness of internal, emotional release (Smedes 1984)

The use of Enright's model has been linked to decreases in anxiety and depression, with increases in self-esteem and hope (Enright et al in Enright and North 1998). Fitzgibbons also observed a decrease in anger and hostility, and an increase in ability to control anger, enhanced trust, and freedom from "*the subtle control of individuals and events from the past.*" (Fitzgibbons in Enright and North 1998). All exciting stuff, right? So what does this process of forgiveness look like?

Uncovering Phase

In the uncovering phase, you really dig in to what your anger is all about. This phase is about acknowledging it, understanding it, etc. This is especially important if we are experiencing anger that we're denying or not outwardly willing to acknowledge. Enright, Fitzgibbons, and others make the point that many people mistakenly believe that the only way to resolve anger is to express it. In this phase it is important to begin to understand that anger can be dealt with without expressing it.

Decision Phase

In the decision phase it is important to really consider the option of forgiveness – the benefits of forgiveness, understanding what forgiveness is and what it isn't, etc. In this space, it's important to remember that forgiveness does not mean a person cannot express anger nor does it mean they cannot seek justice.

Work Phase

The work phase, as psychiatrist Richard Fitzgibbons explains, often, *"...begins as an intellectual process in which there is no true feelings of forgiveness."* True forgiveness comes over time and involved working to understand the person being forgiven and the context of their behaviors. This task can feel impossible at first and progress can be slow, but ultimately empathy can be found and (hard as this is to believe) compassion can emerge. It is important to remember in the work phase that forgiveness does not cure sadness, hurt, or mistrust; what it can do is help diminish fixations on things like anger and revenge.

Deepening Phase/Outcome Phase

The final phase (called the deepening phase by Enright and the outcome phase by Fitzgibbons) involves finding meaning in the forgiveness process. You may consider times that you yourself have been forgiven by another or you might begin to recognize the positive impact of forgiveness on your emotional and physical health and on your ability to cope with and integrate your loss.

Where to go from here

Forgiveness isn't easy. You aren't going to magically find forgiveness. Instead, this may be a first step in considering the possibility of forgiveness. Consider what forgiveness is and what it isn't. Consider forgiveness' benefits to yourself, your mental health, and your grief. And then, if even just a littlest part of you is open to it, dig a little deeper.

Adapted from: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/grief-and-forgiveness/>

