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Six Step Therapeutic Process to Facilitate Forgiveness of Self and Others

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Abstract This theoretical article postulates a six step therapeutic process to facilitate forgiveness of self and others. The purpose of this article is to provide therapists with the therapeutic process that can be used to assist clients who are working through forgiveness and self-forgiveness. The combination of several therapeutic methods in a specific order might be effective in assisting clients to work through the forgiveness process in a systematic way. A case example that chronicles a client's experience while working through forgiveness is provided. Lastly, a discussion of implications for practice and further research questions are presented.

Keywords Therapeutic process · Forgiveness · Self-forgiveness · Metaphors in therapy

Introduction

For many people, forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness are important processes associated with mental well-being. In the past, forgiveness has been limited to religious teachings and traditions, however, in the last quarter of the twentieth Century research among mental health practitioners has focused on the mental health aspects of forgiveness of self and others (Darby and Schlenker 1982; Worthington 1998; Zillman and Cantor 1976). Prior to the current research on forgiveness, there was an absence of discussion about the efficacy of forgiveness in the various psychological theories of the early and mid-twentieth century. Forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness are common concerns for most people, and systematic strategies to facilitate forgiveness can assist people in working through the process more quickly once they have decided to work on forgiving others or self.

The definition of forgiveness and self-forgiveness for the purpose of this discussion is an extrapolation of definitions from several sources. First, forgiveness of others is letting go of destructive feelings toward a person responsible for an offense, and the negative intention toward the offender is replaced by positive thoughts and behavior. While the forgiver does not forget the offense, it is possible to let go of non-adaptive emotional consequences and move forward (Enright 1996; Forgiveness Web 2011; Smedes 1984). Second, self-forgiveness is a conscious choice to let go of "self-blame, resentment, anger, hurt, and other negative feelings toward oneself related to" life events (Jacinto 2010, p. 207).

The purpose of this paper is to present a review of the literature on the forgiveness of others and self, develop a practice process of specific therapeutic steps to assist clients in working through the forgiveness of others and self, present a case study that illustrates the use of the therapeutic process, and delineate implications for helping professionals.

Religious and Spiritual Perspectives

A person's approach to forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness is an important aspect of her or his religion and spirituality. The forgiveness process is a component of

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many individuals' spiritual practice that can be helpful in working through anger. While spirituality is a way to develop meaning and purpose in individuals' lives, it also motivates people to behave in ways that produce outcomes consistent with their existential worldview by incorporating their values and beliefs into practice (Canda and Furman 2010). Forgiveness uses the lens of personal spirituality in order to process anger and associated feelings.

Centuries of religious teachings on forgiveness have impacted current empirical research about forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness. Adherents to various religious traditions have emphasized the importance of forgiveness and the emotional and spiritual benefits that can significantly change the life of the forgiver (McCullough et al. 2001; Pargament 2001). McCullough et al. (2001) reported that several studies suggested people with religious or spiritual beliefs valued forgiveness more than those who did not possess these beliefs (Gorsuch and Hao 1993; Poloma and Gallup 1991; Rokeach 1973; Shoemaker and Bolt 1977).

Inclusion of spirituality in clinical practice allows the client to engage all aspects of the self to bring about transformational healing (Canda and Furman 2010). Transformational social work practice includes clients' work to forgive others and the self. From a spiritual perspective, those who forgive are able to transform their anger and resentment by forgiving others (Doblmeir et al. 2007). Positive dimensions of spirituality include a sense of connectedness to others and the cosmos, acts of compassion toward oneself and others, and the maintenance of positive relationships (Canda and Furman 2010; Kurtz and Ketchum 1993). Humans are imperfect and at times behave in offensive ways towards others (Kurtz and Ketchum 1993). Fractured relationships are antithetical to connection with others, compassion, and positive relationships; therefore, forgiveness of others and self is a constitutive element of spiritual practice. The six stage therapeutic process suggested in this paper provides a holistic paradigm to address forgiveness. First, the person works on the transformation of anger into forgiveness. Second, when the person is able to forgive, a choice to let go of the negative feelings associated with the offense is recognized. Third, the person embraces the positive energies of forgiveness and moves into the future having reestablished connectedness, compassion, and positive relationships (Canda and Furman 2010).

Forgiveness of Others

Despite the growing interest of forgiveness practice, the manner in which clients deal with feelings of anxiety, guilt, and fear related to forgiveness of others has been left largely unanswered (McCullough et al. 2007; McCullough and Worthington 1994). It was not until the last two decades of the twentieth century that researchers began to focus on forgiveness. Worthington (1998) reported that prior to 1985 there were five studies published exploring forgiveness: (a) Brown (1968); (b) Zillman et al. (1975); (c) Zillman and Cantor (1976); (d) Axelrod (1980); (e) Darby and Schlenker (1982). Worthington (1998) asserted that a popular book by Smedes (1984) on the topic captured the imagination of the general public and mental health professionals. Smedes' (1984) ideas about healing and forgiveness triggered discussion about the (a) value of forgiveness in psychotherapy, (b) process of forgiveness, (c) efficacy of forgiveness as part of the healing process, and (d) intervention strategies facilitating forgiveness (as cited in Worthington 1998). Key to Smedes' (1984) work was the concept of forgiveness as well as the process by which individuals move from unforgiveness to forgiveness of others. In 2005, the scientific research about forgiveness included 950 studies (Doblmeir et al. 2007). For example, a few of the studies have included an overview of the research literature (Post and Wade 2009), a meta-analytic review of forgiveness studies (Smith et al. 2007), and a meta-analytic synthesis of situational and dispositional correlates of forgiveness (Fehr et al. 2010).

The literature about forgiveness offers differing definitions of the term. McCullough et al. (2001) observed that the lack of consensus about the definition of forgiveness in the scientific community raised a number of issues among studies on the topic. For example, one definition of forgiveness is discussed by Kurtz and Ketchum (1993) who stated, "To forgive, truly forgive, involves letting go of the feeling of resentment and of the vision that underlies that feeling—the vision in which we see ourselves as being offended against, the vision of *self-as-victim*" (p. 222). The important concept in this definition is viewing the self as a victim. The passive worldview of victimhood allows one to ruminate about resentments and not assertively take responsibility for oneself, which leads to letting go of the resentment.

The choice to forgive allows individuals to take personal responsibility and let go of the self-as-victim perspective (Kurtz and Ketchum 1993). Luskin (2003) defined forgiveness as "shedding the self-as-victim belief and asserting personal power that leads to healing for the person choosing to forgive" (p. 192). This decision to take personal responsibility for oneself and forgive the other person leads to an enhanced sense of self-efficacy (Doblmeir et al. 2007; Kurtz and Ketchum 1993; Luskin 2003; Post and Wade 2009). The act of forgiveness is the result of an individual giving up resentment and desire for retribution, the choice to cease rumination about being

angry and resentful, and agreeing to pardon the offender(s) (Luskin 2003; Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language 1986).

Self-Forgiveness

Self-forgiveness emerged from the literature of forgiveness in the 1990 s as a way to understand how individuals work through their own grievances with themselves (Flanagan 1997; Luskin 2003; Rutledge 1997; Schell 1993). There is a growing number of studies that address self-forgiveness in working with clients (e.g., Bauer et al. 1992; DeShea et al. 2008; Enright 1996; Fehr et al. 2010; Hall and Fincham 2006; Halling 1994; Ingersoll-Dayton and Krause 2005; Macaskill et al. 2002; Ross et al. 2004). No common definition is accepted by researchers of self-forgiveness (Ingersoll-Dayton and Krause 2005). Flanagan (1997) described self-forgiveness as a process leading to the following results: (a) the belief one has remitted a debt; (b) the end of self-punishing behavior resulting from allowing one's imperfections to hurt others; and (c) the insight that one needs to change, and in changing behavior, feeling better about oneself. The act of forgiving the self allows renewed belief in oneself and others. This process of working toward self-forgiveness may involve one or more of the following feelings: anger, resentment, guilt, shame, self-blame, depression, anxiety, regret, and grief. Upon completion of the self-forgiveness process, the person lets go of those negative emotions toward one self and replaces them with positive emotions such as empathy, compassion, gentleness, and love of oneself (Berry and Worthington 2001; Enright 1996; Luskin 2003; Rutledge 1997; Schell 1993).

Luskin (2003) suggested that a type of self-forgiveness comes with the awareness that "holding grudges and creating a grievance story are not the best approaches to letting go of anger and frustration" (p. 194). The four categories of people who engage in self-forgiveness according to Luskin (2003) are those who blame themselves: (a) for not succeeding at one of life's important tasks, (b) for not taking necessary actions to help themselves or someone else, (c) for hurting another person, and (d) for engaging in self-destructive behaviors such as addiction.

Flanagan (1997) contended that self-forgiveness did not apply to personal behavior that has resulted in hurting oneself. This self-forgiveness approach is focused on permanently changed relationships with others due to behaviors, words, and notions that were perceived by either party as hurtful. Flanagan listed five categories that required self-forgiveness: (a) injury that is caused by mistakes, misconduct, or limitations; (b) harm that results when a person challenges her or his core set of assumptions; (c) apologies from others that do not seem to correct hurtful situations; (d) fear that at the core of one's being resides evil or cruelty; and (e) feelings of "guilt, shame, regret or grief" (p. xii).

Another important aspect of self-forgiveness is the realization that all humans are imperfect (Kurtz and Ketchum 1993). People report that when they attempt to forgive, they experience more resentment. Conversely, when they stop "trying to forgive" and just "let go," after a period of time, they suddenly recognize that the resentment and anger disappear. "At this point they realized they had forgiven" (Kurtz and Ketchum 1993, p. 216).

Personal relationships may involve numerous instances of forgiveness of others or self-forgiveness experienced over several years. Often the change in interpersonal relationships related to the forgiveness process is the result of negative encounters over time. After considerable rumination about an event(s), earlier referred to as unfinished business, the person is ready to experience forgiveness of others or self-forgiveness.

Therapeutic Methods

In recognizing the needs of clients related to the issue of forgiveness, a six step therapeutic process discussed in this section was originally developed to facilitate forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness with clients in an AIDS Service Organization. The authors developed this six steps process by combining several already existing therapeutic techniques. One of the authors used several techniques that had been helpful in working with clients and adult learners. Using these techniques in a particular order was found to be effective in resolving anger and leading to forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness.

First, three journal techniques developed by Progoff (1992) were adapted to assist clients in working on various issues over time. The Steppingstones (*experience inventory*), Crossroads (*empty chair*), and Dialogue (*unsent letter* and *empty chair technique*) are parts of the Intensive Journal Method (Progoff 1992). These journal techniques were used to assist clients in working through a range of issues such as depression, anxiety, and bereavement. The methods were woven into the six step therapeutic process to assist clients in the forgiveness journey. Second, the work of Jung (1960), Kellogg (2002), and Kopp (1995) were combined into the *inward-mirror image* step. Mental imagery provides a rich theater of therapeutic metaphors from which to work through issues related to anger. Third, the *empty chair technique* was adapted from Gestalt Therapy (Perls 1974). Last, the work of Fox (2007), Kurtz and Ketchum (1993), and Luskin (2003) inspired the

development of the final stage that involves *letting go and moving forward*.

The first iteration involved a five step therapeutic process that included the following order of the techniques. The first step, *building rapport*, involved a discussion about the direction of the therapeutic work and determining whether or not the client wanted to work on forgiveness of others or self-forgiveness. During the first step, the client selected a person that they want to forgive. This created an expectation on the part of the client that it is possible to forgive and move on. The second step, *experience inventory*, focused on the client's relationship with the person to be forgiven. This step built an expectation for the client leading to the next step in the process. The listing of key events provided an overview of many experiences with the person to be forgiven. In the third step, *unsent letter,* the client was asked to write a letter to the person to be forgiven about the break in their relationship. Rather than sending the letter, the authors believed it would be helpful to use the letter as the beginning part of the fourth step. In the fourth step, *empty chair technique*, a dialogue between the client and person to be forgiven takes place. The client takes on the role of self, and the person to be forgiven, in the process of moving from one chair to the other as the dialogue develops. The final step, *letting go and moving on*, involved a discussion about whether or not seeking reconciliation was to be included in the therapeutic work. Reconciliation with the person to be forgiven is not always suggested, nor is it required for forgiveness to be completed (Luskin 2003). The therapist must carefully assess whether contacting the person to be forgiven is a good plan. If there is any danger of the client being harmed, then, reconciliation should not be pursued.

In the second iteration of this six step approach, one of the authors realized that there is significant therapeutic movement when a client generated metaphors that could assist in the forgiveness process. The *inward-mirror image* had been effective in working with clients who constructed images that provided a rich seed plot for therapeutic work. The clients' images provided metaphors for the clients' life situations. Therefore, the authors decided to explore the literature of metaphor therapy (Dwairy 1997; Hanes 1995; Kopp 1995; Stone and Everts 2006; Wickman et al. 1999). This technique was added to the five stage process, placing it just after *building rapport*. The generation of metaphors assisted clients in visualizing their current life situation and determining the direction of the therapeutic process. The *inward-mirror images* generated energy that the clients applied to the *experience inventory*. After adding the *inward-mirror image* to the process, many of the clients seemed to more easily work through the steps in the forgiveness process.

This method in its current six step format can also be applied to other groups of individuals who want to work on forgiving others or self-forgiveness. Each of the six steps was developed by adapting aspects of existing therapeutic techniques. Simply reconfiguring and practicing existing techniques in a certain order appears to assist individuals in working more successfully through the forgiveness process. The strategy at each step builds on the previous strategies (e.g., writing an unsent letter, and having the client read the letter to begin the Gestalt empty chair technique), and this leads to a rapid process of forgiveness. This six step therapeutic process recognizes that each therapist may adapt the succession of the techniques to meet the needs of individual clients depending on the nature of the therapeutic setting. The key element in facilitating this sex step therapeutic process is determining the client's desire to work on forgiveness. The following is a description of the six step therapeutic process and a case example illustrating how the techniques are used to facilitate forgiveness of self and others.

Building Rapport

The first step in successfully working with clients is to establish therapeutic rapport (Duncan et al. 2009). Unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence are important elements in the establishment of rapport with clients (Rogers 1965). These elements are demonstrated throughout all sessions a therapist works with a client. In this step, the therapist listens closely to the client's story, and inquires about the client's interest in addressing unfinished business regarding unresolved anger. When setting goals for therapy, clients often discuss the problem of unfinished business as a cause for not letting go of negative feelings. Over the course of two or three sessions, the therapist completes an assessment and asks if clients want to work on forgiveness of others or self-forgiveness. A discussion of the client's experience of anger indicates to the therapist whether or not the client is ready to forgive the person who is the target of the client's anger. When a client agrees to work on resolution of anger issues, the therapist directs the client to list the people with whom the client has unfinished business that involved anger. This activity is similar to the steppingstones section of the Intensive Journal Method developed by Progoff (1992). The client then scans the list and picks a person to be forgiven, or if the focus is on self-forgiveness, the client selects an incident in his or her own life.

Inward-Mirror Image

In the next step, the client draws three spontaneous images relating to the person the client has chosen to forgive. The

inward-mirror image allows clients to produce metaphors used by the therapist to creatively engage the client in a discussion of anger. The client is asked to reflect on the person to be forgiven and to spontaneously produce three images. The production of art work allows clients to produce uncensored images. The client can censor information being shared during talk therapy, but when producing art, the client spills out metaphors that are relevant to the situation. The use of metaphors allows the therapist to enter into the client's symbolic language to interpret the client's existential perspective. After the client completes the images, the therapist engages the client in a discussion that explores the metaphors. The discussion includes having the client explore the association of the metaphors in relationship to the person to be forgiven. The *inward-mirror image* leads to the next step where the client will produce an overview of experiences with the person to be forgiven over time.

Experience Inventory

The *experience inventory* is adapted from the work of Progoff (1992) who developed the Intensive Journal Process. The therapist asks the client to reflect on the *inward-mirror images* and instructs the client to generate an *experience inventory* with the person the client has chosen to forgive, or to select an incident for which they have not been able to illicit self-forgiveness. After selecting the person to be forgiven the client lists ten or more experiences with the person from the beginning of their relationship to the present time, or if self-forgiveness is chosen, he or she lists ten or more experiences from birth to the present time. The list includes both positive experiences and negative experiences, with particular attention to the incident that led to the client's anger toward the person.

The *experience inventory* allows the client to use metaphors as a seed plot to review key experiences with the person to be forgiven from the start of the relationship to the present time. The client is asked to center and reflect on the total experience with the person to whom they wish to forgive. When the person completes the ten key experiences, the therapist asks the client to scan the list and choose the one experience that stands out. Instead of dialoguing with the person, a technique suggested by Progoff (1992), the client is asked to write an unsent letter. The *unsent letter* is a starting point for the *empty chair* dialogue. The material from the *inward-mirror image* and *experience inventory* provide a foundation upon which to build the *unsent letter*.

Unsent Letter

The client scans the *experience inventory* and reflects quietly about the incidents. The therapist instructs the client to write a letter to the person to be forgiven. The client is not to mail the letter (Jolly 2010). In the letter, the client discusses reasons for her or his anger. In preparation for the next session, the therapist asks the client if she or he would be willing to bring the letter to the next session and engage in an exercise to dialogue about anger toward the person to be forgiven. The unsent letter is an opportunity for the client to write the beginning part of a dialogical process that will be experienced in the *empty chair technique* (Perls 1974), and for the client to experience catharsis, thus generating energy to move into the *empty chair* dialogue.

Empty Chair

The client brings the letter to the next session and the client engages in the *empty chair technique,* a central task of the dialogical process (Perls 1974). The *empty chair technique* developed by Perls (1974) directs the client to sit in a chair facing an empty chair. The physical process of moving back and forth between the chairs helps the client to shift perspectives about the client's subjective experience with the person the client has chosen to forgive. The client visualizes the other person in the empty chair and reads the letter aloud. When the client completes reading the letter she or he then moves to the empty chair taking on the place of the person to be forgiven, and responds back to the empty chair (representing his or her personal perspective). The dialogue continues until the client completes the exercise. This Gestalt technique is a powerful transformative experience for clients who work on forgiveness of others or self-forgiveness (Perls 1974; Wagner-Moore 2004). When the client reaches the end of the *empty chair technique* the client elects to let go and forgive the person to be forgiven.

Letting Go and Moving Forward

At this point, the therapist reviews the process of forgiveness and explores the client's feelings. If appropriate, the therapist asks the client to use pastels to construct a picture that depicts the feelings experienced when the client was able to let go, or the client constructs an image that depicts her or his future. The art work serves as a metaphor for letting go and moving on with the client's life. It could be taken home by the client as a reminder of how the client worked through anger in the past, and as a glimpse of the future. During this process, the therapist asks the client if reconciliation is a possibility. If so, the client determines what would be an appropriate way to reconcile. In cases of abuse, attempts at reconciliation can be potentially harmful to the client. Therefore, the therapist must understand the circumstances of the client's situation before working on

reconciliation strategies. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation and no client should attempt to reconcile with a person who could harm the client. In most cases of domestic violence, or where a client has been seriously attacked or harmed by another, reconciliation is not suggested.

Application of the Six Step Therapeutic Process Using a Case Example

The following section will apply the six step therapeutic process to facilitate forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness. The case example was written based on several clients' work with a social worker supervised by one of the authors. The case will be presented according to the six steps of the therapeutic process.

The client, John, is a 39 year old white male diagnosed with a chronic disease. He has been depressed for some time and wants to work in therapy with issues related to his family of origin. He has been talking about his relationship with his father and states that there is "unfinished business" on which he needs to work. His father expressed disappointment with him and John has carried a number of painful remembrances of his adolescence. The therapist inquires him if he wants to work on forgiveness with his father. John replies, "Yes, I want to come to some resolution with my father issues."

John reports that he grew up in a small town in the Pacific Northwest and that his family was not supportive of him because he did not want to stay on the farm. He eventually left in order to move to a city that offered more social and financial benefits. In the following section, the case example is italicized and the discussion is in regular font.

Building Rapport

John met with Linda, his therapist, for an assessment and then signed an agreement that he would work with her. They spent three sessions building rapport and picking a direction with which to focus. After completing the assessment, Linda noted that John experienced depression due to his unresolved anger. Linda asked John to list the people with whom John has unfinished business that involves anger. Then Linda asked John to review the names on the list and select the name that stands out for him as the one he needs to work with first. John stated that he wanted to work on forgiveness of his father, and this might reduce his depression.

In this step the therapist first establishes rapport with a client. Providing a safe place to explore the client's concerns is an important aspect of rapport building. As the therapist works with the client, often the clients' story indicates unfinished work with key people. After building rapport, the client will move through unresolved feelings regarding the relationship with the person to be forgiven. Clients are often stuck at some point in their past and this may lead to forgiveness work in order to let go of non-productive, hurtful thoughts and feelings that could result in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

Inward Mirror Image

In session four, Linda asked if John would be willing to draw three spontaneous pictures as he reflected on his relationship with his father. He agreed to do so and the pictures depicted the following images: (a) a picture of an old farm house with a horse in front of the house; (b) a picture of an ocean wave with a surfer going outside of the lines of the circle; and (c) a figure standing on the ground with arms lifted toward three symbols in the sky that appeared to be sun, moon, and a question mark. These inward-mirror images were metaphors for three different periods in John's life that are relevant to his work with his father. In regard to the first picture, he stated that when he was 13 years of age he told his father he wanted to be an Olympic equestrian contender. His father said to John that he could not ride a horse and to forget about ever competing in equestrian events. He talked about his disappointment at the time and that this was his dream for his life's work. He has carried that hurt for years and agrees that while he had not thought about it in a long time, it was the first image to come to the surface. The second picture he stated was the course of his life. Like the waves swelling and subsiding, his life had been like an uneasy ride on a surf board. He said the third picture related to his current life situation. He said juggling the sun, moon, and the question marks represented his current existential situation. He was trying to make sense out of his life and was interested in planning his future. During this session, he began to discuss his life and acknowledged that he wanted to take responsibility to forgive his father. He began to express his feelings and insights regarding his relationship with his father.

It should be noted that producing *inward-mirror images* is helpful in order to establish uncensored metaphorical material. Art-work generally flows forth without censorship producing apt metaphors for the client's work. The

inward-mirror image remembered by the client generally depicts key events in life that affect working through forgiveness. For example, in this case the third image might be interpreted as emblematic of his quest for meaning and purpose in his life through dialogue between Linda and John.

Experience Inventory

In preparation for session five, the therapist asked John to reflect on three images and make a list of experiences both positive and negative that he had with his father from birth to the present time. John proceeds to list his experiences with his father over the course of his life. At first, John seemed to have a hard time finding positive and negative memories since he had intentionally removed many memories related to his family. However, while Linda asked John to take enough time to trace his life back, eventually, John came up with 12 incidents. In looking at the list, John noted that there were only four incidents that were of a negative nature. The incident that drew John's attention was the time in which his father told him that he could not ride a horse.

It is important to make sure that the client lists both positive and negative incidents in order to provide perspective when the client begins to do work related to the person whom the client has chosen to forgive. The therapist needs to explain to the client that some experiences are both positive and negative leading to ambivalence in the client's approach to forgiveness. Memories over time can shift perspectives on events leading a person to let go of the negative feelings and realize she or he is ready to forgive. In this case, the incident that John chose was the theme of the first picture where he lost his dream of being an equestrian competitor. The therapist engaged the client in a discussion of the client's thoughts and feelings about the chosen incident. This discussion generated a range of ideas and feelings that will be used to process the following steps.

Unsent Letter

John was then asked to write a letter to his father sharing his feelings about the reasons why he was angry. Linda reminded John of the discussion about his thoughts and feelings experienced in the development of the experience inventory and suggested he include that information in the letter. John experienced some difficulty in writing the letter because he reconnected with his anger. This led to Linda

working with John over two sessions about his anger, and toward the end of session two, John realized the intensity of his anger had shifted. He was surprised by this notable change in his feelings and felt more comfortable in writing the letter. He stated that he thought the experience inventory gave him a different perspective on his relationship with his father over the years. He noted that there had been some positive as well as negative experiences. He wrote a letter that shared his emotions, not as the thirteen year old boy, but as the 39 year old man. Writing the letter allowed John to release angry energy and emotion in order to enter the empty chair dialogue.

The unsent letter links the client to the previous work that has been completed. The unsent letter offers a client the opportunity to present an overview of the client's experiences, thoughts and feelings. This sets the stage for the client to interact with the person to be forgiven.

Empty Chair

During session eight, Linda set up two empty chairs for dialogue and invited John to sit in one of the chairs. In order to get the dialogue started, John was asked to read his letter to his father represented by the empty chair. It took a few minutes for John to focus and began reading his letter to his father. After completing the letter, he took a deep breath. He moved to the chair representing his father. It took a while for him to step into his father's shoes before he could muster a response to the letter. The response he gave in the role of his father revealed several needs that were unspoken before in their relationship. His father expected him to continue on the farm and his interest in equestrian competition would cause him to leave. John shifted back into his chair and responded back that he had needs just like his father and he wanted to fulfill those needs. For about twenty minutes, John went back and forth between the chairs discussing his needs, and in the role of his father he became more supportive of John. He realized that he and his father had different perspectives on issues. John worked on the dialogue and reported he was tired but felt good at the end of the session. As he concluded the session, he said to Linda, "I have now been able to forgive my father."

The *empty chair technique*, a Gestalt technique (Perls 1974), is an important step in which the client is able to gain significant insight by shifting between the self and the projected other as part of the work. The *empty chair technique* can start with spontaneous dialogue by the client; however, in this case the client read an *unsent letter* to start

out the dialogue. Going back and forth between the chairs let the client experience the feeling of being in the shoes of the person the client has chosen to forgive.

During the week after the session, John reported that he had gotten a phone call from his father. They had not talked in a number of years. His father reported that he had a terminal disease and was not expected to live more than one year. The father said he wanted John to come home and take over the family business because he did not believe John's brothers or sisters could do so. The phone conversation led to John and his father reconciling. After the call, he was one step ahead of where he would have been during the next session with Linda.

For John, this was an experience of synchronicity described by Carl Jung (1960). Jung coined the word "synchronicity" to describe meaningful coincidences people experience in their lives. From time to time, unplanned events happen during the course of therapy that help clients resolve their issues. It should be noted that an occasion of synchronicity has the potential to help the client deepen his or her forgiveness work and an experience of synchronicity can happen at any time. However, in therapeutic work synchronistic events are uncommon. In addition, it is important to note that therapy does not always progress in a linear fashion. At times, clients will need to revisit earlier steps in order to process unfinished aspects of forgiveness work.

Letting Go and Moving Forward

The exchange with his father was powerful, John said, "I can't believe how we were able to talk and say what we needed to say to each other. It was like we were both ready to face the past and let it go. I felt better than I have in many years after I hung up the phone. While I cannot go back home again to live, I can go home and visit my father and say goodbye this year." As John reconciled with his father, he realized he has some self-forgiveness issues related to his relationship with his father and requests to do some self-forgiveness work. Linda instructed him to generate a new list of experiences in relationship to events where he said or did things to hurt his father. John was then instructed to select one of the events and to write a letter as homework to himself as if he were his best friend giving him advice about his self-blame. In the next session, he entered into the empty chair dialogue. During this session, he had an important insight. He said, "I just realized that I am not perfect and that my father is not perfect. Not being perfect we sometimes say and do things that

harm ourselves and others. When I was feeling attacked I did what I thought was the best thing I could do. I realize that I have to let go of my bad behavior and learn from it." He continued to process his self-blame over another two sessions.

After the completion of six steps, the therapist needs to review the process of forgiveness and explore the client's feelings. The therapist will inquire as to whether or not the client wants to reconcile with the person chosen, if the client had not already reconciled. If the client has not reconciled, the therapist works with the client to determine if reconciliation is an option. If it is an option, then a discussion of how and when to reconcile is planned. The client meets with therapists at least once after the attempt to reconcile to process the experience.

Finally, the therapist asks the client to construct a list that focuses on the future and things the client wants to accomplish. After generating a list, the therapist may inquire if the client would like to complete one more art work that represents her or his future. If the client agrees, she or he will be asked to spend a minute reviewing the list of future plans. The client will then be instructed to seek an *inward-mirror image*. After completing the picture, they will discuss it as a metaphor for the future. The *inward-mirror image* serves as a good closure activity for the client's work with the therapist. It provides an image for the client to take home. This image will anchor the client to the experience of working through forgiveness.

Discussion

It is important to remember that forgiveness is about the forgiver, and not the perpetrator who offended the forgiver. Therefore, forgiveness may or may not involve reconciliation. When the offense is great, for instance sexual abuse of a child or domestic violence, reconciliation would not be recommended. However, in letting go of shame, helplessness, and other negative feelings the forgiver can move forth embracing self-affirmation and feeling empowered. Anger is a complicated process that has several dimensions. On the one hand, the individual is angry with the perpetrator who committed the offense. Another dimension is on a personal level where the anger may involve feelings of hurt such as shame and helplessness that need to be processed by the forgiver. The six step therapeutic process to facilitate forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness provides a systematic process to help clients work through their feelings and reconcile with the self and others. Clients may not follow the process in a linear manner. At times, the therapist must judge whether to work on one step versus another and may have to return to earlier steps in the

process in order to progress through the resolution of forgiveness.

It is important to assist clients in developing self-empathy as they become aware that they are imperfect (Kurtz and Ketchum 1993). With the realization that humans are imperfect, clients are able to understand that while they did everything they could have done, and some situations in life are such that the outcome is beyond their control. For instance, in John's case, he was young when his dreams were taken from him. He responded negatively to his father and developed a number of memories of damaging encounters with his father over the years.

The use of journal methods such as the *experience inventory*, *unsent letter*, and artwork helps the client anchor feelings, thoughts, and reflections about the relationship with the person chosen to be forgiven or in forgiving the self. Having clients create metaphorical drawings helps to generate material from a deep part of the self. The interpretation of the metaphors leads to important insights and discovery of unfinished business.

Helping the client to assess past life experiences is important. This allows the client to incorporate the past with the future. Re-entering dreams of childhood about what life could be may be helpful. Looking back over the life course and listing things that the client may have wanted to do that they were not able to accomplish at that time because of life circumstances. Having generated information about the client's interests, changing directions during life that shifted career direction or the life path, current interests, and past employment, the therapist is able to help the client re-vision their future. In some situations, the therapist may want to refer the client to a life coach in order to complete this stage of work. Working through forgiveness and self-forgiveness can be difficult for many clients. The therapist equipped with an understanding of the stages of forgiveness in therapy can assist in effective intervention planning at each critical step in the forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness.

Conclusion

While working with forgiveness has been the focus of many religious teachings in the past, in the late twentieth century, forgiveness as a focus of therapeutic work was introduced. In the past, forgiveness and self-forgiveness have been concerns that many clients were not able to process in therapy. As practitioners include spirituality in their assessments of client issues, forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness will surface as themes for therapeutic intervention. This paper presented a six step therapeutic process to facilitate forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness that works well in combination to facilitate forgiveness. In the era of managed care, the use of the six step therapeutic process is an efficient brief intervention methodology that provides an excellent process for working through forgiveness issues.

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