

The Enright Process Model of Psychological Forgiveness

By Philip M. Sutton, Ph.D.***

Whether, when and how may persons forgive, seek forgiveness *from*, and/or effect reconciliation *with*, someone who has offended them - or whom they have offended? *How may* persons heal emotional wounds resulting from the real or perceived actions or inactions of others? *How may* persons free themselves from the effects of the justifiable anger which is engendered by emotional, physical or sexual abuse or neglect? With these questions in mind, this paper considers the psychological processes of “*forgiveness*”: *how* people who have been offended may give forgiveness- and *how* their offenders may request and/or receive it- and of *reconciliation*: *how* two or more people, once having maturely given and received forgiveness, may reestablish mutual trust. Specifically, this paper summarizes the *Enright Process Model of Forgiveness* as theorized, researched, taught and practiced by Catholic psychologist Robert Enright and colleagues.¹

Although Enright is a devout Christian, this model is essentially psychological- and philosophical- rather than religious or spiritual. The Enright model recognizes the religious mandate that to flourish spiritually, persons need to give - or request and receive - forgiveness when appropriate. In the service of this need, the model encourages those trying to forgive or be forgiven to use whatever spiritual and religious inspiration and resources are personally meaningful. But the model offers guidance for *how* anyone- whether their primary motivation is religious, moral or psychological- may cooperate with the fundamental, universally human, psychological process of forgiveness.

What Forgiveness Is - and Isn't

Enright asserts that forgiveness is essentially, the “foregoing of resentment or revenge” when the wrongdoer's actions deserve it and instead giving the offender gifts of “mercy, generosity and love” or “beneficence” when the wrongdoer does not deserve them. In other words, when people forgive, they essentially give up the anger to which they are entitled and give to their offender a gift to which he or she is not entitled. Depending on the seriousness of the offense and the length of time that the person offended has lived with and- perhaps denied- the harm caused by the offense, forgiving may be a long, difficult and painful process.

Enright and his colleagues have found that a common, major obstacle to forgiving another is misunderstanding what forgiveness is. People who would benefit from forgiving sometimes mistakenly assume that to forgive they must do what is impossible or even wrong. Another obstacle may be that one's parents or primary caregivers may never have shown forgiveness, or may have modeled a *pseudo-forgiveness*. For example, saying “I forgive you” sometimes may be a denial that any harm occurred or a self-defeating effort to control, manipulate or gain “moral superiority” over the offender.

¹ Robert Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice* (Washington: APA, 2001); Robert Enright & Richard Fitzgibbons, *Helping Clients Forgive* (Washington: APA, 2000); cf. International Forgiveness Institute, web-site: www.forgiveness-institute.org.

***The author of this summary may be contacted via e-mail at: suttonphilip@gmail.com

In order to be willing to work toward forgiving an offender, people often need to be educated first about what forgiveness is *not*.² For example, *genuine* forgiveness does *not* mean forgetting that the offense occurred, condoning or excusing the offense, renouncing efforts to obtain restitution or legal justice, or suppressing or no longer feeling anger about what happened. In addition, genuine forgiveness does *not* require that offenders first admit their offenses, ask for forgiveness, make appropriate restitution, or be willing and able to change their offensive ways. While it may be easier to forgive an offender who responds in these ways, one who has been offended need not remain trapped in unforgiveness due to the offender's inability or unwillingness to do so.

Sometimes the offended may be unwilling or unable to forgive for less obvious reasons. An offended person may experience "secondary gains" from the victim's role. For example, the attention or influence that one gets from having been offended, or the "power" that one may feel, or the escape from emotional pain or depression from harboring resentment may reinforce unforgiveness. Or the offended may genuinely try to forgive a certain offender but be frustrated because of the unknown need to forgive other, prior offenders. For example, one spouse offended by another may need to forgive an opposite sex parent, or someone who feels offended by God may need to forgive an offending parent or other authority figure.³

Finally, genuine forgiveness *need not*- and sometimes *ought not*- result in *reconciliation*. True reconciliation requires not only the offer of forgiveness by the offended, but also the acceptance of this gift by the offender *and* the ability of both parties to (re-)establish mutual trust, or interpersonal safety in their relationship. Prudentially, some offenders may be untrustworthy, unwilling or unable to change their offending ways. And some people who have been offended realistically may be unable or unwise to trust that their offenders have changed or will change.

The Four Phases of Forgiving

In the Enright model, the process of forgiveness proceeds through four phases.⁴ In the **Uncovering Phase**, a person "gains insight into whether and how the injustice and subsequent injury have compromised his or her life."⁵ This involves *confronting* the nature of the offense and *uncovering* the consequences of having been offended. A fundamental step in coming to offer forgiveness to an offender is clarifying the nature of the offense and how it has compromised one's life. This means determining as objectively as possible *who did what to whom*. One cannot forgive an offense that did not occur, although one may be able to *resolve* the anger aroused by a *perceived* offense when the actual nature of the event *is* understood. And psychologically, people cannot forgive an offense committed against another, although they *can* forgive the secondary or indirect effects which they themselves *do* experience after someone else has been offended. For example, if someone abuses, or a drunk driver hurts or kills, a close family member or friend, one *cannot* forgive the abuse or drunk

² Enright, chap. 2; Enright & Fitzgibbons, chap. 3.

³ Properly speaking, one cannot "forgive God" because God does not offend. But, if we have "taken offense" against God for what has happened, or not happened, to us or others, it is possible by *reframing* and other efforts, including forgiving parental or authority figures, to "resolve" resentments toward God.

⁴ Cf. Enright, chapter 4; Enright & Fitzgibbons, chapter, 5.

⁵ Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 67.

driving offense. But one *can* forgive the emotional pain, distress and loss experienced by oneself because one's loved one was victimized.⁶

In addition to confronting the nature of the offense, uncovering the consequences of the offense includes understanding how both "the original unfairness" and one's reactions to this injustice have affected one's life. In this phase, a person must confront the objective nature of the offense and the objective and subjective harm or injuries caused by the offense. Sometimes, a person may need help realizing the connection between not having forgiven and the experience of various physical or psychological difficulties that are the result of suppressed or repressed anger. In counseling, this may involve discovering and "working through" various "layers of pain" in addition to justifiable anger. Such layers of pain may involve: shame, guilt, obsessive thoughts about the offender and/or one's offense, temporary or permanent life changes due to the offense, and changes in one's views about the justice of the world and of God.⁷

In the **Decision Phase**, a person "gains an accurate understanding of the nature of forgiveness and makes a decision to commit to forgiving on the basis of this understanding."⁸ Although there are many religious, spiritual and cultural commandments or mandates to forgive an offender, forgiveness *is* and *must be* a "free choice." At the least, a person must be willing to become willing to forgive. For a person trapped in the "prison of unforgiveness", deciding to forgive may involve realizing that what one has been doing to overcome the harm and suffering caused by an offense is not working. Deciding to forgive may begin when a person is- in Twelve Step words- "Sick and tired of being sick and tired." At this point, a person not only is "pushed by the pain" of unforgiveness, but also "pulled by the hope" that learning to forgive one's offender will free the one offended from further, avoidable suffering. So, at the end of this phase, the person stuck in and suffering from unforgiveness realizes that forgiveness *is* an option and makes a decision, however tentative or weak, to begin forgiving.

The **Work Phase** involves actually *working on forgiving*.⁹ In this phase, a person "gains a cognitive understanding of the offender and begins to view the offender in a new light, resulting in positive change in affect about the offender, about the self, and about the relationship."¹⁰ Concrete actions in this phase commonly begin with working toward an accurate understanding of the offender. This *reframing* may involve rethinking the offensive situation or seeing the offender from a new perspective, as "a person who is, in fact, a human being, and not evil incarnate".¹¹

Clinical experience has shown that a person usually comes to *think* differently about an offender before *feeling* more positively toward him. Other actions in this phase include working toward realistic *empathy* and *compassion* for the offender, courageously and assertively bearing the pain caused by the offense, and finally giving the offender the "moral gift" of forgiveness. Psychologically, such *beneficence* cannot be rushed or demanded, and may take a long time to achieve. Some clients struggling to forgive severe abuse find that a lessening of resentment toward their abuser is the closest they get to the ideal goal of beneficence.

⁶ A more public example of this would be forgiving the deaths, injuries, and other losses caused by the terrorist attacks on 9-11-2002. One cannot forgive the harm inflicted on others, but one can forgive the harm which persons not directly injured did experience (e.g., the heightened insecurity, fearfulness and grief caused by the loss of innocent lives).

⁷ Enright, p. 78-79, chapters 5 & 6; Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 68-75.

⁸ Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 67.

⁹ Cf. Enright, chap. 9; Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 79-85.

¹⁰ Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 67.

¹¹ Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 79.

Finally, in the *Deepening Phase*,¹² a person “finds increasing meaning in the suffering, feels more connected with others, and experiences decreased negative affect and, at times, renewed purpose in life.”¹³ In this phase, one may discover that in the process of forgiving, one finds release from the “emotional prison” of “unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment and anger.”¹⁴ As one’s ability to forgive deepens, one may find new meaning in one’s suffering and new purpose in one’s life for having suffered unjustly. One also may discover one’s own need to ask for forgiveness from others, perhaps even toward one’s offender.

Requesting and Receiving Forgiveness

Initially, the Enright model of forgiveness focused primarily on understanding and helping people who have been offended to forgive. But in recent years, the effects on the offender of being offered forgiveness, the process by which an offender asks for forgiveness, and the process of genuine reconciliation have been theorized and studied as well. Even when focusing on the one who has been offended, in the *deepening* phase those who have been offended may find it necessary to confront how they may have unjustly treated either their own offender- either before or after the offense- or others.¹⁵ Phases and guideposts for seeking to be forgiven parallel the phases of seeking to forgive.¹⁶ Offenders who want to be forgiven must confront the nature of their offense, uncover their own guilt and shame, and face the past and present consequences (including psychological) of their offense(s), both for themselves and those whom they have offended.

Deciding to *seek* forgiveness includes recognizing the need to ask for forgiveness, being willing to receive it if offered and deciding to accept it humbly, if and when forgiveness *is* offered. Working on actually receiving forgiveness involves working to understand how one’s offense has affected the one offended, developing an attitude of gratitude for having been given an unmerited gift, doing whatever is possible to reconcile with the offended (including making restitution for any losses suffered by the offended, when possible), and accepting the painful humiliation of admitting that one was wrong. Finally, the process of being forgiven includes working to find meaning in one’s failures, deciding to and working on making positive changes in one’s life, realizing one’s common humanity, and experiencing freedom from lingering, or inordinate, guilt or remorse.

Reconciliation ?

Reconciliation necessarily requires that two-or more- persons come together in mutual respect and trust to (re-)establish an ongoing relationship that is acceptable to both- or all. This *may* become possible after the parties have maturely- and perhaps mutually- given and received forgiveness. At times, reconciliation may be unwise- if not impossible. The realistic possibility of re-experiencing a

¹² Enright, chap. 10; Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 85-88.

¹³ Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 67.

¹⁴ Enright, p. 79.

¹⁵ “When we are in a close relationship with someone, it is rare that one person forgives and the other seeks forgiveness, and that is the end of it. Instead, both people can be unfair at times, necessitating that each person forgive and each seek forgiveness for what he or she did” (Enright, p. 245).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, chap. 14.

traumatic hurt- such as further emotional abuse- may counsel against having direct or future contact with an offender.

Incomplete or Premature Forgiveness?

From my own experience and consideration, the forgiveness process requires two movements, both necessary for a person to truly forgive another and free him or herself from any lingering emotions following an offense. The first Movement involves the questions and efforts of the first or *Uncovering Phase* of the Enright model, which consists in developing compassionate understanding and acceptance of oneself, one's experiences, and all one's feelings. The second Movement includes the 2nd and 3rd, *Decision* and *Work Phases* of the model, which consists of developing an accurate understanding and compassion for one's offender.

Sometimes, persons who begin the forgiveness process find that they have difficulty completing it. In my experience, people are more likely to get stuck for one of two reasons. In particular, clients who are religious may become stuck because they have forgiven *prematurely*, i.e., they have skipped – often unintentionally – the questions and efforts of the Uncovering Phase, while focusing on trying to understand and have compassion for their offender. Unfortunately, an accurate and compassionate understanding of their offender may make it more difficult for those offended to admit how much they were harmed, or feel the proper level of anger. They may even feel guilty for resenting their offender if they realize the real limitations their offender had – e.g., their never having been loved well enough by *their* own parents, caretakers or significant others, as we needed them to love us. It is important remember that realizing why the offense happened, and especially if we understand that the offense was not intentional or personal, may explain but does not excuse, condone or minimize the offense – or its emotional and other consequences. Prematurely trying to give the forgiveness gifts of mercy and grace will not by themselves release the anger and other feelings which the offense engendered.

Another place someone may get stuck is in the Uncovering Phase, becoming very aware of the emotional and other life consequences of the offense, but finding it too difficult to move into the Decision – let alone the Work – Phase. A person may have attempted the Decision or Work Phases only to find that lingering or intense feelings have led them back into the issues of Uncovering Phase. Or, if a person has developed one or more self-defeating (including compulsions or addictions) as ways of “numbing the pain” or “self medicating” the leftover feelings, s/he may find it difficult even to simply feel, let alone deal, with the feelings. Or, once a person realizes and accepts that s/he was and is a “victim,” the “benefits” of this role – sometimes not clearly perceived – and the costs of relinquishing being a “survivor” in order to become a “thriver,” may be more than s/he is yet ready to pay. For such persons, realizing the costs of remaining a mere “victim/survivor” and the benefits of becoming a “thriver,” as well as experiencing the witness and support of others who successfully have forgiven past offenders, may enable to would be forgiver to finish the course.

It is helpful for those stuck at *any* phase of the forgiveness process, to remember that the grieving and forgiving processes are two sides of the same coin, and that feeling and dealing with our past unmet needs, unhealed hurts, unresolved feelings, etc., always requires assertive self-care. If our

offender continues to mistreat us – or others whom we care about – in the present, we must learn to self-protect and self-care, as well as help others to do so if necessary. On the one hand, we may find it necessary to limit contact with our offender. Also, as stated above, reconciliation – meaning either restoring the relationship to one as good or even a better than in the past, or developing a good enough relationship for the first time – may not be wise and/or possible. On the other hand, genuinely forgiving someone who did – and could – not love us as we deserved, may enable us both to accept their current and chronic limitations and have a better relationship with them – for all of its limitations – than we could have had without our efforts to forgive.

Appendix: Helpful Questions and Guideposts for Forgiving¹⁷

UNCOVERING PHASE:

1. To what extent have I denied - or attempted to forget – that I was offended and the suffering which I have experienced as a result?
2. In what ways have I *avoided* feeling and dealing with my anger and suffering?
3. In what ways have I *attempted to* feel and deal with (i.e., face) my anger?
4. To what extent do I experience, and avoid exposing, any shame or guilt?
5. In what ways does my unresolved anger affect my physical and emotional health, relationships, and work productivity?
6. To what extent am I obsessed or preoccupied with *how* I was offended and/or with my offender?
7. To what extent do I compare my own life situation with that of my offender?
8. To what extent has the offense caused permanent, difficult change(s) in my life?
9. How has the offense changed my worldview, i.e., in what ways do I now believe or perceive that “the world” – or God – are (no longer) as just or loving?

DECISION PHASE

1. What is – and isn’t – forgiveness?
2. To what extent do I experience that, although I have tried – or am sincerely trying – to forgive, I realize that emotionally I haven’t?
3. What stops me from courageously confronting my offender’s unjust actions toward me – both internally and directly?
4. To what extent may I “idolize” or “demonize” my offender – i.e., regard him or her either as not needing my forgiveness or as being unforgiveable?
5. Am I *willing* to consider forgiving my offender (i.e., willing to become willing to forgive?)
6. What *hasn’t* worked for me so far in trying to forgive my offender?
7. What stops me from *being (or becoming more)* willing to try to forgive *now*?
8. To what extent have I *decided* to forgive – am I *committed* to trying to forgive *now* – (perhaps *again*)?

¹⁷ Cf. Enright, p. 78, 150-154; Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 68, 86.

WORK PHASE

1. Have I developed an understanding of how I was offended and the past and immediate consequences of the offense, as well as a deeper self-compassion?
2. In what way(s) have my prior attempts to understand, develop compassion for and forgive my offender, made it difficult for me to fully realize and feel the consequences of the offense?
3. What in justice, do I need to do now, if anything, to seek restitution, i.e., deal with the lingering affects of the past offense(s) and/or to protect myself or others from actual or new offenses?
4. What, if anything, stops me from seeking restitution for past offenses by the offender and/or protecting myself and others from future offenses by him or her?
5. What may I do *now* to accept and resolve the pain and consequences of how my offender did and did not treat me?
6. *How* may I grieve my sadness and pain and use my anger to assertively care for myself – and if relevant, others?
7. How safe – or possible – is any direct contact with my offender at this time?
8. What human and spiritual help do I need in order to forgive my offender as I may chose to, and how will I seek and cooperate with this help?
9. What *was* and *is* my offender really like?
 - What was my offender’s life like when he or she was growing up?
 - What was my offender’s life like at the time he or she offended me?
 - What is the long-term history of my relationship with my offender; specifically, what is good as well as bad, true as well as false about it?
 - How does my offender treat me – and others – *now*, and how do I treat him or her?
 - What is my offender like as a human being, and to what extent does he or she deserve my respect simply for being another human being?
 - How does God view my offender – and me – and our potential for conversion, redemption, and constructive change, and how would God want and help me to treat my offender *now*?
10. What specific word, action, gesture or “gift” may I do for or give to my offender – even if s/he is dead – as an expression of my intent to offer him or her compassion or mercy at this time?

DEEPENING PHASE

1. In what ways have I grown through my efforts to feel and deal with my suffering and anger, and to act with compassion and mercy toward my offender.
2. In what ways have my efforts to forgive set me free – free **from** unwanted emotional suffering and free **for** having a better relationship with the offender (perhaps), others, myself and God?
3. In what ways do I recognize that I am not alone in my suffering – that others share my suffering and I theirs, whether we suffer for the same reasons or not?
4. To what extent have I discovered my own need to be forgiven, to seek and ask for forgiveness, perhaps even from my offender, or from someone else whom I have offended?
5. What *meaning* am I discovering in and through my suffering and my trying to forgive and, if appropriate, to *be* forgiven?
6. What am I learning about my purpose in life and how I may be called to serve others?

Additional Recommended References:

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