

Finding Forgiveness in Intimate Relationships

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One of the key factors that distinguish happy couples from unhappy couples is not so much the degree of their conflict, but the degree to which they are able to repair their conflict (Gottman, 2011). Repair involves a variety of remedial actions including providing apologies, accepting responsibility, acknowledging hurt feelings, and so on. However, forgiveness is one of the most commonly used and effective forms of repair partners can offer to one another for hurts and wrongs that are the most troubling.

At its core, forgiveness is the decision to let go of the resentments and thoughts of retribution partners have toward another. This decision is influenced by a combination of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors. At the intrapersonal level, it typically is motivated by the partners' desire to relieve the pain of their emotional disconnection and by the wish to restore their relationship to a more harmonious state of affairs. At the interpersonal level, this decision is influenced by the offended partner expressing less blame and by the offending partner taking corrective steps to reestablish the damaged relationship.

In order for full forgiveness to take place, Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer (1998) argue that it must occur at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. When it fails to take place on both of these levels, they maintain that forgiveness will likely be incomplete. They point out that obtaining full forgiveness is particularly challenging for intimate relationships because partners adopt biased perspectives about their transgressions. Offenders tend to minimize the adverse impact of their actions, and those offended often fail to acknowledge mitigating circumstances and their own contributions to the problem. As a result of these divergent views, the process of forgiveness requires the offended partner "to cancel a debt that is larger than the one the perpetrator acknowledges" (Baumeister et al., 1998, p. 85).

Factors of Forgiveness

The likelihood that one partner forgives the other for a transgression depends on at least four factors. First, relatively minor acts are more likely to be forgiven than more severe acts (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998; Ohbuchi, Kameda & Agarie, 1989). Second, offended partners who are generally more empathetic, agreeable, and emotionally stable are more inclined to be forgiving (Brown, 2003; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Research also shows that those partners with a more secure attachment style are more likely to forgive transgressions (Milulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006).

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Third, when apologies express empathy for the offended partner, they tend to promote forgiveness (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). However, apologies are not always accepted if the offended partner does not believe they are sincere enough. Fourth, forgiveness is more likely to take place when the levels of commitment and satisfaction are high for both partners (Gottman & Silver, 2012). If the couple has already invested a great deal into their relationship, the offended partner will likely be motivated to preserve this investment by forgiving the offending partner's misdeeds (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997).

Stages of Conflict

In their struggle to achieve forgiveness, couples typically go through three stages of conflict (Gordon & Baucom, 1998). In the *impact stage*, partners learn of the transgression and begin to recognize the effect it has on them and their relationship. This is a time of great disorientation and confusion that is filled with anger, recrimination, and withdrawal. Typically, the offended partner tries to absorb what has happened and the offending partner attempts various forms of damage control.

As the impact stage gives way to the *meaning stage*, the offending party attempts to provide less defensive explanations of what happened and the offended partner tries to make sense of what went wrong. Having a better understanding of the incident enables the offended partner to make some sense of what the offending partner has done. This understanding can also help the offended partner better contend with the feelings of powerlessness that invariably accompany the hurt.

The transition to the final *resolution stage* occurs as both partners find ways to adjust to, and move beyond, the incident. At the interpersonal level, gestures of forgiveness are continually made toward the offended partner in the hope of restoring the relationship. This primarily takes the form of the offending partner's increased capacity to express his or her remorse and to take responsibility for the hurt he or she has caused. At the intrapersonal level, it involves the offended partner coming to two fundamental realizations: First, he or she comes to recognize that further hostility toward his or her partner will likely become increasingly counterproductive and will eventually have the unintended consequence of harming his or her own well being. Second, while the offended partner knows what happened was unacceptable, he or she comes to recognize he or she must accept the fact that the wrong did happen and that no amount of holding on to his or her resentment will change this reality. As a result of these realizations, the offended partner eventually comes to see his or her partner in a more benign light, rather than in the harsh light of what happened. In essence, the offended partner is gradually able to let go of the past that he or she wanted and return to the present that he or she needs to build.

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