

Settling Unresolved Negative Feeling with Family Members*

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Settling unresolved negative feelings (hurt, anger, disappointment, rejection, etc) with family members involves two types of resolution: exoneration and forgiveness.

Exoneraton

Exoneraton is absolving the family member of culpability for committing the wrong. It is accomplished through insight and understanding. Insight entails the aggrieved family member becoming more aware of the relational and family dynamics that fostered and/or contributed to the injustice and understanding involves identifying those related injustices the wrongdoer himself or herself experienced in the past. Insight can provide the aggrieved family member with a broader perspective about the injustice and understanding can enable him or her to see the wrongdoer as more of a damaged person than a bad person. As it is defined here, exoneraton requires no action on the part of the wrongdoer and can be solely accomplished by the aggrieved family member.

Foregiveness

Forgiveness differs from exoneraton in that forgiveness requires specific action on the part of the wrongdoer in the form of accepting responsibility for the injustice and promising to refrain from committing further injustices in the future. More specifically, forgiveness is achieved by the aggrieved family member obtaining compensation from the wrongdoer and/or by engaging in an overt act of forgiveness with the wrongdoer. In obtaining compensation, the aggrieved family member provides the opportunity for the wrongdoer to “prove” that he or she is caring and dependable by allowing incremental trust opportunities and exchanges in the relationship. As a part of the compensation process, the original injustice or destructive action may or may not be directly discussed between the two parties. However, in the case of an overt act of forgiveness, the particular violation is discussed and the promise of working toward a restored relationship is accepted.

The overt act of forgiveness requires three distinct elements: (1) agreement, (2) acknowledgement, and (3) an apology. In terms of agreement, both parties must come to an approximate understanding about the specifics of the violation. After agreement, the wrongdoer must take responsibility for the hurt and pain caused. Finally, the wrongdoer

* The concepts presented here are taken from Terry Hargrave’s *Families and Forgiveness*, 1994, Brunner/Mazel.

must give a heartfelt apology for the damage that has been perpetrated and the aggrieved family member must accept the apology.