

Forgiveness Therapy in the Relief of Discomfort

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Abstract

Patients present with a myriad of complaints. These complaints cover a range from the physical to the psychological. Many of the presenting symptoms and ramifications of the "disease" process can be a reflection of the psycho-physical relationship in all human beings. The practice of forgiveness has been discussed throughout history usually through a religious lens, yet, research points to forgiveness as a means to reduce anger, depression, to improve health and happiness and to increase self-esteem. It is interesting to note that it is forgiveness work that enables individuals to enable lasting personal change and move forward in a positive fashion. It is also interesting to note that forgiveness therapy is a crucial part of the hypnotherapeutic interaction when dealing with pain and other discomfort.

Keywords: Forgiveness therapy; Hypnosis; Pain relief

Introduction

Patients present with a myriad of complaints. These complaints cover a range from the physical to the psychological. Many of the presenting symptoms and ramifications of the "disease" process can be a reflection of the psycho-physical relationship in all human beings. The practice of forgiveness has been discussed throughout history usually through a religious lens, yet, research points to forgiveness as a means to reduce anger, depression, to improve health and happiness and to increase self-esteem [1]. It is interesting to note that it is forgiveness work that enables individuals to enable lasting personal change and move forward in a positive fashion [1-3]. It is also interesting to note that forgiveness therapy is a crucial part of the hypnotherapeutic interaction when dealing with pain and other discomfort [4,5].

Forgiveness Therapy

Forgiveness therapy involves an interaction between an individual (victim) and a perpetrator (cause). This interaction does not need to be one that is a personal encounter, and many times should not be, but rather one in which the victim will ultimately "let go" of the anger, fear, shame and other bitterness toward the perpetrator. When this forgiveness occurs, the victim no longer feels the "sting" of the past and begins to move forward [1].

There are many definitions of forgiveness, some based in religious belief, others on a more pragmatic level. It is important to understand some of the more popular definitions of forgiveness. One common definition: The handling of another person's real or believed inappropriate and harmful deeds in such a way that it helps the forgiver (the person who forgives, the injured party) find healing and wellness, peace and tranquility. Another: Forgiveness is the refusal to hurt, strike back at, get even with, to prove another is wrong with arguments or protests, violence or to harm the one who hurt you. Another definition as simple as: "I forgive you". It is important to

distinguish differences in definition as this pertains to individual victims. Robert Enright in his book "Forgiveness Is a Choice" (2011) discusses these and other definitions of forgiveness. Enright states however that forgiveness is a process and if you are willing to use the forgiveness process you may be able to find freedom from the anger, resentment and bitterness of the past.

Forgiveness researchers have identified that simply saying "I forgive you" is not enough. Saying the words does not prevent the anger and resentment and bitter feelings from returning [1-3]. Individuals must go through the process in order to forgive and move on. I have discovered over several decades of doing hypnotherapeutic work with patient having many differing problems and diagnoses, especially pain, that one commonality exists in order for them to move forward. The common ground for all these patients is forgiveness.

Therapeutic work can be done in identifying causation for problems both physical and psychological. For instance, it is common practice for many practitioners in hypnosis to use "age regression" techniques to identify an Initial Sensitizing Event (ISE) [4,5]. Age regression is one of the phenomena identified in the hypnotic trance [6,7]. Techniques of age regression usually guide a patient back in memory to re-experience an event either vividly, called hypermnnesia, or as if they are reliving the event itself, called revivification [8]. Age regression is perhaps one of the most widely utilized techniques in hypnotic work. At the same time, it is suspect for confabulation and thus remains controversial [8]. The use of proper age regression techniques limits confabulation [9,10] and allows the possible identification of causative events with regard to pain, discomfort, psychological trauma [4,5,11].

Despite the controversy, using age regression and Ego State therapy can identify the ISE and then help to identify Subsequent Sensitizing Events (SSE) that occur at various times later than the ISE that lead to development of symptoms both physical and psychological [7,11,12]. Once the ISE and subsequent SSE's have been identified, then therapeutic techniques can be used to reframe events that occurred in the patient's life. This reframing many times leads to a more informed or moderate understanding of a particular occurrence. With new

understanding the individual begins the process of recovery. This recovery many times progresses to resolution of a particular problem but, at the same time many clients return with familiar symptoms. It has been noted over hundreds of client records that forgiveness work is the key to lasting resolution, utilizing some form of forgiveness process is crucial to lasting resolution [4,5,11].

Many patients suffer from grievances for years. These sufferings many times lead to long lasting physical and/or psychological problems. Anger and depressions create harmful effects if not relinquished quickly. Aside from the effects of anger, depression, resentment and other negative feelings, the loss of joy, peace and tranquility as well as love and intimacy are lost during these times. The loss of these emotions and feelings is many times as devastating as the trauma itself [1,8]. Working with these clients has shown the power of forgiveness help the individual toward lasting healing. Those patients that did forgiveness work had successful resolution. Those that did not have sustained resolution were those who still need to work through the forgiveness process [1,2]. It is interesting to note that there are a number of individuals that despite all the therapeutic intervention will relentlessly hold on to anger, hatred and resentment. These individuals are seemingly driven by those forces and it has been my experience that some will hold on to those feelings until death.

When working therapeutically with clients that hold on to resentment and not let go, using death bed therapy has been beneficial for some (not all) to be able to forgive and let go [13]. Death bed therapy involves using the hypnotic phenomena of Age Progression. Age progression involves suggesting to the subject they are progressing forward in time (similar to age regression only now moving forward). The subject is progressed to a point in the future where they realize death is imminent. When this point is reached the individual is again suggested to let go of the negative feelings and emotions and be free of those bonds. Unfortunately there are some still refuse to let go.

It is also interesting to note that when working through past events both the ISE and SSE's, that an individual may find it not only necessary to forgive others (the perpetrator) but also to forgive themselves. The client/patient finds that they have feelings of guilt or anger with themselves for "letting themselves get into that situation" or "I must have done something to bring this upon myself" or perhaps "I caused this to occur". This self-forgiveness is many times overlooked by practitioners. If not resolved those feelings of self-guilt will fester and boil over sometime in the future [4,14].

One method of doing self-forgiveness work is to use ego state therapy [11]. This involves utilizing the ego psychology as described by Paul Fern and further developed by John and Helen Watkins. The hypnotized patient is deepened using a fractionation technique [8,11]. The subject is then asked while in hypnosis about the part of him/her that may feel some conflict with themselves. The part or ego state is then asked to simply announce its presence with verbalization of "I'm here". This may at first seem unnerving to both therapist and client and perhaps a better method to use at first (to avoid crating artifact) is to simply have the individual imagine going down a safe stairway, with sturdy handrails and anti-slip treads. Suggest to the client that at the bottom they will enter a room through a doorway. In the room they see a plush comfortable chair in front of them. The subject is then suggested to imagine anyone involved with their feelings of guilt. At this point it is not unusual to have the individual age regress to a childlike ego state and describing themselves as a certain age, wearing certain clothing etc. When this occurs that particular ego state has a need and wants to be heard by the therapist [11]. Some individuals

may prefer a "safe room" or "safety cocoon" if they have some trepidation or fear about this. In any case, it is important to assist the client to a point where they realize self-forgiveness is needed. They will come to a realization that they have blamed themselves for whatever role they may have played in the particular troubling event. That role may be real or imagined to them, in either case it is the same [5,11]. Helping the client/patient with forgiveness of self begins with the individual knowing they need to forgive themselves.

Strategies for Feelings of Hurt

Several positive methods for self-management of hurt feelings are available for individuals doing forgiveness work. Management of these feelings is a positive step. Luskin in his text *Forgive for Good* (2002) talks about not losing sight of the good things in your life. He discusses that all of us do have positive things in each of our lives and we need to refocus on those items. He calls this second step Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique or PERT. It is relatively simple to do and leads to a quick change when one notices negative feelings encroaching.

Practicing PERT is done when one is feeling the effects of an unresolved grievance. There are four steps to this practice as Luskin points out [1]. First: Focus on the stomach as you take in two deep breaths, pushing your belly out as you breathe in. Then as you breathe out, simply relax your belly completely making it soft. Second: Take in a third breath, think about and visualize an image of someone you love or a beautiful scene. This should be one that fills you with awe and as you do this focus on the area of your heart. Thirdly: Continue with the belly breathing as above. Fourth: Ask the relaxed part of you what can be done to resolve the difficulty. It is a most important to persevere with this practice. Forgiveness is a process and not something that is done in an instant. Through perseverance positive feelings will begin to come through.

Taking responsibility for our feelings is a most important facet in forgiveness process. We all have choice. We may not have the ability to decide what happens to us but we do have the choice on how we react to it. Something bad occurs, we always have a choice, we can choose to become angry, enraged, strike back, or we can simply remain still for a while and then make an informed decision on how we will react. In my practice many patients have had traumatic events occur in their lives sometime in the past. Many of these patients are still very angry and resentful that these things occurred to them! I reiterate to them that "yes" a terrible thing occurred on some date in the past (usually long ago, but not necessarily so) but that is no reason to feel angry or resentful today!

A very effective method to use for managing these hurt feelings is simply to focus on other items in your life. To stop focus on the negative items or individuals that have been instrumental in causing these feelings and move beyond to new happy, good, comfortable items is something we all can do. This requires us to "let go" of the hurt we seemingly want to hold on to and reach out for the good. In my office I demonstrate this by holding out my left arm representing holding onto the negative hurt feelings, anger etc. Then I reach out with my right arm representing reaching for new, better, happy, positive things. I sit there with both arms outstretched and it becomes very evident to the viewer that in order to move to where they want to be they must let go of the other or no movement takes place. Luskin [1] speaks to "changing the channel" (p.111) in an effort to move away from the stagnant pose. Unfortunately this "stagnation" is what most patients come into the office with.

Effects of Negative Affect

It has been demonstrated that negative affect states lead to physical calamity [1,2]. If this negative affect is not remediated negative effect is sure to occur. Hurt feelings, anger, hatred, resentment become a powerful engine idling beneath the surface. This powerful engine goes unnoticed many times yet is causative in so many “psychosomatic disorders”. Using an affect bridge technique as described in Watkins & Watkins text [11], a practitioner can follow the negative affect back into the patient’s memory and discover the root cause behind many physical ailments. It is very interesting indeed to have a patient referred to the office for some unresolved neck pain that is not responding well to other treatment and when using hypnotic ideomotor techniques for questioning we find it is related to negative self-talk. This negative self-talk is frequently heard in these patients using phrases such as: “This is such a pain in the neck” or other body part. This is then reflected into physical sensation plaguing that individual [10,15].

Practicing Positive Self Talk

It is important for all of us, not just patients and clients with problems, to use positive self-talk daily. Psychologists have long understood that giving ourselves positive, self-referenced, present tense suggestions continuously through the day is not only invigorating but over time leads to positive outcomes. This is no surprise when one understands that what we expect, we tend to get. This being so we should desire to always expect the best! Unfortunately we mostly do the opposite. Why? First: The sympathetic nervous system which is our fight, flight or freeze system. It has a protective function that has served us for thousands of years and has protected us from things and creatures out to do us harm. Secondly, we are being bombarded through our lives with negative suggestion from all sides. Well-meaning parents, significant others, friends, family etc., all seemingly wanting to help but delivering negative suggestion disguised as sage advice. How many times have you heard: “Expect nothing and when you get something it is a plus”? “If you don’t have any expectations then you will not be disappointed”. These are two of the most common that we have heard in our lives at one time or another.

It is very important to begin changing the prevailing suggestion flow for ourselves and others. Positive self-suggestion is important for our wellbeing both physically and mentally [3,5,16]. The authors tell their students and clients to “focus on what you want in your lives” rather than focusing on what you do not want. Patients are in my office constantly telling me what they do not want to happen, what they do not want in their lives, and I tell them bluntly to stop! “Tell me what it is that you do want” I ask. This many times makes them pause and think. For most clients and patients, they must admit they have not given thought to what they want! It takes a few minutes but I get a response sooner than later. It is refreshing for most individuals to begin changing their thoughts to positive outcomes. This leads to a new feeling for most. Sometimes the most positive feeling they have had for some time.

Forgiveness work goes hand in hand with positive thought. There can be no negative feelings, no wishing for revenge, no focusing on the

past hurts, feelings, etc. There can only be a new focus on a comfortable future free from past negativity, a more comfortable feeling inside oneself without the fear and frustration of wondering if “is it going to happen again”? [1]. Positive self-suggestions such as “I forgive all others, I forgive myself, I am forgiven” repeated to oneself frequently every day go a long way to solidifying forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self. This work is a process and this process takes time and perseverance. Only with perseverance and a positive goal for the future will one be successful in letting go the chains of the past.

Conclusion

Forgiveness work is an essential part of therapeutic intervention for those suffering from past transgressions. Emotional as well as physical baggage from the past can haunt individuals causing present day physical and emotional problems. Identifying the need for forgiveness work is essential tool in the armamentarium of the practitioner. Successful resolution of these troublesome past events consists of a process of forgiving the perpetrators (real or imagined) and then the process of forgiving oneself (Enright, 2011; Luskin, 2002; Mackey 20012; Turk and Gatchel 2002).

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