

Difficulty of Forgiveness Prompts Approaches, Strategies

Even chimpanzees hold grudges, scientists say. Researchers at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center at Emory University are trying to determine just how long it takes for a chimp to chuck hard feelings and move on.

But is letting go of a grudge the same thing as forgiveness? The world's major religions all espouse forgiveness, though some emphasize the virtue more than others. Even within religions, notions of forgiveness vary widely.

It's no different with those in the academic community who study this difficult act.

"If you put a bunch of forgiveness researchers in a room, they'll fight about what forgiveness really is," said Everett Worthington, executive director of the Templeton Foundation's [Campaign for Forgiveness Research](#). "That's the irony of all this."

Worthington, author of the forthcoming *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* from InterVarsity Press, approaches the notion of forgiveness from a Christian perspective. His research has led him to conclude there are two types of forgiveness: decisional and emotional.

We practice decisional forgiveness when we choose to forgive someone even though we have been hurt or wronged. Worthington characterized decisional forgiveness as a "behavioral intention statement. We say, in essence, 'I'm going to control my behavior. I'm not going to try to get even.'"

He referred to Jesus' conversation with Peter, when Jesus told Peter he must forgive anyone 70 times seven. Worthington said the ability to forgive an offender of such numerous misdeeds is decisional; the repetitive wrongdoing prevents it from being emotional.

Over time, however, there may be emotional forgiveness.

With emotional forgiveness, Worthington said, we replace our “unforgiving emotions with positive, other-oriented emotions such as love, agape love, romantic love, compassion, empathy for the person or sympathy.” Those positive emotions are able to neutralize the negative emotions until the latter dissolve.

None of this is easy, however, said Jeffrey Vickery, co-pastor of Cullowhee Baptist Church in Cullowhee, N.C.

“There’s something about forgiveness that’s difficult,” he said, evoking the story of the men who lowered their paralyzed friend through a roof to see Jesus. As the paralytic lay on his mat before Jesus, Jesus offered him forgiveness of sins—a gesture that outraged Pharisees and teachers of the law in the audience.

Vickery explained that Jesus turned to them and essentially asked a rhetorical question: “Which is more difficult—healing or forgiving?”

“Forgiveness is more difficult,” Vickery said.

Robert Plath, founder of the [Worldwide Forgiveness Alliance](#), coordinates International Forgiveness Day on the first Sunday in August. The seven-year-old movement is trying to combat what it perceives to be a significant personal and social ill, and to offer people an opportunity to deal with their hurt.

“Anything where they’ve been deeply hurt, not received the love they should have,” Plath said, “there tends to be resentment, anger, outrage, feelings of being victimized. And if it’s real deep, somebody would kill rather than forgive. They’d kill themselves or the other.”

Given the difficult nature of forgiveness, it’s probably not surprising that cultures have sought different strategies for motivating people to forgive.

“From the studies that are coming out now,” Plath said, “you realize that forgiveness makes you healthier, makes you happier. They’ve actually proven that

it lessens stress.”

“To not forgive means you’re willing to hurt yourself to hurt the other,” he continued. “You’re almost giving away your power to them.”

While health benefits appeal to people’s sense of self-preservation, Vickery believes a higher form of forgiveness comes when self-interest isn’t a part of the equation.

Simply viewing forgiveness as a way of getting over one’s anger after being wronged “is not a full understanding” of what forgiveness means, he said. “It’s like a mission trip,” he said. “There’s always that tendency to come back and say, ‘We got more out of it than they did.’”

While such personal illumination is valuable, Vickery said, one must caution against letting other-oriented ventures become self-serving.

Vickery said he counsels mission workers, “We’re doing this because these people don’t deserve to live the way they’re living.” He says the intent of mission activity is to help people be who God wants them to be, he said.

Similarly, “Forgiveness is ultimately about us being able to see value in someone else,” Vickery said.

Worthington contrasted forgiveness with catharsis, using Freud’s analogy of a teapot letting off steam.

“Catharsis is really just letting out your emotions,” he said. “Catharsis is going to do pretty much the opposite thing to the relationship that forgiveness does. You may feel better, but your relationship is going to really be hurting.”

Worthington also described other ways that people, including Christians, attempt to deal with their unforgiving attitudes, even using Scripture to justify their approach.

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They include forbearance, giving judgment over to God, seeing justice done, or just accepting the wrong and moving on with life.

“That’s not forgiveness,” he said. “That’s just giving up.”

Plath’s movement says that forgiveness has the potential not only of creating happy individuals but also “a safer and saner world.”

“Let’s march to the forgiveness drum,” Plath advocated. “Let’s love each other.”

[Cliff Vaughn](#) is culture editor for [EthicsDaily.com](#).

[Pre-order](#) Worthington’s book, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, now from Amazon.com.