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Julie Juola Exline

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The Thorny Issue of Forgiveness: A Psychological Perspective

Julie Juola Exline*

I. INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to forgive another person? This article will address the concept and process of forgiveness from a psychological perspective. Although psychologists often frame forgiveness as an internal process focused on emotions and attitudes, forgiveness can also have important consequences for interpersonal relations. For the sake of brevity, this article will emphasize forgiveness in responses to offenses by another individual. However, it is worth noting that forgiveness-related concepts can also apply in cases involving the self,¹ groups,² God,³ or even impersonal forces such as tornadoes.⁴

Forgiveness has become a burgeoning area of psychological research over the past fifteen years⁵ and is widely applicable. For example, decisions

* Case Western Reserve University. Address correspondence to Julie Juola Exline, Department of Psychological Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, 10900 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44106-7123. Phone: 216-368-8573. Email: julie.exline@case.edu.

1. E.g., Julie H. Hall & Frank D. Fincham, *Self-Forgiveness: The Stepchild of Forgiveness Research*, 24 J. SOC. & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 621 (2005) (offering a conceptual analysis of self-forgiveness as distinct from interpersonal forgiveness and situations where self-forgiveness is appropriate even where interpersonal transgressions have occurred); M.L. Fisher & Julie J. Exline, *Self-Forgiveness Versus Condoning: The Importance of Accepting Responsibility*, 5 SELF & IDENTITY 127 (2006).

2. E.g., Michael J.A. Wohl & Nyla R. Branscombe, *Forgiveness and Collective Guilt Assignment to Historical Perpetrator Groups Depend on Level of Social Category Inclusiveness*, 88 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 288 (2005) (examining how categorization and perception of group inclusivity affects victimized group members' responses to current members of a historical perpetrator group).

3. E.g., Julie J. Exline & Alyce Martin, *Anger Toward God: A New Frontier in Forgiveness Research*, HANDBOOK OF FORGIVENESS 73 (E.L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 2005).

4. E.g., Laura Y. Thompson et al., *Dispositional Forgiveness of Self, Others, and Situations*, 73 J. PERSONALITY 313 (2005) (presenting six studies of forgiveness using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale, a self-reporting measure of dispositional forgiveness).

5. See generally Julie J. Exline et al., *Forgiveness and Justice: A Research Agenda for Social and Personality Psychology*, 7 PERSONALITY & PSYCHOL. REV. 337 (2003) (suggesting a need to incorporate alternatives or additions to retribution into current justice frameworks); M.E.

about whether to forgive can take place within marriages,⁶ in the workplace,⁷ and also within legal contexts.⁸ Interpersonal forgiveness is framed here as a general concept—one that could be relevant in any situation involving injustice.

The primary aim of this article is to provide a broad overview of the topic of forgiveness from a psychological viewpoint. After defining forgiveness, the article will describe some common misunderstandings about forgiveness. The remaining sections emphasize several challenging issues and decisions surrounding the issue of forgiveness: determining whether forgiveness is appropriate, considering questions of timing and motive, and finding ways to facilitate forgiveness without increasing the risk of future harm to the forgiver.

II. RESPONSES TO INJUSTICE

When people mistreat others, they create states of injustice that can be understood through several theoretical frameworks from psychology. Equity theory suggests that transgressions create an imbalanced state by causing one party to receive outcomes that are poorer than deserved.⁹ To restore a

McCullough, *Forgiveness*, in *CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES: A HANDBOOK AND CLASSIFICATION* (Christopher Peterson & Michael Seligman eds., 2004); *FORGIVENESS: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE* (Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, & Carl E. Thoresen eds., 2000) (providing a historical outline of forgiveness and exploring forgiveness in different cultural and social situations); *DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES* (Everett L. Worthington, Jr., ed., 1998) (examining how positivity and an emphasis on character improves both the wellbeing of individuals and society).

6. See Frank D. Fincham et al., *'Til Lack of Forgiveness Doth Us Part: Forgiveness and Marriage*, in *HANDBOOK OF FORGIVENESS* 207–26 (E.L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 2005) (stressing the importance of understanding forgiveness in close relationships).

7. E.g., Karl Aquino et al., *When Push Doesn't Come to Shove: Interpersonal Forgiveness in Workplace Relationships*, 12 J. MGMT. INQUIRY 209 (2003) (developing a framework for forgiveness occurring in the workplace and contrasting it with retribution and revenge).

8. E.g., Susan A. Bandes, *When Victims Seek Closure: Forgiveness, Vengeance and the Role of Government*, 27 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 1599, 1599–1606 (2000) (examining the notion of closure for the surviving family members of the victims of two separate high-profile murders and exploring the difference between the needs of these survivors and the actions taken by government); R.A. Duff, *Review Essay: Justice, Mercy, and Forgiveness*, 9 CRIM JUST. ETHICS 51, 51–63 (1990) (offering criticism of two works on mercy and forgiveness, JEFFRIE G. MURPHY & JEAN HAMPTON, *FORGIVENESS AND MERCY* (1988) and KATHLEEN DEAN MOORE, *PARDONS: JUSTICE, MERCY, AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST* (1989)); Peter C. Hill et al., *The Social Psychology of Justice and Forgiveness in Civil and Organizational Settings*, in *HANDBOOK OF FORGIVENESS* 477–90 (E.L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 2005) (considering how people think of justice and perceive injustice and how they react when they perceive that an injustice has occurred).

9. E.g., Elaine Walster et al., *New Directions in Equity Research*, 25 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 151 (1973) (discussing equity theory, narrowing a general theory of social behavior, and utilizing equity theory to understand greater social problems).

sense of justice, balance must be restored. According to social-exchange theory, transgressions create debts that need to be repaid in order to restore a sense of fairness.¹⁰ More recently, Worthington and colleagues¹¹ proposed the metaphor of the *injustice gap*. When people harm others or break social rules, the result is a gap between the way that things are and the way that they would be if things were fair. To restore a state of justice, this gap must be filled somehow—perhaps through apologies,¹² attempts at restorative justice,¹³ or retributive punishment of offenders.¹⁴ Of course, some offenses are trivially small and easily remedied, as when a person accidentally steps on another's foot and immediately apologizes. This article focuses on more serious offenses, in which the injustice gap is substantial and not easily overlooked.

In addition to the cognitive process of perceiving injustice, people often experience intense anger when they believe that injustices have been committed against them,¹⁵ their loved ones,¹⁶ or groups with whom they identi-

10. PETER N. BLAU, *EXCHANGE AND POWER IN SOCIAL LIFE* (1964) (analyzing the importance of social structure while stressing the importance of social interaction as a driving force).

11. Exline et al., *supra* note 5; EVERETT L. WORTHINGTON, JR., *FORGIVING AND RECONCILING: BRIDGES TO WHOLENESS AND HOPE* (2003) (discussing the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, and approaching forgiveness as an altruistic gift instead of from selfish motives).

12. E.g., Julie J. Exline et al., *Is Apology Worth the Risk? Predictors, Outcomes, and Ways to Avoid Regret*, 26 J. SOC. & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 479 (2007) (discussing people's motivations for apologizing versus withholding apologies).

13. William P. Bottom et al., *When Talk is Not Cheap: Substantive Penance and Expressions of Intent in Rebuilding Cooperation*, 13 ORG. SCI. 497 (2002) (examining the effects of explanations or other more substantive actions for the restoration of the mutual relationship prior to the transgression).

14. John Darley, *Just Punishments: Research on Retributional Justice*, in THE JUSTICE MOTIVE IN EVERYDAY LIFE 314–33 (M. Ross & D.T. Miller eds., 2002) (discussing the retributionist drive for punishment in upholding the just world where people get what they deserve); C.V.O. Witvliet et al., *Retributive Justice, Restorative Justice, and Forgiveness: A Psychophysiological Analysis*, 44 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 10 (2008) (examining the effects of imagined apologies and non-apologies after a common crime and how the effects of both situations are manifested physiologically).

15. WORTHINGTON, JR., *supra* note 11.

16. Jeffrey D. Green et al., *Third-Party Forgiveness: (Not) Forgiving Your Close Other's Betrayer*, 34 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 407 (2008) (discussing the theory that close friends of those wronged (third parties) are less forgiving than those who were actually wronged (first parties)).

fy.¹⁷ When people are treated unjustly, the resulting sense of unfairness—particularly if coupled with humiliation—can trigger feelings of intense anger and desires for revenge. In symbolic terms, the offended party has been pushed down by the offender, perhaps via betrayal, rejection, or a violation of personal rights.¹⁸ After being pushed down, a common set of reactions would entail not only trying to protect the self from further harm, but also to pull oneself back up. Some will want to push the offender down in return, perhaps going beyond tit-for-tat retribution to outright revenge¹⁹ in which the aim is to inflict harm greater than that suffered by the self. To the extent that revenge restores a sense of personal power along with a sense of retributive justice, some will see it as beneficial even if it escalates a conflict.

What are some alternatives to revenge and retributive justice? People who have been offended or hurt often withdraw from their offenders,²⁰ avoiding contact and perhaps even severing relational bonds. Others will respond unassertively, perhaps excusing or condoning serious offenses or acting as though no offense occurred. Compartmentalization is another option, in which people will try to forget the offense or will simply shift their attention away from it. Forgiveness is another possible response in the wake of interpersonal offense—one that does not rule out the possibility of other responses such as seeking justice.

A. *What Does It Mean to Forgive? A Perspective from Psychology*

Although the definition of forgiveness has been controversial among psychologists,²¹ most agree about several core elements. First, forgiveness

17. Ryan P. Brown et al., *Taking Up Offenses: Second-Hand Forgiveness and Identification with Targets of Transgressions*, 34 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1406 (2008) (discussing the results from three studies); Wohl & Branscombe, *supra* note 2.

18. Erving Goffman, *On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction*, 18 PSYCHIATRY 213 (1955) (discussing the subconscious interactions involved in interpersonal transactions and their impacts on others).

19. E.g., Arlene M. Stillwell et al., *We're All Victims Here: Toward a Psychology of Revenge*, 30 BASIC & APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 253 (2008) (discussing the perceived imbalance in equity in relationships leading to a cycle of revenge).

20. See Michael E. McCullough et al., *Interpersonal Forgiving in Close Relationships II: Theoretical Elaboration and Measurement*, 75 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1586 (1998) (examining the impact of various relationship level variables on interpersonal forgiving).

21. See Robert D. Enright et al., *Interpersonal Forgiveness Within the Helping Professions: An Attempt to Resolve Differences of Opinion*, 36 COUNSELING & VALUES 84 (1992) (discussing the differing philosophical opinions about interpersonal forgiveness, and the practical aspects of counseling programs in forgiveness).

involves a decision to release or forego bitterness and vengeance.²² Forgiveness may also involve a positive shift in attitudes or motivations toward a transgressor.²³ Negative emotions such as anger should be reduced through forgiveness—and it is possible, though not essential, that positive feelings toward an offender could even replace negative feelings.

Forgiveness can be seen as a way of deliberately freeing the self—and perhaps others—through the release of negative feelings and motivations.²⁴ In ideal conceptual terms, then, an authentic act of forgiveness should include an element of transcendence. There needs to be a clear injustice in order for forgiveness to be relevant. If it becomes clear upon closer inspection that no injustice actually occurred or that the debt has been completely repaid, then the language of forgiveness becomes less appropriate.²⁵ Using the injustice gap metaphor, forgiveness might be seen as an attempt to transcend the gap by bridging it, reaching over it, or stepping across it.

In research conducted over the past fifteen years, forgiveness has been linked with many positive outcomes: healthy relationships,²⁶ emotional wellbeing,²⁷ and perhaps even physical health.²⁸ Despite these potential benefits, however, the concept of forgiveness is controversial because of the potential tradeoffs and risks associated with forgiving. The remainder of

22. See Robert D. Enright et al., *The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness*, EXPLORING FORGIVENESS 46–63 (Robert D. Enright & Joanna North eds., 1998) (discussing the meaning of interpersonal forgiveness, how to foster it, and the effects on those who do it).

23. See Eli J. Finkel et al., *Dealing with Betrayal in Close Relationships: Does Commitment Promote Forgiveness?*, 82 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 956 (2002) (advocating the importance of commitment in motivating forgiveness).

24. See Enright et al., *supra* note 22.

25. This point will be elaborated further below.

26. See David L. Fenell, *Characteristics of Long-Term First Marriages*, 15 J. MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING 446 (1993) (discussing results of study of successful first marriages and commonalities between them).

27. See C.T. Coyle & R.D. Enright, *Forgiveness Intervention with Postabortion Men*, 65 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 1042 (1997) (studying the effects of treatment to foster forgiveness on postabortion men and showing that after treatment men gained in forgiveness); see also S.R. Freedman & R.D. Enright, *Forgiveness As an Intervention Goal with Incest Survivors*, 64 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 983 (1996) (discussing the impact of treatment to foster forgiveness, among twelve women survivors of incest abuse, toward their abusers).

28. See Kathleen A. Lawler et al., *A Change of Heart: Cardiovascular Correlates of Forgiveness in Response to Interpersonal Conflict*, 26 J. BEHAV. MED. 373 (2003) (examining the psychophysiological effects of forgiveness on college students when describing times of past interpersonal conflicts); see generally CHARLOTTE V.O. WITVLIET & MICHAEL E. MCCULLOUGH, *For-Forgiveness and Health: A Review and Theoretical Exploration of Emotion Pathways*, in ALTRUISM AND HEALTH: PERSPECTIVES FROM EMPIRICAL RESEARCH (Scott G. Post, ed. 2007).

this article, which includes elements similar to those used in several established forgiveness interventions,²⁹ will point out some of these pitfalls and suggest ways to minimize the risks associated with forgiving.

B. What Forgiveness Is Not: Some Common Misunderstandings

In both scholarly articles and interventions designed to facilitate forgiveness,³⁰ considerable care is taken to clarify the distinction between forgiveness and other responses, even though some of these other responses might be included in some lay definitions of forgiveness. Are such distinctions important only from a scholarly perspective—one that might be seen as hair-splitting in its attention to detail? No, because in the case of forgiveness, misunderstanding what the term means could harm people who intend to forgive by invalidating their anger or by setting them up for repeated exploitation. Before proceeding, then, it is crucial to point out some common misunderstandings about the concept of forgiveness.

One example is that, despite common usage of the expression, “forgive and forget,” forgiving does not imply forgetting. Although trivial offenses might be readily dismissed, it is usually adaptive for people to remember important events from their lives—both negative and positive—so that they can learn from their experiences. Knowing about potentially dangerous situations can help people protect themselves from future harm. Furthermore, emotional content makes memories stronger,³¹ implying that it will be difficult or impossible for people to forget events that their emotions have marked as important. Granted, to the extent that forgivers are able to stop ruminating about offenses, their memories of the offense may become less salient and intense; however, this is different from saying that forgivers actually forget major harms that they have suffered.

Another important distinction must be made between forgiving an offense and excusing it. When people excuse or condone an act, they are minimizing—or even nullifying—the role that another person played in causing an offense. They are absolving that person of full or partial responsibility by

29. See ROBERT D. ENRIGHT & RICHARD P. FITZGIBBONS, *HELPING CLIENTS FORGIVE: AN EMPIRICAL GUIDE FOR RESOLVING ANGER AND RESTORING HOPE* (2000) (explaining the forgiveness process in relation to practical psychotherapy); see EVERETT L. WORTHINGTON, JR., *The Pyramid Model of Forgiveness: Some Interdisciplinary Speculations About Unforgiveness and the Promotion of Forgiveness*, DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS 107–37 (Everett L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 1998) (explaining the Pyramid Model of Forgiveness, a model with empathy as a necessary element to promote forgiveness); see generally WORTHINGTON, JR., *supra* note 11.

30. See ENRIGHT & FITZGIBBONS, *supra* note 29; see also Worthington, Jr., *supra* note 29; WORTHINGTON, JR., *supra* note 11.

31. James L. MCGAUGH, *MEMORY AND EMOTION: THE MAKING OF LASTING MEMORIES* (2003) (overviewing memory research in the modern era in light of recent scientific advancements).

pointing out the presence of mitigating factors. Granted, under some conditions, excusing or condoning an act is perfectly appropriate. Sometimes people are falsely accused of wrongdoing when they truly are innocent, or they may be accused of offenses more serious than those they actually committed. Crucially, however, forgiveness does not involve making excuses or minimizing offenses. In fact, the act of forgiveness applies only to cases in which the offender is seen as having some responsibility for the problematic action or failure to act.

Forgiveness also differs from suppression, denial, and minimization of anger and hurt. Some people, thinking that they are practicing forgiveness, might simply push aside angry feelings without taking a close look at them. They might pretend that no offense occurred or that they were not hurt by it. ("It's no problem. It's not a big deal.") By suppressing their negative emotions, people may be trying to avoid the vulnerability and stress that such emotions can entail. Alternatively, their goal might be to follow social norms by being agreeable and kind. Unfortunately, suppression of negative feelings could easily lead people away from authenticity in their relationships with others and with self, and it can also be stressful to the body.³² Genuine forgiveness, in contrast, implies a willingness to acknowledge the damage that has been done. In other words, people who forgive are able to look at the injustice honestly and to recognize its impact.

Forgiveness can also be confused with unassertiveness or with submissiveness. Some may fear that forgiving will mean neglecting to set limits, failing to confront, and allowing the self to be exploited by others rather than pursuing justice or standing up for one's own rights.³³ Recall, however, that the psychological definitions of forgiveness focus on internal emotional states and attitudes toward offenders. Even if some behavioral elements are included as part of the forgiveness process (e.g., desisting from revenge or working against the urge to avoid the other person), none of the definitions imply that forgivers should take an unassertive stance, failing to protect

32. James J. Gross & Robert W. Levenson, *Emotional Suppression: Physiology, Self-Report, and Expressive Behavior*, 64 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 970, 971 (1993) (examining the effects of emotional suppression).

33. See Sharon Lamb, *Women, Abuse, and Forgiveness: A Special Case*, in BEFORE FORGIVING: CAUTIONARY VIEWS OF FORGIVENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY 155, 162–63 (S. Lamb & J.G. Murphy eds., 2002) (examining the theory that apologizing is a form of self-help and whether it is the best form of self-help for abused women); Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Forgiveness in Counseling: A Philosophical Perspective*, in BEFORE FORGIVING: CAUTIONARY VIEWS OF FORGIVENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY 41, 46–47 (S. Lamb & J.G. Murphy eds., 2002) (examining the growing trend of adopting a new approach to the practice of counseling, called philosophical counseling).

themselves and confront others where appropriate. As will be elaborated later, forgiveness ideally begins from a position in which people feel safe and secure—not from a place in which they see themselves as “caving in” to others.

Finally, forgiveness does not imply trust of the offender, nor does it require that people form or continue an ongoing relationship with this person. In some situations, such as those involving abuse, exploitation, or criminal offenses, forgivers may not see a relationship with the offender as being safe, wise, or desirable. Forgiveness in such cases may be a process that is entirely internal, focusing on the elimination of bitterness and hatred without opening up the possibility of a relational bond. Although interpersonal expression of forgiveness can sometimes be helpful, forgiveness can also be a completely private process. A person might forgive without ever communicating forgiveness to the offender or pursuing any form of reconciliation.

C. Is Forgiveness Relevant? Taking a Closer Look at the Offense

As described above, forgiveness is only relevant in cases where one person clearly commits some transgression against another. Yet there are times when people experience intense anger in the absence of an actual transgression. To determine whether an offense has actually taken place, people who feel angry, hurt, or bitter may need to do a close inspection of their emotions and the possible reasons underlying them. Under what conditions might one person experience anger, dislike, or even hatred toward another in the absence of an actual offense?

1. Envy and Jealousy

One provocative example is found in cases of envy, which involve feelings of inferiority, hostility, and resentment toward a person who is presumed to have some advantage over the self.³⁴ At the core of envy is hostility, often accompanied by a desire to see the envied person fall or be “brought down to size.”³⁵ Because feelings of envy are usually seen as mor-

34. R.H. Smith & S.H. Kim, *Comprehending Envy*, 133 PSYCHOL. BULL. 46 (2007) (analyzing what embodies the feeling of envy and how people cope with this feeling, and the impact it has on social interaction).

35. N.T. Feather, *Attitudes Toward High Achievers and Reactions to Their Fall: Theory and Research Concerning Tall Poppies*, 26 ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 1, 18–22 (1994) (introducing envy as a variable in a study of Australians’ reactions to the fall of high achievers); Richard H. Smith, Terence J. Turner, Ron Garonzik, Colin W. Leach, Vanessa Urch-Druskat, & Christine M. Weston, *Envy and Schadenfreude*, 22 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 158 (1996) (finding that people often find pleasure in the misfortune of those they envy).

ally wrong and socially unacceptable,³⁶ envy often goes underground: rather than acknowledging their envy, people may try to transform it into a sense of justified resentment, usually by focusing on some aspect of the envied person's advantaged status that might seem undeserved. Thus, a man who is actually hated because he received a competitive promotion might be viewed with suspicion and resentment (e.g., "He was just playing up to the boss.") Jealousy, which centers on the threat of losing a valued relationship, can bring emotions even more intense than those associated with envy.³⁷ Those who pose relational threats (e.g., a man who starts conversations with another man's girlfriend; a woman who dresses provocatively) might be hated simply because they are posing a relational threat, regardless of whether they are doing so intentionally. If negative reactions to another person seem to be rooted in jealousy or envy, rather than in an actual offense, the most effective strategy would be to address these threat-based emotions directly rather than focus on the idea of forgiveness.

2. Vulnerabilities and Unhealed Wounds

Sometimes people overreact to situations because of a history of prior hurts in a similar area. For example, a woman who was teased about her weight as a child could be hypersensitive to comments about her eating habits or body shape, even if such comments are not intended to hurt. Similarly, a boy who was abandoned by his father might become vigilant to any possible signs of abandonment in his adult relationships. Individuals may also overreact to an individual offense when it forms part of a series of offenses (e.g., screaming at a friend for being late, but not until the fifth time it occurs). It is easy to see how repeated offenses could raise problems with making fair judgments in a legal context: viewed by itself, the offense in question might seem relatively minor, but it may actually be part of a long string of related offenses—whether or not those prior offenses have been documented.

Although people may be justified in feeling angry or upset in response to any of the above situations, their emotional responses may be out of proportion to the situation. Before determining whether forgiveness is appro-

36. Smith & Kim, *supra* note 33, at 54.

37. Peter Salovey & Judith Rodin, *The Differentiation of Social-Comparison Jealousy and Romantic Jealousy*, 50 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1100, 1111–12 (1986) (discussing how jealousy or envy in romantic situations elicit more negative emotions than jealousy or envy in other social situations).

priate, it is important to try pinpointing the nature of the actual offense and to distinguish what the other person did, such as “he was late five times in a row” from other, more personal reasons for a strong reaction, such as “I am very sensitive to feeling rejected.” Before attempting to forgive, it is important to be clear about the nature of the offense.

III. THE VALUE OF ANGER

If forgiveness is a good thing, does this imply that anger is a bad thing? On the contrary, anger can serve as a useful signal of injustice. When people have been wronged directly, or when they learn that others have been wronged, anger is a common (and, many would argue, morally justifiable) response. Anger is also an energizing emotion,³⁸ one that can make people feel powerful and motivate them to take action.³⁹ Rather than dwelling on the fear, shame, or vulnerability that can be associated with a victim role, those who become angry may find themselves feeling strong, confident, and courageous.

Anger and its expression can, of course, take destructive forms. When people experience the high levels of physiological arousal associated with intense anger, they may find that these feelings are stressful,⁴⁰ or that they impede rational decision-making.⁴¹ Intense anger might take the form of blind rage in which people lash out aggressively, committing acts of vengeance that could harm others and themselves. But anger could also be channeled in a positive direction,⁴² motivating people to assert themselves,⁴³ pursue fairness, or set appropriate limits with others who might otherwise exploit them. In fact, an early step in several forgiveness interventions in-

38. Raymond W. Novaco, *Anger*, in *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PSYCHOLOGY* 170, 170 (Alan E. Kazdin ed., 2000) (explaining the physical effects of anger).

39. Charles S. Carver & Eddie Harmon-Jones, *Anger Is an Approach-Related Affect: Evidence and Implications*, 135 *PSYCHOL. BULL.* 183 (2009) (exploring the effect that anger has on motivation).

40. Novaco, *supra* note 37, at 170–71.

41. E.g., Kerstin E. E. Schroder & Michael P. Carey, *Anger as a Moderator of Safer Sex Motivation Among Low-Income Urban Women*, 28 *J. BEHAV. MED.* 493 (2005) (providing evidence that negative emotions, like anger, can impair rational decision-making by showing that high anger women are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors despite having the same knowledge of the consequences as low anger women).

42. See, e.g., Antonio Pascual-Leone & Leslie S. Greenberg, *Emotional Processing in Experiential Therapy: Why “The Only Way Out Is Through,”* 75 *J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL.* 875 (2007) (showing that therapy patients can turn unproductive emotions into productive emotions over time).

43. ROBERT ALBERTI & MICHAEL EMMONS, *YOUR PERFECT RIGHT: ASSERTIVENESS AND EQUALITY IN YOUR LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS*, 185–206 (9th ed. 2008) (discussing appropriate ways to express anger).

volves validating the offended person's right to be resentful or angry.⁴⁴ Paradoxically, then, the start of a forgiveness intervention could actually have the effect of making offended persons *angrier*—particularly if they were previously suppressing their anger or minimizing offenses against them. If used wisely, anger could provide an important first step in helping offended parties to restore a sense of self-respect and safety.

A. *If Anger Is So Great, Why Give It Up?*

Once people feel safe and strong and have moved past the intense emotions of a highly charged crisis situation, they may be more likely to see forgiveness as a viable option. But why would a person even consider forgiveness? As discussed above, anger in the wake of offense can be used in positive ways, and it can empower people who might otherwise feel damaged and helpless. Why, then, would anyone want to forgive—that is, to give up anger and resentment to which they are rightfully entitled?

In order to earnestly pursue forgiveness, a person would presumably see that the moral or practical benefits of forgiving outweigh its risks or costs. Many people will not. For example, offended parties may not see forgiveness as a good option if they still see many benefits of their anger, if they have no prior close relationship with the perpetrator,⁴⁵ or if they have a strong sense of personal entitlement that impels them to pursue and protect their individual rights at all costs.⁴⁶ For almost anyone, however, decisions about forgiving serious offenses are likely to be nontrivial, and the act of forgiveness may require considerable effort.

44. E.g., Helen Chagigiorgis & Sandra Paivio, *Forgiveness as an Outcome in Emotion-Focused Trauma Therapy*, in WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS ON THE COMPLEXITIES OF FORGIVENESS 121, 124 (Wanda Malcolm, Nancy DeCourville, & Kathryn Belicki eds., 2008) ("Only when the anger and hatred toward the offender have been explored, understood, and validated as legitimate can clients begin the process of letting go of anger and forgiving."); Enright & Fitzgibbons, *supra* note 28, at 71 (stating that in the first phase of forgiveness therapy, anger should be acknowledged and expressed).

45. Eli J. Finkel, Caryl E. Rusbult, Madoka Kumashiro, & Peggy A. Hannon, *Dealing With Betrayal in Close Relationships: Does Commitment Promote Forgiveness?*, 82 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 956, 962 (2002) ("[I]n comparison with less committed individuals, highly committed individuals are more likely to forgive partners' acts of betrayal.").

46. Julie J. Exline, Roy F. Baumeister, Brad J. Bushman, W. Keith Campbell, & Eli J. Finkel, *Too Proud to Let Go: Narcissistic Entitlement as a Barrier to Forgiveness*, 87 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 894 (2004) (finding that those who are narcissistic and have feelings of entitlement tend to be unforgiving).

What types of factors might cause the balances to shift, making people more likely to consider potential benefits of forgiving? Sometimes offended parties will be fortunate enough to receive a sincere apology or complete restitution, or they may believe that their offenders have been sufficiently punished. But forgiveness decisions may often be based more on internal motives than on external events. Several reasons that people might decide to forgive are described next, some based on practical benefits and others rooted in principles.

1. Practical Benefits of Forgiving

In the early stages of coping with a major offense, anger can energize people, lifting them from a victim role to a place where they feel stronger and less vulnerable. But once people have taken steps to assert and protect themselves, the function of anger becomes less clear. In their quest to be proven right or to get “the upper hand,” people often escalate conflicts, creating cycles of revenge that lead to lasting harm for both parties. Valued relational bonds may be broken or permanently damaged if resentment takes center stage over a long period of time. On the individual front, considerable evidence suggests that chronic anger and hostility can increase the risk of serious health problems, including cardiovascular disease and suppressed immune functioning.⁴⁷

Psychologically, too, some of anger’s benefits may fade over time. Anger that initially burns hot eventually turns stale, bitter, or cold when it takes the form of a grudge—a state that is no longer particularly rewarding. Anger, once a source of empowerment, can become a burden that weighs people down and saps energy. Offense-related ruminations, in which people go over and over an offense in their minds, can go from being a source of problem solving or validation to a source of torment. One reason to forgive, then, would be to gain the practical benefits—whether relational or personal—of being freed from the burden of excessive anger.

2. Principled Reasons to Forgive

Many people have religious, cultural, family-based, or personal principles that favor forgiveness, and these may play a vital role in decisions about whether to forgive. By motivating people to commit to forgiveness, these principles may save people considerable time and energy; they may be spared an intensive internal debate about whether forgiveness is the right

47. See Gross and Levenson, *supra* note 31, at 971 (reviewing literature discussing the effect that anger and hostility can have on health).

choice for them. People with pro-forgiveness principles may believe that they should forgive because forgiveness is a kind, generous act, or they may recall times that they were forgiven and see it as only fair that they should forgive others. In other cases, forgiving may be raised to the level of a moral imperative. When unforgiveness is seen as a sin, as it is within Christianity,⁴⁸ decisions about whether to forgive can take on additional layers of significance. For example, those who successfully forgive may feel a closer connection with God or may take satisfaction in having obeyed God's command. Those who find themselves unable or unwilling to forgive may worry about displeasing God or members of their religious group, and they may fear punishment for their unforgiving attitudes.

Even though principles favoring forgiveness may be effective in persuading people that forgiveness is wise or morally right, it is easy to identify some problems that might arise when people are intensely angry or hurt, but nonetheless believe strongly that they should forgive.⁴⁹ Some might try to forgive prematurely and without reflection, perhaps simply suppressing their anger without examining its sources or considering other constructive actions that might be taken. By not giving any credence to their feelings of resentment, they could fail to show respect for themselves and their rights.⁵⁰ Others might feel bound to forgive by a sense of pressure, fear, or obligation. Those who have suffered abuse or other forms of trauma may experience a form of double victimization if they are pressured to forgive.⁵¹ First they are harmed in devastating ways by their offenders, then they may be shamed for their failure to forgive.

48. Mark S. Rye et al., *Religious Perspectives on Forgiveness*, in FORGIVENESS: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 17 (Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, & Carl E. Thoresen eds., 2000) (discussing the emphasis that different religions place on forgiveness).

49. See BEFORE FORGIVING: CAUTIONARY VIEWS OF FORGIVENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY (Sharon Lamb & Jeffrie G. Murphy eds., 2002) [hereinafter BEFORE FORGIVING] (providing a collection of essays on the importance of thinking critically before choosing forgiveness).

50. E.g., Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Forgiveness, Mercy, and the Retributive Emotions*, CRIM. JUST. ETHICS 3, 5–6, (Summer/Fall 1988) (linking resentment with self-respect); Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Forgiveness in Counseling: A Philosophical Perspective*, in BEFORE FORGIVING, *supra* note 49, at 41, 44 [hereinafter Murphy, BEFORE FORGIVING] (“Resentment of the wrongdoer is one way that a victim may evince, emotionally, that he or she does *not* endorse this degrading message A person who forgives immediately, on the other hand, may lack proper self-respect and be exhibiting the vice of servility.”).

51. See Chagigiorgis & Paivio, *supra* note 43 (discussing how pressuring a survivor of childhood sexual abuse to forgive their abuser can “retraumatize” the victim). See generally Sharon Lamb, *Women, Abuse, and Forgiveness: A Special Case*, in BEFORE FORGIVING, *supra* note 48, at 155 (discussing the importance of not pressuring victims to forgive).

Thus, even when the decision to forgive is rooted in important personal principles, it may still be wise to consider the extent to which a person actually wants to forgive and feels ready to do so. Whether seen through a theological, philosophical, or social science lens, forgiveness is typically framed as a transcendent behavior rather than as an act of conformity or weakness. As with most other behaviors and choices, decisions to forgive may be most effective and enduring if they are intrinsically motivated,⁵² reflecting a personal desire to forgive rather than a desire to please others (or, worse, fear of punishment or rejection). As with other behaviors that require a considerable act of will, such as stopping the use of addictive substances,⁵³ some people may need considerable time to reflect on the prospect of forgiveness and to decide whether they are ready, willing, and able to attempt this potentially challenging course of action.

B. Facilitating Forgiveness through “Shrinking and Warming” Strategies

Once a person does commit to the idea of forgiving, what types of actions can facilitate the process? This section will present several suggestions. To help organize the material, the section will use the broad categories of *shrinking* techniques (i.e., shrinking the perceived size of the injustice) and *warming* techniques (i.e., warming attitudes toward the offender).

One caution must be mentioned before proceeding. The following suggestions are intended for individuals who are ready and willing to attempt forgiveness. If used prematurely, before participants have had a chance to learn from their anger or engage in appropriate limit setting, these strategies could easily increase the risk of repeated victimization, emotional suppression, or other negative outcomes.⁵⁴

1. Shrinking Perceptions of the Offense

When offended parties narrowly focus their attention to ruminate on the harm and unfairness they have experienced, their perceptions of the offense may become magnified. The larger an injustice looms in one’s mind, the

52. Richard M. Ryan & Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being*, 55 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 68, 69 (2000) (comparing the effects of intrinsic and external motivation on behavior).

53. James A. Prochaska, Carlo C. DiClemente, & John C. Norcross, *In Search of How People Change: Applications to Addictive Behaviors*, 47 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 1102, 1103 (1992) (discussing how smokers can spend years contemplating changing their behavior before taking the next step).

54. See, e.g., Chagigiorgis & Paivio, *supra* note 43, at 124–25; BEFORE FORGIVING, *supra* note 48; Murphy, BEFORE FORGIVING, *supra* note 49, at 46.

more difficult it will be to forgive. One way to facilitate forgiveness would be to help shrink the offense in the mind of the offended party. As the injustice gap starts to seem smaller, people should have an easier time stepping over the gap or bridging it. One challenge, of course, is to find ways to shrink the offense to a more manageable size without denying the reality of the harm or the offender's responsibility—which might include legal responsibility—for causing it. How might this be accomplished?

One possibility involves empathic perspective-taking. Research suggests that when people are in the role of a victim, they engage in systematic distortions. For example, they tend to magnify the severity of offenses and to see them as inexplicable.⁵⁵ Yet when offended parties can step out of their own limited perspectives and try to imagine the situation from the offender's viewpoint, they may uncover factors and alternate explanations that could reduce the level of blame (or at least the level of evil intent) attributed to the offender, thereby facilitating forgiveness.⁵⁶ Recent studies suggest that perspective-taking techniques may be particularly useful for men,⁵⁷ perhaps in part because men are not socialized to empathize to the extent that women are.⁵⁸

To help take the offender's perspective, offended parties might try to reflect on anything that they know about the offender's history and background, including past mistreatment or trauma, personality traits, or vulnerable areas that partly explain the poor choices made in the offending situation. ("He is really sensitive to signs of disrespect.") They could also focus more closely on the offense incident itself, including stressors and extenuating cir-

55. Roy E. Baumeister, Arlene Stillwell, & Sara R. Wotman, *Victim and Perpetrator Accounts of Interpersonal Conflict: Autobiographical Narratives About Anger*, 59 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 994 (studying how victims' perceptions of events differ dramatically from perpetrators').

56. E.g., Charlotte V.O. Witvliet, Thomas E. Ludwig, & Kelly L. Vander Laan, *Granting Forgiveness or Harboring Grudges: Implications for Emotion, Physiology, and Health*, 12 PSYCHOL. SCI. 117, 118 (2001) ("Developing feelings of empathy for the perpetrator is considered to play a pivotal role in turning the victim away from unforgiveness.").

57. Julie J. Exline, Roy F. Baumeister, Anne L. Zell, Amy J. Kraft, & Charlotte V.O. Witvliet, *Not So Innocent: Does Seeing One's Own Capability for Wrongdoing Predict Forgiveness?*, 94 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 495, 504–11 (2008) (finding that men gave "gentler judgments" and were less vengeful after reflecting on their own past transgressions); Julie J. Exline & Anne L. Zell, *Empathy, Self-Affirmation, and Forgiveness: The Moderating Roles of Gender and Entitlement*, 28 J. SOC. & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 1071, 1093 (2009) ("[E]xercises that facilitate empathic processing . . . may help to reduce vengefulness among men . . .").

58. E.g., Nancy Eisenberg & Randy Lennon, *Sex Differences in Empathy and Related Capacities*, 94 PSYCHOL. BULL. 100, 100 (1983) ("[T]o fulfill their role functions effectively, females, but not males, must be socialized to be nurturing, sympathetic, and empathic.").

cumstances that might provide reasonable explanations for the offender's behavior. ("She just lost her job and was really upset about it.") In going through this process, offended parties might also realize that their own actions (or inaction) may have contributed to either the start of the conflict or its escalation. ("She probably felt attacked when I accused her of not caring about me.")

Another form of perspective-taking is to turn the lens on oneself, reflecting on past or potential offenses of one's own. People who can imagine or recall themselves committing a similar offense tend to be more forgiving.⁵⁹ Of course, there are upper limits to this strategy. Sometimes people truly cannot relate to an offense and cannot envision themselves doing something similar under any conditions. Although such failures to relate might reflect self-righteous attitudes or difficulty with empathy in some cases, they could also be a perfectly natural response when the offense is truly heinous. People might also have difficulty envisioning themselves committing certain types of offenses because of their own personalities. For example, individuals who are timid may have trouble relating to those who bully others, whereas those who are highly assertive and action-oriented may have trouble relating to passive-aggressive behaviors or failures to act.

Another form of perspective-taking, rather than focusing on the offender or the self, takes a much broader view. Rather than focusing on a specific offense, an offender might reflect on the universal nature of human transgression: all human beings have moral failings, and we all do things that hurt others. Harming others, whether intentionally or not, is part of the human experience, and we all play a part in it. When people frame offenses as part of the general human condition rather than as isolated personal events, this broad perspective can facilitate forgiving attitudes.⁶⁰

Any of the above perspective-taking techniques could make a single offense seem to shrink in size, thus making the injustice gap smaller and easier to transcend. Of course, any technique that makes an offense seem smaller or more understandable might also lead people to excuse serious offenses.⁶¹ In addition, some individuals are predisposed to shrink the offenses of others, perhaps "letting them off the hook" too easily and failing to hold them

59. Exline et al., *Not So Innocent*, *supra* note 57, at 511; Seiji Takaku, *The Effects of Apology and Perspective Taking on Interpersonal Forgiveness: A Dissonance-Attribution Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness*, 141 J. SOC. PSYCHOL. 494 (2001).

60. Wohl & Branscombe, *supra* note 2, at 299 (finding that victimized groups were more likely to forgive when events were categorized as more general human experiences than as specific unique incidents).

61. Kathryn Belicki, Jessica Rourke, & Megan McCarthy, *Potential Dangers of Empathy and Related Conundrums*, in WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS, *supra* note 43, at 165, 169-175 (discussing how empathizing with a perpetrator can minimize the severity and effects of their actions).

accountable. For those who have taken appropriate precautions and are ready to attempt forgiveness, these types of techniques may help to facilitate the process.

2. Warming One's Attitudes Toward the Offender

The techniques just described focused on the offense itself, trying to shrink its size by viewing it from another perspective or within a broader context. However, some offended parties might find it morally objectionable to shrink the perceived size of the offense, or they might find themselves unable to do so in a manner that has integrity. Another set of options, which might replace the *shrinking* strategies or be used in conjunction with them, focuses on attitudes toward the offender rather than perceptions of the offense. These techniques might be termed *warming strategies*, as they are designed to combat cold attitudes toward one's offender.

In the wake of offense, feelings of anger can readily translate into dislike or even hatred toward of the person who caused the harm. When people feel hurt, humiliated, or powerless, they may mentally portray themselves as innocent victims while seeing their offenders as being entirely in the wrong. Worse, offended parties might start to see their offenders as caricatures, identifying them with their misdeeds to the point where they dehumanize them, seeing them as examples of "pure evil"⁶² or as monsters who deserve hatred and mistrust.⁶³ If people are able to work against these tendencies, seeing their offenders as complex human beings and possibly even cultivating positive attitudes toward them, these shifts in attitudes should make forgiveness easier. Although changing one's attitudes toward an offender may not make the injustice gap seem smaller, it could increase a person's motivation to transcend the gap.

What types of strategies could help to warm up attitudes toward an offender? Cultivating positive feelings or attitudes is easier for parties who shared a previous close, committed relationship.⁶⁴ In a marital context, for example, people might reflect on their partner's positive qualities or on good

62. ROY F. BAUMEISTER, EVIL: INSIDE HUMAN CRUELTY AND VIOLENCE 88–91 (1997) (discussing how victims like to perceive themselves as innocent and often achieve this by demonizing perpetrators).

63. John H. Ellard, Christina D. Miller, Terri-Lynne Baumle, & James M. Olson, *Just World Processes in Demonizing*, in THE JUSTICE MOTIVE IN EVERYDAY LIFE, at 350 (Michael Ross & Dale T. Miller eds., 2002) (discussing the reasons why victims demonize offenders).

64. Finkel et al., *supra* note 44.

past experiences in the relationship. They might also make a point of noticing anything positive about their partner's behavior in the present, perhaps expressing appreciation to the partner for behaviors that benefit the relationship. They could remind themselves of their love for the partner, their partner's love for them, or any commitments that they have made to the partner, any of which might motivate them to work toward healing the relationship. Of course, all of these relationship-enhancing behaviors will be easier if the offender has shown a repentant attitude—including apologies and attempts to make things right—and has communicated genuine caring and concern for the offended party. When offenders show no remorse, blame those they have harmed, or reopen old wounds by committing new offenses, the would-be forgiver has a much more difficult task.

What about situations in which no former relationship exists between the parties (e.g., being raped by a stranger) or in which the offender has always been seen as an enemy? In this case it may be extremely difficult to find positive aspects of the person or the relationship. Yet forgiveness might still be facilitated by focusing on universals: the offender's inherent value and dignity as a human being, perhaps, or the ways in which all human beings are part of a broken world in which we frequently harm one another.⁶⁵

In some situations, warming one's attitudes toward an offender might be dangerous. Granted, psychologists tend to draw clear conceptual lines between forgiveness, trust, and reconciliation: forgiving one's offender does not imply trust, nor does it imply a decision to resume or build a relationship. Yet in real life, the lines dividing these actions may become fuzzy. The strategies described above are designed to make one's attitudes toward another person—and perhaps a relationship—more positive. And as people start to see those who have hurt them in a more positive light, they may become willing to trust them once again and to reconcile. Such outcomes are desirable in many situations. However, it is also clear that cultivating a more positive view of a person or a relationship could misfire, keeping people in dangerous relationships or potentially harmful situations. Clearly there is a need for extreme caution in situations involving exploitation, abuse, or other factors that could put the offended party in harm's way once again.⁶⁶ Limit setting, self-protective actions, and the pursuit of legal justice

65. Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion: An Alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself*, 2 SELF & IDENTITY 85, 87 (2003) (arguing that viewing one's struggles as part of the common human experience enhances compassion for oneself and others); Wohl & Branscombe, *supra* note 2.

66. See Chagigiorgis & Paivio, *supra* note 43; Jennifer Katz, Amy Street, & Ileana Arias, *Individual Differences in Self-Appraisals and Responses to Dating Violence Scenarios*, 12 VIOLENCE & VICTIMS 265 (1997) (exploring the relationship between forgiveness and maintaining or exiting an abusive relationship); Lamb, *supra* note 50, at 163; Murphy, *supra* note 49.

may be crucial in such cases in order to protect the rights and wellbeing of forgivers.

C. Letting Go

In some cases, especially when hurts are small and pre-existing relationships are close and positive, the above exercises may be enough to reduce bitter, vengeful feelings to the point where no further action is necessary. But often some residual negative feelings remain, usually tied to a lingering sense of injustice that cannot be minimized or explained away. This is where the transcendent aspect of forgiveness comes in. Offended parties may need to make a conscious decision to release or relinquish any vengeful, bitter, or resentful feelings that remain so that they can attain a goal that they see as higher: physical or emotional wellbeing, obedience to God, giving an altruistic gift, following personal principles, or relationship restoration, to name just a few.

Imagery sometimes helps people to release residual angry feelings. For example, people might try to envision themselves setting down a heavy burden, releasing their concerns to God or the universe, or breaking through chains of unforgiveness to find a place of freedom. Rituals may also be useful, such as making a public commitment to forgive or writing a letter of forgiveness (but perhaps without actually sending the letter; see below). Regardless of the exact actions, the main point is to make a conscious, deliberate effort to release any negative feelings that remain.

D. Forgiveness as an Ongoing Process

People often make a conscious decision to forgive, work through the process, and conclude that they have indeed forgiven—only to find that their anger flares up again. For example, the forgiven offender might commit some new transgression, thereby triggering memories of the old offense. Even in the absence of additional offenses, however, people may find that simply being reminded about some facet of the offense—perhaps the grave harm that was caused or the callous attitude of the offender—causes resentment to flare up afresh.

When faced with their new or unresolved anger, some people might berate themselves: “I thought that I had forgiven that person!” or “I guess that I didn’t really forgive after all.” In such situations, and particularly when wounds are deep, it may be helpful to view forgiveness as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. When anger arises, people may need to

examine it again and work through the process once more. It might be useful to think of the process of forgiveness as a spiral: initial levels of rage may be intense, but they should subside somewhat in response to a forgiveness process. If anger flares up again, it may still be intense, but perhaps not quite as intense as the first time. With another attempt to forgive, the anger should begin to subside once more. Although this process should gradually become easier with repetition, it may need to be repeated many times—especially when offenses are serious and ongoing.

E. Communicating Forgiveness to One's Offender

Once people have forgiven, is it wise to communicate forgiveness to one's offender? This article has focused on forgiveness as an internal process rooted in the thoughts and emotions of the forgiver. Yet in real life (and certainly in many legal contexts), offended parties may also need to decide whether to communicate forgiveness to their offenders—and how. As elaborated elsewhere,⁶⁷ these can be complex social decisions.

One difficulty is that coming right out and saying “I forgive you” can be seen as a confrontational statement. If people only need to forgive others in cases of wrongdoing, then direct communications of forgiveness imply some assignment of blame. Unless explicitly requested by offenders (“Will you please forgive me?”), direct statements of forgiveness might put offenders on the defensive (“I should be the one forgiving *you*!”). This possibility can create a difficult dilemma for forgivers. If they communicate forgiveness implicitly, perhaps through a handshake, saying “It’s no problem,” or not mentioning the offense again, those who have been forgiven may respond positively; but they also may not have received any clear message about their perceived wrongdoing. Sometimes, rather than choosing to communicate forgiveness directly, forgivers will decide to apologize for any part that they may have played in the offense. An apology might be better received than a direct, unsolicited expression of forgiveness; however, there is no guarantee that the other person will apologize in return.

Another potential problem is that some people are quick to communicate forgiveness, but later find themselves feeling angry. Their offenders, believing that they have been forgiven, may be defensive if the offended party seems angry once more. (“I thought that you forgave me. Why are you still bringing this up?”) Thus, the timing of communicated forgiveness rais-

67. See generally Julie J. Exline & Roy F. Baumeister, *Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers*, in FORGIVENESS: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 133 (Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, & Carl E. Thoresen eds., 2000) (discussing the benefits and risks of forgiveness for both victims and perpetrators).

es challenging issues of its own. Ideally, it would seem most authentic to work through an internal process of forgiveness before taking the risk of communicating forgiveness. In daily life, however, people do not always have this luxury. For example, consider the case of two children who have just had a fight. After their mothers pressure them to apologize, they are expected to immediately forgive. But what if their expressions of forgiveness were rooted only in their desires to obey their mothers—or to avoid being punished? Adult life may bring many similar examples. Consider, for instance, a restorative justice situation in which a mother has an opportunity to formally interact with the murderer of her child. Even though a part of her may want to communicate forgiveness, her opportunity to do so may be limited to one brief window of time—a time that she did not schedule and may not be able to control. Her own internal struggle to forgive, in contrast, may be a lifelong process.

In summary, although a clear conceptual line can be drawn between the internal process of forgiveness and its external expression, many people may find themselves in situations where the boundaries between these behaviors become blurred. In deciding whether, when, and how to communicate forgiveness to their offenders, offended parties may face a new set of challenges that are partly distinct from those involved in the internal and emotional process of forgiveness.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article was to present a brief overview of the concept of forgiveness from a psychological perspective, including strategies for facilitating the process. Although forgiveness involves the reduction of anger, it is crucial to note that anger can be a natural and adaptive response to injustice, especially in the short term. For example, anger can help to provide energy and confidence to help offended parties restore a damaged sense of self-respect, pursue justice, and protect themselves from future harm.

In helping people decide whether to forgive, most psychologists would contend that it is crucial to be clear about what forgiveness does imply (i.e., an internal process of reducing bitter, vengeful feelings) and what forgiveness does not imply (e.g., trust; reconciliation; forgetting or minimizing serious offenses). Vigilance is required to ensure that would-be forgivers do not put themselves in harm's way. Yet, if attempted with attention to the rights of all individuals concerned, forgiveness may help to heal relational wounds while helping people to move past chronic anger or hatred that might otherwise hold them back.