Therapeutic Use of Forgiveness in Trauma Resolution

Phil Watts

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol23/iss1/6
Therapeutic Use of Forgiveness in Trauma Resolution

Phil Watts, PhD

Within the myriad of principles of Christianity, one of the precepts which differentiate this ideology from other philosophies of life is the principle of forgiveness. The introduction of this precept two thousand years ago countered the opposing tenet of revenge. With the shift from Mosaic law to the teaching of Jesus Christ came the shift from “an eye for an eye” to “turn the other cheek.”

This radical shift in the nature of interpersonal relationships has had a fundamental impact on the nature of society. It is not a dated ideal of two thousand years ago but something that is valued by Christian communities today. Within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the precept of forgiveness and the vehicle by which forgiveness is made possible, the Atonement, are among some of the most commonly preached principles. Therefore, forgiveness is an essential aspect of the church culture.

The exact meaning of forgiveness, as defined in the dictionary, is “to pardon; to cease to bear resentment against” (Collins Dictionary, p. 207). Forgiveness is about having a sense of peaceful resolution when there has been good reason to have negative emotions. Consequently, forgiveness is an issue that frequently arises when someone has suffered a trauma. The task for a member of The Church

1 Address correspondence to Phil Watts, 56 Hope Avenue, Manning, W. A., Australia 6152.
of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is to achieve a state of forgiveness after traumatization or victimization. This can be difficult and may require the assistance of priesthood leaders. In addition, the achievement of a sense of forgiveness after the resolution of trauma is not just the domain of spiritual leaders, but is also a legitimate area for therapists to address.

This paper examines some of the implications of forgiveness in trauma resolution within the Latter-Day Saint community. First, it explores how thought processes, and especially attribution, naturally occur in trauma experiences. These processes are inherently flawed, however, and cannot bring about a complete resolution of trauma. Second, this paper contends that forgiveness is not simply a Christian ideal but a state that sometimes spontaneously occurs in trauma resolution. Third, it discusses how the desire to achieve the state of forgiveness within a Christian population leads to the postulated concept of premature forgiveness. This is a state of false forgiveness that can be quite destructive to a victim's emotional well-being. Finally, the paper discusses some strategies that can be applied to assist in the forgiveness process.

1. Thought processes in trauma resolution

At the most basic level, human processing of the world can be considered as a thought and feeling dichotomy. A normally functioning person probably expends around 30 percent of their capacity in feeling and 70 percent in thought.

In a traumatic experience, a reversal occurs. Emotional functioning escalates to levels as high as 80 percent and the thinking capacity diminishes proportionally. This reversal occurs because in a traumatic experience, the initial responses are predominantly on the instinctual level. This is the classic “fight or flight” reaction. Such reactions are survival responses. They enable a person to deal with the danger of a situation in a reflexive way. If during a crisis a person spent too much time thinking without reacting, they might not survive, due to the time delays.

As the crisis begins to subside, the thought processes are engaged in the task of making sense of the experience. Research has found that
emotional distress levels are very high in the first week and peak in severity at approximately three weeks after the trauma. The literature on both rape and robbery shows this pattern (Koss et al., 1994, p. 187).

In the first three weeks, feelings predominate. Gradually, thought processes start to regain an equilibrium. Making sense of the experience enables a healthy balance to be achieved. With understanding comes the ability to cope again. It is therefore important to discern the types of thought processes people are using to understand the situation.

Attribution is the process of ascribing cause to events. It allows the survivor to understand his or her experience, which gives him or her a sense of control. In cases of trauma, cause often equates to blame, with four possible targets toward which blame can be directed. These are (1) the self, (2) a perpetrator, (3) a third party who was supposed to be able to prevent the trauma, or (4) God. However, there are problems associated with attributing responsibility to any or all of these.

A victim of trauma may feel some degree of all four types of blame. Often, one of the most frequently experienced of the four is self-blame. Intuitively, it may seem counterproductive to blame oneself: nevertheless, there is a benefit, which is that it allows the world to appear to be fair or just. For example, if a woman is raped when walking down a back street at night, it is psychologically safer to direct the blame to her behavior—it was her short skirt, the neighborhood, or the time of night she was out. That way, she brought it on herself, and others do not have to face the fact that their friends, wives, or sisters could be at risk. If it was not her fault, then families of others could be at risk. This is what Lerner (1980) called the “just world hypothesis.” The just world hypothesis ensures that our world is safe because bad things happen because people deserve them. The victim of a trauma uses much the same process:

Thus a victim may explain [that] her rape occurred because she is too open and trusting of people. Psychological theory has held that even self-blame may be adaptive because it can satisfy deeply felt human needs to impose meaning on life, allows victims to preserve beliefs in a “just” world where bad things only happen
to bad people and enhances illusions of control over life outcomes. (Koss et al., 1994, p. 185) This quote was backed up by studies which have shown that rape victims who were following their personal safety rules at the time of attack, experience a greater trauma reaction than those who perceived themselves as going into dangerous situations. They perceive that they have less control over their life.

Consequently, self-blame gives “an illusion of control.” The alternative is to blame external forces. Externalized blame involves blaming the perpetrator, a third party, or God. If there is a perpetrator to blame, and in many situations there is one, this is very useful. The reality is that the perpetrator really is to blame, and it is not the fault of the victim. The only reason someone is mugged is that muggers are “out there” making a living stealing from others. The reality is that if there were no muggers, there would be no muggings, irrespective of where someone chooses to walk. However, the downside of attributing the responsibility to the perpetrator is that all the power is now his, and this increases the psychological vulnerability of the individual.

Another common reaction is attributing blame to a third party. An area where this blame is frequently seen is in the child abuse area. It is commonly found that a nonabusive parent receives the greater share of condemnation. The dynamics are complex but an important element is that a third party may be “safer” to hate. The victim feels that hating the abuser will expose them to a greater risk of harm, so they direct their anger to a target of lower risk.

It is also understandable why someone could blame God. Christian teachings emphasize that when people do the right thing, they are blessed; when they do wrong, there are negative consequences. When they have bad times and believe that God could have prevented it, it is tempting to blame him. God is also often blamed when no one else is available. Natural disasters and sudden deaths are two situations where God often features. Attributing responsibility to God helps people regain a sense of control over the uncontrollable.
While attribution is useful in gaining a sense of control over a difficult situation, it has some costs associated with it. Most significantly, inappropriate blaming prevents final resolution of the trauma experience and may damage spirituality. Internal (or self) attribution leads victims to feel guilty because they did not do enough, while external attribution takes away their personal power. In most situations, there are elements of both sorts of blame. However, my observation is that there is a process of change in both the thought types and the predominant emotions over the trauma resolution process. These processes are shown in Figure 1. The cognitive changes start with a limitation, or in some cases an inability, to process information (instinctual processing), shifting to self-attribution (which helps regain the control), to external attribution (“I did all I could; it’s their fault”), and finally, to accepting the responsibility and achieving forgiveness. There is a similar shifting of emotions from the instinctual “fight or flight,” to anxiety, anger, sadness, and finally, resolution.

It should be noted that this is not a simple linear model. While there are times when someone will move through the stages in order, often resolution is multi-levelled. Someone may move through the steps only to have some trigger expose unresolved feelings, which lifts the lid on deeply buried emotions. This then sets the person back to the beginning steps of the attribution or feeling processes.

Some therapists believe that shifting the blame from self to perpetrator is a sign of successful resolution of trauma. This has the advantage that the anger is associated with blaming; the perpetrator serves a protective function. However, it does not meet the standards which a victim desires to live by, nor does it enable a victim to fully heal. Furthermore, forgiveness is something that sometimes spontaneously occurs in therapy with both church members and nonmembers, which suggests that anger is not the final stage of resolution.

2. Spontaneous and premature forgiveness

Spontaneous forgiveness is the process in which a trauma victim makes a shift from anger or depression to resolution. It is evident at
Cognitive and emotional stages in trauma

Anxiety

Shock

Anger

Fight or flight

Remorse & sadness

Trauma

EMOTIONAL: Equilibrium

Resolution

COGNITIVE: Normal thinking

Limited processing

Self-blame

External blame

Forgiveness
times in most therapy techniques, but some methods such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) are structured in such a way as to show the changes more clearly. Situations where spontaneous forgiveness is most evident are when the client is suffering from a limited number of specific traumas that occurred after the late teens. Severe or long-term traumatization takes much longer to resolve and often takes specific interventions to help achieve the same level of resolution. However, the examples where it does occur are reassuring because such resolution is totally in harmony with gospel principles.

I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men. (D&C 64:10)

If the Lord wants victims to forgive, it makes perfect sense that he would also provide mechanisms to help them achieve this. This is a sound principle, and it matches what occurs with spontaneous forgiveness.

Within the Church culture there is a strong belief that forgiveness is essential. This belief is both internalized by the members and reinforced by teachers and leaders who focus on the importance of forgiveness. However, if forgiveness is being encouraged before the trauma victim has dealt with the emotional reaction, it results in a state of dissonance. To resolve the unpleasant feelings, some people force themselves to forgive before they are ready or able. This is defined as “premature forgiveness.”

Consider this example. How would a victim feel if a bishop read the following scripture after he (the victim) had been robbed at knife-point and was still feeling very angry toward the person who committed the crime:

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?
Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22)
It is bad enough that the victim cannot forgive once, let alone seven or seventy times seven. The most likely feelings for those who cannot forgive if faced with this scripture are guilt, inadequacy, and lowered self-esteem. When people try, or are forced, to forgive before working through their feelings, the result is internal conflict. This sets up a destructive cycle that both maintains the premature forgiveness and halts resolution of the trauma.

Figure 2 shows this cycle graphically. The pressure for premature forgiveness results in a cycle that damages self-esteem and makes the person feel unworthy. Ironically, with the increased feelings of inadequacy, the victim is then more likely to seek spiritual help, which can result in an increased pressure to forgive, thus starting another cycle.

To avoid premature forgiveness, it is essential in early stages of therapy the client is taught that forgiveness comes from a process and is not simply a choice (e.g., the counselor tells the client that it is okay not to forgive now and that after they have addressed their feelings, they will be able to forgive). Similarly, in the later stages of therapy, the client is helped to move from “you must forgive” to “this is how you forgive.” Therapists need to teach clients the necessary mental skills to do this; but before this is done, it is important to ensure that the earlier therapy has allowed the person to work through the anger and sadness and to have addressed intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares, etc. If not, then forgiveness is premature and unlikely to be lasting.

How can clients effectively forgive someone when in their mind they are reexperiencing the trauma on a regular basis? I treated one sixteen-year-old who was sexually assaulted when she was nine. The whole event happened once, lasted five minutes, and had occurred seven years before. On a logical level, the incident had not lasted long and had been long ago, so my client should have been able to forgive the perpetrator. However, every day since the event she had had flashbacks. In her mind she had been assaulted 500 or 600 times a year for seven years, and he was still “assaulting” her when she came for treatment. Until the flashbacks, anger, shame and grief are treated, any talk of forgiveness is premature.
Figure 2
Cycle of premature forgiveness

Pressure to forgive

Affects spirituality
Feel unworthy

Prevents emotional processing

Feel inadequate
Lowers esteem

Suppressed anger
Depression

Feel guilty
3. Strategies to help achieve forgiveness

There is a paucity of research on the spiritual aspects of trauma. For example, in a recent review of abuse against women, conducted by the American Psychological Association this compelling statement appeared: “Not yet examined in the literature are the spiritual consequences of rape, including its potential to threaten belief in God and to stimulate an existential crisis characterized by loss of meaning and connection” (Koss et al., 1994, p. 187). I would expect that statement would be equally applicable to other trauma areas.

Consequently, the process of forgiveness, which is predominantly a spiritual ideal, requires therapists to integrate religious doctrine into their therapy approach. Once the emotions and flashbacks are treated using traditional psychological tools, therapists must use their spiritual knowledge to address the cognitions that block the forgiveness process. The remainder of this paper addresses some of the key religious doctrines relevant to the Latter-day Saint client. Obviously, helping clients of other religions requires an understanding of their scriptural framework, although much of what follows is relevant to the broader Christian community as well.

In this paper, five main steps have been identified for the process of helping a client achieve forgiveness after the emotions of a trauma have been addressed. These steps are summarized in figure 3.

The first step is repentance. If clients have an actual responsibility, they need to go through the repentance process. Then, after working out what they have done wrong, then they need to differentiate between erring and sinning, as discussed in the D&C 1:25, 27. Sins require chastening while erring needs only to be made known. With any sins, the traditional steps to repentance should be encouraged both in therapy and though the help of priesthood leaders. That means the client ceases to do what is wrong and doesn’t do it anymore, makes restitution if possible, and keeps the commandments. If either the perpetrator or victim has done some wrong, he or she needs to accept responsibility before seeking forgiveness.
Figure 3
Steps to Forgiveness

1) Examine situation and take responsibility for own failings.
   Determine whether the act was an error or sin.
   Repentance process for sin and learn from error.

2) Separate the act (sin, evil behavior) from the perpetrator
   (sinner) Express anger and sadness at the hurtful behaviors.

3) Know all sin (evil behavior) will be punished eternally.

4) Put responsibility to a higher power.
   It's no longer our problem to fix the situation.

5) View the sinner (perpetrator) from an eternal perspective.
   Feel compassion for the loser who would do such an act.

In many ways the most important step for the counselor is to help
the client see that the abuse needs to be separated from the abuser.
This is a process of reattribution. This allows clients to hate what has
happened—which is often the first time clients realize that it is okay
to hate the abuse, even if they are Latter-day Saints. They realize for
the first time that sin is sin and they never have to accept or forgive
sin. At the same time, this now opens up the possibility that they can
forgive the person who is the abuser.

Similarly, clients learn that being angry with God for what hap­
pened (for their perceived “abuse”) is okay; they don’t have to be
angry with God himself (the perceived “abuser”). This allows them to
rebuild their spirituality. A grieving mother who had lost her young
daughter through SIDS started to pray for the first time in a year
after I reframed her statement “I hate God” for her. I simply said,
“God is good, but losing a child is bad; tell him how much you hate losing the child.”

Once the victim can see that the action never needs to be forgotten, he or she can grieve for what happened to them. The demand for premature forgiveness will disappear and they can deal with being angry or sad at something terrible without feeling guilty.

The next step for clients is to accept that justice for wrong behaviors will occur at the end of this mortal existence. There are many scriptural references that support this fact. One of my favorites is found in the book of Alma 41:3-4, which states “it is requisite with the justice of God that men should be judged according to their works; ... and if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil.” It is also important to remember that “none shall be exempted from the justice and the laws of God” (D&C 107:83). Irrespective of status or standing, wealth, power, education, or knowledge, all people will be required to make an accounting for their deeds. This means the deeds will be punished exactly as they deserve to be, nothing more and nothing less. This allows the victim the satisfaction of knowing a terrible behavior, for which full repentance was not made, will not be forgotten.

The fourth step is to put responsibility for eternal consequences to Heavenly Father. This involves gaining a new understanding by relating their experience to the plan of salvation. A difficult barrier in understanding eternal justice is the human desire to believe in a “fair” world (the “just world” hypothesis discussed earlier). Church members like to believe that if they live righteous lives, then they will be blessed. This is true, but only to a point. If everything in this life was fair—the good were always blessed and the bad were punished—there would be no plan of salvation, no eternal judgement, and therefore no celestial glory.

To explain this point further, if we are rewarded in this life, eternal payment is not necessary. Justice says that people cannot be paid twice for their actions. If someone wrongs a client in this life and the client hates the abuser, then that is potentially part of the abuser’s pun-
ishment. If the client who was wronged forgives the abuser, then the abuser will have a debt to pay that the heavens will collect.

Putting responsibility onto the Lord is a process well recognized outside of the Church. A central tenant of the various 12-step programs is the belief that a Higher Power is essential to recovery.

The last step is to consider the eternal consequences for the perpetrator. If the therapist has led the victim through the earlier steps, the final challenge is to have the victim feel compassion for someone who “must go away into that lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever, which lake of fire and brimstone is endless torment” (Jacob, 6:13). From this perspective, the client can begin to feel sorrow for someone who must endure such a fate. It will be God’s responsibility to determine what type of justice must be meted out. Once clients reach this point, they are free to accept the abuser (the sinner) as he or she really are, namely pathetic, wretched creatures. If the client can see the perpetrator as weak and pathetic, the attributions can now be ones which are no longer frightening to the client.

For those clients who are not of the Christian framework, the situation is harder because the primary tool, doctrine from the scripture, is not available. Therefore, just as the way the Latter-day Saint beliefs are practiced may cause the pressure that generates premature forgiveness, the doctrines of the Church have the decided advantage of enabling a complete resolution of trauma. The way in which members of the Church attribute cause and responsibility enables them to have a complete forgiveness for trauma.

It is important to note that where the trauma is severe, some people may not be able to resolve their trauma in this life-time. Fortunately, the doctrines of the Church teach eternal progression, which suggests that the victims of trauma may have more than this mortal life-time to achieve complete resolution.

In summary, this paper contends that in a crisis, people initially respond on the instinctual and emotional levels but then increasingly use their cognitive processes to make sense of their experiences. The
process of attributing blame allows the person to impose control and meaning to their experience. The targets of the attribution may be self, God, the perpetrator, or a third party. Each of these targets involves trade-offs between personal control, empowerment, and reality. The counter productive aspects of the attributions need to be addressed and resolved so that in later stages of therapy, therapists can help their clients achieve the spiritual and emotional peace that comes from complete forgiveness.

References
