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## **FORGIVENESS IN INFIDELITY INTERVENTIONS**

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**Abstract:** Interpersonal hurt caused by an extramarital affair may produce anger, bitterness, conflict, or depression, and the

client may suffer twice without treatment: because of the original offence, and because of the resentment toward the offender. **Forgiveness** is a *therapy intervention* that may help overcoming and resolving interpersonal hurt in case of infidelity. No matter how the partners respond to infidelity, the **process of forgiveness** should include such aspects as accepting responsibility, apology, extending forgiveness, humility, remorse, and softening. Unfortunately, neither therapists, nor religious therapists use **forgiveness intervention** on a regular basis because they lack one or more of the following: an *adequate conceptualisation of forgiveness* (acceptance, condoning, excusing, pardoning, reconciliation), a *working model of forgiveness* (it is important to make the proper choice among the tens of models), or a *rationale for forgiveness intervention* (particularly client's rationales). The paper suggests a **forgiveness-based infidelity intervention** that benefits from Esther Perel's (2016) and other researchers' findings.

**Keywords:** forgiveness, infidelity, intervention, working model

## 1. Forgiveness

### 1.1. Forgiveness: Definition

Interpersonal hurt/injury caused by an (extramarital) affair may produce anger, bitterness, conflict, or depression, and the client may suffer twice without treatment: because of the original offence, and because of the resentment toward the offender. **Forgiveness** is a *therapy intervention* that may help overcoming and resolving interpersonal hurt/injury in case of, among others, marital therapy.

**Forgiveness** is defined by language dictionaries as “the action or process of forgiving [no longer feeling angry about or wishing to punish (an offence, flaw, or mistake)] or being forgiven” (*Oxford Dictionaries*).

**Forgiveness** is a concept also used about such atrocities as the apartheid, Bosnia, or the Holocaust (Minow, 1997, in Mills, 1998).

For O'Connor (2001), **forgiveness** is a matter of both *existential issues* (together with death, life, meaning, suffering, survival) and of *interpersonal justice* (together with abuse, extra-marital affairs, guilt, loyalty, making amends, non-guilt, pain, past hurts, punishment, or violence).

The **process of forgiveness** includes such aspects as accepting responsibility, apology, extending forgiveness, humility, remorse, and softening (Fife, Weeks & Gambescia, 2007).

Partners respond differently to infidelity: “men, relative to women: (a) find it more difficult to forgive a sexual infidelity than an emotional infidelity; and (b) are more likely to terminate a current relationship following a partner’s sexual infidelity than an emotional infidelity” (Shackelford, Buss & Bennett, 2002).

Few Romanian researchers have approached infidelity in their studies. In 2014, Gotea published “Social Network and Marital Conflict: Constraints and Opportunities” a book in which she theorises, among others, on infidelity. She makes no reference to the Romanian context, except for a few mentions of a public opinion barometer from 2007 dealing with couple life, in which infidelity is claimed to be of lesser importance (a fact contradicted by reality) than other factors affecting negatively couple life. In 2014, Scutaru defended, at the “Al. I. Cuza” University of Iasi, a doctoral thesis titled “A Model of Predictive Factors of Infidelity: Emotional Responses to Sexual versus Emotional Infidelity” in which she analyses, among others, “the role of forgiveness in the dissolution process of a relationship as a result of infidelity”. Runcan (2015a, 2015b, 2016) revisited the issue of social networks (namely Facebook) and couple relationship and the conclusions are that Facebook may impact couples negatively.

## **1.2. Forgiveness as Intervention**

**Forgiveness** has been studied *non-empirically* from the perspective of *clinical models* (Enright & The Human Development Group, 1991), as well as *empirically* from the perspective of its *clinical efficacy*.

Neither therapists, nor religious therapists use forgiveness intervention on a regular basis because they lack one or more of the following: an *adequate conceptualisation of forgiveness*, a *working model of forgiveness*, or a *rationale for forgiveness intervention* (Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002).

### **1.2.1. Adequate Conceptualisation of Interpersonal Forgiveness**

**Forgiveness** has been rightfully associated with *acceptance*, but wrongfully associated with *condoning*, *pardoning*, or *relationship reconciliation*.

#### **1.2.1.1. Acceptance**

**Forgiveness** is a special case of *acceptance* (“willingness to tolerate a difficult situation” – *Oxford Dictionaries*). It means “coming to terms with the injurious event in a way that either maintains intimacy development in the relationship or diminishes active aversion (‘letting go’) such that the time and

energy previously dedicated to aversion is freed for other, more psychologically healthy, activities (whether the relationship continues or is terminated)” (Cordova *et al.*, 2006).

#### **1.2.1.2. Condoning**

**Forgiveness** is not *condoning* (“accepting behaviour that is considered morally wrong or offensive” – *Oxford Dictionaries*) “because **forgiveness** overcomes the resentment with love and compassion, while *condoning* denies the resentment and the offence” (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991).

#### **1.2.1.3. Excusing**

**Forgiveness** is not *excusing* (“seeking to lessen the blame attaching to (a fault or offence); trying to justify” – *Oxford Dictionaries*) (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991)

#### **1.2.1.4. Pardoning**

**Forgiveness** is not *pardoning* (“forgiving or being forgiven for an error or offence” – *Oxford Dictionaries*), because *pardoning* may allow offenders to continue causing more damage. Moreover, a forgiver can still expect justice to be served (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991; Freedman & Enright, 1996).

#### **1.2.1.5. Reconciliation**

Some authors believe that **forgiveness** and *reconciliation* (“the restoration of friendly relations” – *Oxford Dictionaries*) are inseparable (Hargrave, 1994, in Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002). Other authors believe that “forgiveness and reconciliation are distinct, independent actions” (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991): **forgiveness** is offered by the offended person, while *reconciliation* “occurs when the offender recognises his/her wrong and acts to correct the offending behaviour” (Freedman & Enright, 1996); **forgiveness** opens the door to *reconciliation* (Aponte, 1998, in Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002).

## **2. Forgiveness Models**

After the decline of the discourse of **forgiveness**, as well as the tendency to minimise the effect of affairs on married life in 1960s’ England, **forgiveness** has been revived as an intervention in infidelity in both Europe (Langhamer, 2006) and North America. Several forgiveness models have developed starting with the 1980s.

According to Coop Gordon & Baucom (2003), “there are several existing models in the literature that appear to fit closely with the responses people spontaneously report after interpersonal betrayals, trauma models

suggesting that the typical response to a traumatic event incorporates three phases: impact, a search for meaning, and recovery”.

In Fitzgibbon’s (1986) model, the client is asked to spend time letting go of anger, which may make the client associate “letting-go-of-anger” forgiveness as a form of condoning the offender.

In Enright, Santos & Al-Mabuk’s (1989) cognitive developmental model, people’s understanding of forgiveness is shown to develop with age.

In Rosenak & Harnden’s (1992, in Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002) model, the client passes through hurt, anger, and information gathering, “getting ready for forgiveness, which includes reframing, releasing desire to retaliate, and wishing the offender well”; or, this may look like condoning, pardoning, or reconciling.

In Hargrave’s (1994, in Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002) and Hargrave & Sells’ (1997) model, the client needs to be ready to re-establish trust leading to reconciliation to make true forgiveness take place, which may make him/her feel frustrated or guilty.

In Pittman & Wagers’ (1995) model, there are seven steps: “emergency response, bringing everyone together in a safe environment, defining the affair, helping clients calm down and think clearly, finding a solution and course of action, negotiate resistance, and termination”.

In Mauldin and Hildreth’s (1997, in Bird, Butler & Fife, 2007) model, “the focus is rather on the future, which allows couples to make decisions and move forward”.

In McCullough, Worthington & Rachal’s (1997) model, the offended forgives his/her offender if he/she experiences empathy for the offender.

In Gordon & Baucom’s (1998), Gordon, Baucom & Snyder’s (2004), Gordon, Baucom & Snyder’s (2005), and Baucom *et al.*’s (2006) trauma-based, three-stage synthesized model, there are three stages: a *response to the initial impact* (dealing with the impact); an *attempt to give the event some kind of meaning, or put it into context* (search for meaning); and *movement forward and readjustment* (recovery or moving forward).

In McCullough *et al.*’s (1998) theoretical model, there are structural relations among apology, current closeness, forgiveness, intrusiveness, and pre-offense closeness.

In Sandage and Worthington’s (1999, in McCullough & van Oyen Witvliet, 2001) model, forgiveness is based on ego-humility.

In Weeks, Gambescia & Jenkins’ (2003) intersystem model, “the treatment of infidelity passes through five phases: post-disclosure reactions, crisis management, and assessment; systemic considerations; facilitating forgiveness; treating factors that contribute to infidelity; and promoting intimacy through communication”.

In Cordova *et al.*'s (2006) model of “stages of change”, the client (the offended) collaborates with his/her offender in the direction of forgiveness, going through five phases: “looking at the context before the hurt and recognizing what was lost from it; recognizing the context of hurt and placing the couple relationship in context; accepting the hurt, breaking away from experiential avoidance, and disrupting the rules for avoidance; committing to forgive; and activating behaviour to achieve forgiveness”.

In Meneses & Greenberg's (2011) model, the focus is on both offended and offender's emotions.

In Fife, Weeks & Stellberg-Filbert's (2013) interpersonal model, “forgiveness is facilitated as therapists and clients focus on four unifying factors: empathy, humility, commitment and apology”.

In Perel's (2016) model, there are three phases – “the *crisis phase*, the *insight phase*, and the *vision phase*”. In each phase, there are specific actions and/or behaviours depending on intervention goals, therapist, deceived partner, and unfaithful partner.

Thus, in the *crisis phase*:

- *The therapist*:

- Assesses for co-morbidity (abuse, addiction, mental illness);
- Assesses for domestic violence and suicidality;
- Assesses the impact of infidelity on the other family members;
- Closes the exits for finite jointly-decided period;
- Defines the affair as a two-person crisis (a dual perspective);
- Establishes safety;
- Explores how and why the affair was revealed;
- Helps stabilise families with children;
- Is a force of stability;
- Maintains personal balance, clarity, and patience;
- Separates reactions to infidelity from the matter of divorce;
- Separates the effects of infidelity from the decision to end the relationship;

- *The deceived partner*:

- Confronts devaluation, humiliation, and isolation;
- Normalises experience, traumatic reactions;
- Validates the maelstrom of emotions (abandonment, despair, disorientation, fear, helplessness, humiliation, longing, loss, rage, shame, vengefulness);

- *The unfaithful partner*:

- Must become the vigilante of the relationship;
- Must show guilt and remorse.

In the *insight phase*:

- The *goals of the intervention* are to make the unfaithful partner:
  - Analyse the decision to enter the affair and make sure he/she understand how he/she justifies it to himself/herself;
  - Examine the relational context, contributing circumstances, and life cycle stage that surround the affair;
  - Explore how to move from crisis to opportunity;
  - Explore the power of forgiveness as an offset to the power of resentment;
  - “Integrate the differentiated meanings of the affair as an experience of growth and expansion for the unfaithful, inflicting betrayal and hurt on the other”;
  - “Provide insight into personal desires, needs, and vulnerabilities that led to the affair”;
  - Shift the blame to understanding;
  - “Tell the story of the affair in the context of the relationship”;
  
- *The therapist:*
  - “Acknowledges that the revelation can stimulate the marriage, lead to thoughtful discussions, and new openness to share deeper feelings and needs”;
  - Considers the impact of infidelity on other family members;
  - Discusses shared sense of loss;
  - Explores the power of forgiveness as an offset to the power of resentment;
  - Helps the unfaithful partner remain empathic, present, and connected to the hurt of his/her partner: when pain is denied or diminished, it results in obsessiveness;
  - Helps the unfaithful partner take responsibility for having hurt his/her partner, and show personal clarity;
  - Shifts from detective questions to investigative questions (on meaning, motives, primary relationship, etc.);
- *The deceived partner:*
  - May be shocked, upset, and have angry feelings about the affair and a feeling of moral superiority;
  - May experience anxious feelings leading him/her to set limits around their partner’s exposure to their lover, as well as anger at being asked to feel compassion for his/her partner’s loss;

- May feel anger and confusion at the narrative rupture that he/she is experiencing resulting in obsessional thinking and a need to ask and repeat many questions for clarification from the unfaithful partner;
- May feel anger that the unfaithful partner felt entitled to experience something that he/she had not allowed him/herself to experience;
- May struggle with loss of sense of security;
- *The unfaithful partner:*
  - Could be confused about ending the affair externally but not internally, no longer seeing his/her lover, but not feeling detached from him/her either;
  - Could be impatient with his/her partner to move on from the affair/frustration with the sense that he/she has done all he/she could to reassure the partner;
  - Must become the vigilante of the relationship;
  - Must fear that he/she will not be forgiven;
  - Must feel fear that he/she will have to give up an important or newly discovered part of him/herself that they never had in their marriage;
  - Must feel grief, guilt, remorse, and shame about the affair, about hurting his/her partner, or both;

In the *vision phase*:

- The *goals of the intervention* are to:
  - “Create the vision of a new relationship: the confrontation with an affair forces every couple to re-evaluate their own relationship, but every relationship will determine the legacy of the affair”;
  - Make the couple negotiate new boundaries and new relational arrangement if they decide to stay together;
  - Make the couple understand that forgiveness abdicates one from the sense of moral superiority, ends the ruminations, helps dissipate the anger, and lessens the fear of reoccurrence;
  - Make the couple understand that “forgiving doesn’t happen at once: partial is fine, forgiving enough may be good enough”;
  - Make the couple understand that “genuine trust rests on one’s ability to tolerate what we do not know about the other: as long as we are driven to uncover every detail, we cannot trust”;
- *The deceived partner:*
  - May fear that forgiving infidelity minimizes its severity;
  - Should understand that forgiveness is not a gift and that it asks for restitution;
  - Should understand that forgiving is not always the best solution;
  - Should understand that it is dangerous to forgive too easily;



- Should understand that one can only forgive someone when he/she acknowledges having been wronged;
- Should understand that one may forgive, that one does not forget, but that the injury is no longer central;
- Should understand that there are assumptions that make it difficult to forgive: “all-or-nothing”, “yes or no”.

In Perel’s (2016) model, **erotic recovery** is important. Therefore, the therapist should take into account that (Nelson, 2018):

- Clinical literature on infidelity generally ends with forgiveness;
  - Partners experience sexual performance pressure after the affair;
  - “The betrayed partner fears that engaging sexually will communicate that the affair wasn’t important”;
- while the couple should bear in mind that:
- Affairs are often a consequence of erotic neglect;
  - After forgiveness, sex will follow itself;
  - Forgiveness and healing must be followed by erotic recovery or the couple risks future infidelities;
  - No sexual intimacy ensures that infidelity will not happen again;
  - Recovery should take the form of a new erotic phase in the couple’s life;
  - Refusing sex makes the affair important;
  - “The fear of loss is a powerful sexual combustion: in the immediate aftermath of an affair, some couples experience an intensely renewed sexual desire, which is true also for the partner that had been sexually disengaged for a long time”;
  - They need to go beyond their feelings to bring forward the feelings they want.

## 2.1. Rationales for Forgiveness Intervention

Forgiveness is genuine if the **rationale** (“a set of reasons or a logical basis for a course of action or belief” – *Oxford Dictionaries*; “explanations offered to a person for why forgiveness could be an important focus in therapy” – Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002) for doing so is valid (Freedman & Enright, 1996).

The following could be **rationales** for forgiveness:

- For emotional and physical benefits for the forgiver (McCullough & Worthington, 1995, in Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002);
- For it is condoning/pardoning (Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002).
- For it is not pardoning (Hebl & Enright, 1993, in Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002);
- For others’ growth and healing (Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002);

- For personal growth and healing (Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002);
- For relationship reconciliation (Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002);
- For spiritual reasons (Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002).

Butler, Dahlin & Fife (2002), the only researchers that have studied **rationales for forgiveness** to our knowledge, analysed the relationship between rationales given for forgiveness and acceptability of forgiveness as a therapeutic intervention, and found that *personal growth and healing*, *relationship reconciliation*, and *spiritual reasons* rationales were significantly more acceptable than the other rationales mentioned above.

## 2.2. Clinical Directions

According to Snyder & Doss (2005), professional competence in infidelity therapists means:

- *Assessment skills*, including one or more of the following: “initial assessment by interview vs. self-report measures, inquiry in individual vs. conjoint sessions, and introducing discussion of outside relationships with general questions about other significant persons in the couple’s relationship” vs. “specific queries regarding extramarital affairs” (Snyder & Doss, 2005);
- *Defining the client*, i.e. clarifying who the client is;
- *Familiarity with cultural, ethnical, gender, individual, religious, role and sexual orientation differences*;
- *Intervention skills* specific to either traditional behavioural couple therapy or integrative behavioural couple therapy;
- *Managing conflicts of interest* by adopting one of the following stances: “adhering exclusively to the stated therapeutic goals of the family, independent of the therapist’s own judgment regarding the relative merits of these goals; being responsible only to the system and refusing to align with any individual, thus targeting the couple relationship or family system as the beneficiary regardless of the impact on any one individual; declaring loyalty to all, but shifting alliances between individuals or subsystems during treatment sessions as determined by the therapist’s judgment about the greater good of the individuals and the relationship or family; pledging primary loyalty to each family member as if they were being treated as individuals, thereby intending that the treatment serves the best interest of each family member” (Snyder & Doss, 2005);
- *Proper knowledge base*: being familiar with information regarding common antecedents, consequences of affairs, and correlates.

## 2.3. Ethical Directions

The following should be observed when working with infidelity cases (Snyder & Doss, 2005):

- *Applying the principles of confidentiality*: “agreeing that certain information will be kept confidential as a matter of personal privacy; agreeing to keep certain information confidential temporarily with the understanding that it will be disclosed at a later date”; establishing that no information is confidential; treating information disclosed individually as confidential;
- *Handling undisclosed infidelity properly*;
- *Keeping confidentiality when changing therapy format*.

## Conclusions

**Forgiveness** is a *therapy intervention* that may help overcoming and resolving interpersonal hurt in case of infidelity.

The **process of forgiveness** includes accepting responsibility, apology, extending forgiveness, humility, remorse, and softening.

Neither therapists, nor religious therapists use **forgiveness intervention** on a regular basis because they lack an *adequate conceptualisation of forgiveness* (they need to know exactly what forgiveness is not and what it is), a *working model of forgiveness* (they need to choose the therapeutic model that best suits him/her and his/her clients), or a *rationale for forgiveness intervention* (they need to choose the rationale that best suits him/her and his/her clients).

We strongly support the **forgiveness-based infidelity intervention** that benefits from Esther Perel’s (2016) findings.

We also believe that infidelity therapists should reflect more on the conclusions of the most currently reputed experts in infidelity issues (Perel, 2016; Nelson, 2018):

- Infidelity should be treated from an exclusiveness vs. uniqueness perspective;
- Monogamy in a continuum relying on flexibility and fluidity;
- The new monogamy (Runcan, 2015b, 2016; Nelson, 2018) emphasises emotional commitment, love, and loyalty, but it does not necessarily imply sexual exclusivity;
- The way we understand and experience exclusivity is changing;
- There are implicit and explicit understandings of monogamy in couples;
- We need to accept that there are polyamorous couples.

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