

# Forgiveness – Leader's Tip Sheet

## The Big Idea

This week your group will be dealing with the topic of Forgiveness. This is a wonderful topic to discuss within the context of character qualities. Wouldn't it be awesome if all of us lived with the ability to forgive others and to start a process where by others can forgive us? I recently had lunch with a man in our church that grew up with me in the same community we presently live. He asked me if I was ever embarrassed about the way I acted, the things I said and had done growing up here. I told him that yes, I was and I had started a process of asking for forgiveness when the opportunity presented itself. He wondered out loud if others could or would forgive him.

We all have regrets for the way we have acted and the way others have acted towards us. The Bible says a lot about this subject. Maybe this tip sheet can help you process forgiveness with your group.

What would happen if we could forgive each other, just the way Christ forgave us?

## Probing the Scriptures

This story is one that will certainly generate discussion. Here are a couple of options, tell the story to your group in the first person. Tell your groups that you had something happen this week and you want to share it. Change the details, but then by the end of it your group will recognize it is this Bible story. Or maybe read it from "The Message" or ask someone in the group to read it.

The questions in the study will help your group to dissect the story. One group recently acted out the story. This could be a fun way to get others involved.

## Processing Together

Stories are huge. Personal testimonies from a group leader can make or (if not part of your leadership style) break the group. Lead off by sharing a hurt that you have put behind you by working through the process of forgiveness. Maybe you need to work through some of this before you lead your group.

Read through this. It is an interesting article from the University of Wisconsin on the process. Maybe you could share an outline with your group.

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Forgiveness research has been ongoing at the University of Wisconsin for over thirteen years. The psychiatrist, Richard Fitzgibbons, MD recently said this about our research: "The research on forgiveness by Robert Enright and his colleagues may be as important to the treatment of emotional and mental disorders as the discovery of sulfa drugs and penicillin were to the treatment of infectious diseases."

Our experience and dedication to the teaching of forgiveness as a psychological health intervention have led to the development of a process model of interpersonal forgiving. This model has a series of 20 steps that are organized into four distinct phases. This is our best estimate of the general pathway that people follow when they forgive someone who has unjustly injured them. This process is not a rigid sequence and individuals may experience all or only some of the steps. The following is a brief description of the four phases of forgiveness.

### Uncovering Phase

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During this phase the individual becomes aware of the emotional pain that has resulted from a deep, unjust injury. Characteristic feelings of anger or even hatred may be present. As these negative emotions are confronted and the injury is honestly understood, individuals may experience considerable emotional distress. Deciding on the appropriate amount of energy to process this pain and still function effectively is an important consideration during this phase. However, as the anger and other negative emotions are brought out into the open healing can begin to occur.

## **Decision Phase**

The individual now realizes that to continue to focus on the injury and the injurer may cause more unnecessary suffering. The individual begins to understand that a change must occur to go ahead in the healing process. The individual may then experience a "heart conversion" or, in other words, a life change in a positive direction. The individual entertains the idea of forgiveness as a healing strategy. The individual, then, commits to forgiving the injurer who has caused him/her such pain. Complete forgiveness is not yet realized but the injured individual has decided to explore forgiveness and to take initial steps in the direction of full forgiveness. An important first step at this point is to forego any thoughts, feelings or intentions of revenge toward the injurer.

## **Work Phase**

Here the forgiving individual begins the active work of forgiving the injurer. This phase may include new ways of thinking about the injurer. The injured individual may strive to understand the injurer's childhood or put the injurious event in context by understanding the pressures the injurer was under at the time of the offense. This new way of thinking is undertaken not to excuse the injurer of his/her responsibility for the offense, but rather to better understand him/her and to see the injurer as a member of the human community. Often, this new understanding may be accompanied by a willingness to experience empathy and compassion toward the offender. The work phase also includes the heart of forgiveness that is the acceptance of the pain that resulted from the actions of the injurer. This must not be confused with any sense of deserving the pain but rather a bearing of pain that has been unjustly given. As the individual bears the pain, he/she chooses not to pass it on to others, including the injurer. This is often where the challenge of a "quest for the good" is most evident. Indeed, the individual may now become ready to begin to offer goodwill toward the injurer in the form of merciful restraint, generosity, and moral love. This may or may not include a reconciliation. The goodwill may be offered while at the same time taking into consideration current issues of trust and safety in the relationship between the individual and the injurer.

## **Outcome/Deepening Phase**

In this phase the forgiving individual begins to realize that he/she is gaining emotional relief from the process of forgiving his/her injurer. The forgiving individual may find meaning in the suffering that he/she has faced. The emotional relief and newfound meaning may lead to increased compassion for self and others. The individual may discover a new purpose in life and an active concern for his/her community. Thus, the forgiver discovers the paradox of forgiveness: as we give to others the gifts of mercy, generosity, and moral love, we ourselves are healed.

## Putting into Practice

I always end my Community Groups by asking, "What are you going to do differently because of your study and this discussion." Be careful, this is not a thirty-second question. Sometimes the best part of the night comes from this time of actually putting our study into practice. You might also start a group by asking, "Did anyone behave differently, say anything differently or think differently based on last weeks discussion?"