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New Science of Forgiveness
An Interview with Prof. Everett Worthington, Jr.

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Everett Worthington, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University and a licensed clinical psychologist in Virginia. His research and writing focus on forgiveness other virtues—humility, gratitude, patience, mercy, justice— religion and spirituality, marriage and family. Prof. Worthington has published more than 30 books and over 400 articles and scholarly chapters, mostly on forgiveness, marriage, and family topics. From 1998 to 2005, he directed *A Campaign for Forgiveness Research*, a non-profit organization to promote forgiveness research throughout the world. He is working all over the world with colleagues in different countries to promote forgiveness. He describes his mission as doing all he can to promote forgiveness in every *willing* heart, home, and homeland (he emphasizes people's necessary willingness to forgive).

In this interview, Prof. Worthington answers questions I asked about forgiveness and related issues and the relationship of forgiveness to our personal and social life.

Korkmaz: Prof. Worthington, why did you choose this subject to study? What was the main reason?

Worthington: I began studying forgiveness as a couples counselor back in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It seemed that most couples who sought help in counseling had issues for which they needed to forgive or be forgiven. This was also in line with my religious beliefs (i.e., Christian). So, my initial interest in forgiveness was not as a researcher, but just as a man who professionally tried to help couples have more happiness and less conflict.

Korkmaz: How can you define or explain forgiveness? Or what is not forgiveness?

Worthington: Forgiveness is often confused with just reducing or getting rid of resentment or bitterness or anger at someone who had harmed one. Thus, forgiveness is not simply getting even and thus no longer feeling angry. It is not seeing a person experience justice, such as if a thief were to be caught and sent to jail. It is not seeing a person receive natural consequences for a misdeed, such as if a speeding motorist runs me off of the road, and then I see the person getting stopped by the police. Forgiveness is not the same thing as forbearing. Forbearing is not expressing negative feelings toward a person who harmed us for the sake of group harmony. Forgiveness is not turning a matter over to God so that God will punish the wrongdoer. It is not turning a matter over to God because we feel that only God can deal with the wrong. Forgiveness is not excusing what was done to me, saying something like, "I don't hold a grudge because he was under a lot of stress and that's why he yelled at me." Forgiveness is not justifying what the other person did, saying something like, "He had good reason to yell at me because I aggravated him." Forgiveness is not condoning what was done to me, saying, "You were right in yelling at me." Forgiveness is not just accepting that bad things happen, so I'm going to move on with my life. That makes me feel better and less unforgiving, but it isn't forgiveness; it's acceptance.

Then, what is forgiveness. It is really two things. One type of forgiveness is *decisional forgiveness*, which is making a behavioral intention statement—that is, saying to myself, "This is how I intend to act next time I see the person"—not to get revenge but instead to treat the person as a valued and valuable person. But we can make a sincere decision to forgive and stick by it for the rest of our lives and still feel resentful and angry when we think about how someone offended or hurt us. So, there must be a second type of forgiveness, which I call emotional forgiveness. This is replacing negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions, like empathy, sympathy, compassion or love for the person.

Both of those types of forgiveness—decisional and emotional—are experienced if I have been wronged or offended.

But, in relationships, often we do things that we know are wrong, and thus we can be on the receiving end of forgiveness. We can receive forgiveness from God, which we might call Divine forgiveness. Also, we

might be condemning of our own acts, and we might later come to forgive ourselves, which is called self-forgiveness.

So we are talking about four different types of forgiveness—two are about granting forgiveness and the other two are about receiving forgiveness.

Korkmaz: Is forgiveness people's choice or God's inclination?

Worthington: Well, I choose to forgive someone, but that doesn't rule out that God might also be working in my heart to persuade me or guide me to forgive. People's acts happen on one level, but at the spiritual level God might also be working at the same time.

Korkmaz: Forgiveness is a very important subject for most religions. When considered from this point of view, can forgiveness be divided into God's forgiveness and people's forgiveness? What are the main differences between them?

Worthington: Yes, Divine forgiveness (God's forgiveness) is, I believe, a bit different from people's forgiveness—at least in coming at it from a Christian worldview. God is all-knowing, all-loving, and all-just. God forgives in the Christian view because human evil has been taken voluntarily by Jesus, who is God's Son, and God punishes that evil through Jesus' voluntary death on the cross. Being all-loving, God then raised Jesus from the dead. Humans can have their sin paid for (through Jesus' death) by declaring Jesus as Lord. God forgives human sin as a gift, offered to all. Those who accept the Divine forgiveness receive it.

Human forgiveness of each other is between two imperfect people who clearly do not and cannot know each other's motives and desires of the heart. Thus, Christians are to forgive without waiting until they believe the offender is repentant or sorry or somehow has made amends for the offense. Christians are to forgive their offenders unilaterally. This is what Jesus and the Christian Scriptures teach. We do this out of love for God and gratitude for having been forgiven.

Human forgiveness occurs not just by Christians. To forgive is human. (That was the title of my first book on forgiveness.) That is, part of the image of God, which is built into all humans, is the capacity to forgive. People also have justice built within them. So, we tend to want to see justice as well as to forgive. Sometimes people want to see justice first, then consider forgiveness. (Christians are taught to forgive first and then work for justice.)

Korkmaz: You developed a forgiveness model that is called REACH for both Christian and secular people. Could you please explain this process?

Worthington: This is a five step process to help people forgive when they have tried to do so but are having trouble forgiving. Begin with trying to experience a decision to forgive. Decisional forgiveness, you recall, is deciding to treat the person who hurt you as a person you value. REACH Forgiveness is about experiencing emotional forgiveness. I have created over 20 hours of group exercises to help people forgive, and I have distilled those down into about a 6 hour group treatment. We also have created workbooks that take about 6 hours to complete to help people work through forgiveness. (These have all been those that don't deal with any particular religion and there is another set that is tailored especially for Christians.) Here is a brief look at the five steps to REACH Forgiveness. (REACH is an acrostic, or acronym, in which the first letter of each step in English makes up the word, REACH.)

R=Recall the hurt. To heal, you have to face the facts that you've been hurt. Make up your mind not to be snarky (i.e., nasty and hurtful), not to treat yourself like a victim, and not to treat your partner as a jerk.

E=Empathize with your partner. Empathy is putting yourself in his or her chair. Pretend that your partner is in an empty chair across from you. Talk to him. Pour your heart out. Then, when you've had your say, sit in his chair. Talk back to the imaginary you in a way that helps you see why your partner might have wronged you. This builds empathy, and even if you can't empathize, you might feel more sympathy, compassion, or love, which help you heal from hurt.

A=Altruistic gift. Give forgiveness as an unselfish, altruistic gift. We all can remember when we wronged someone—maybe a parent, teacher or friend—and the person forgave us. We felt light and free. And we didn't want to disappoint that person by doing wrong again. By forgiving unselfishly, you can give that same gift to someone who hurt you.

C=Commit. Once you've forgiven, write a note to yourself—something as simple as "Today, I forgave [person's name] for hurting me."

H=Hold onto forgiveness. We write notes of commitment because we will almost surely be tempted to doubt that we really forgave. We can re-read our notes. We did forgive.

Korkmaz: Is the REACH Forgiveness model applicable to other religiously oriented people?

Worthington: REACH Forgiveness is secular, which literally means it is applicable for anyone. It may be tailored toward Christianity, and this has often been done and studied scientifically. It could be tailored toward other religions also. It would particularly fit those religions that do value forgiveness of others—like the other Abrahamic religions—when people wish to forgive. The theory of making a decision to forgive someone and of changing one's emotional unforgiveness into emotional forgiveness is applicable by anyone, religious or not.

Korkmaz: What would you say about forgiveness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam? Of these three religions, which one would you say attaches more importance to forgiveness?

Worthington: All three Abrahamic religions say that forgiveness is important. It is pretty clearly agreed, though, and the research supports this, that for Christians, forgiveness tends to be valued more and practiced more than for either Jews or Muslims. This is simply because for Christians, love and forgiveness are THE two central aspects of the religion. For Christians, forgiveness is required, not elective, for ALL who offend, whether the person is or is not a Christian. To forgive is human, and Christians should forgive even their enemies. Jesus prayed for the people who were crucifying him, "Father, forgive them." Jesus taught, "Love your enemy." Christians—like people from all religions and people who do not claim any faith—do not always practice what they know to be commands of God. For Jews or Muslims, forgiveness is important, but not central.

For Jews, Maimonides, a 12th century Rabbi, summarized the writings about forgiveness in Judaism. He saw forgiveness as embedded within the more important concept of "return," which is tseuvah. Tseuvah is return to the path of God. When a person offends or hurts someone, the person leaves the path of God. To show that he or she has returned, the person must say he or she is sorry, express true regret and remorse, apologize, make amends and perhaps provide punitive damages to make up for suffering caused, ask forgiveness, and then prove that he or she will not harm again. Then, he or she must ask for forgiveness directly from the person harmed. This is a lengthy process. Maimonides said that if the person asks three times (having fulfilled all of the terms of tseuvah), the Jew is obligated to forgive. A Jew might choose to forgive at any time. In fact, on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, forgiveness is freely offered (often) even if the offender has not asked. Islam, like varieties of Christian and of Jewish faiths, does not have ONE way of forgiving.

Muslims are encouraged, even commanded, to forgive. God, after all is the Forgiving God (one of the 99 names), and Muhammad (God's prophet) was also forgiving of the people of Mecca when returning from Medina. In Islam, forgiveness is encouraged. In fact, it is rewarded. But justice is taken seriously, and thus revenge is permitted for serious injustices. There is also a differentiation made between forgiving other Muslims (which one ought to do) and forgiving people who are infidel or apostate (which one usually is not encouraged to do). Differences exist between Sunni and Shia forms of Islam, and between both and the more radical Wahabbis in Saudi (which are particularly not in favor of forgiveness toward unbelieving people).

Korkmaz: You mention that empathy, sympathy, and compassion are very important concepts which are related to forgiveness. Would you elaborate a bit more on this relationship?

Worthington: Emotional forgiveness happens by replacing negative emotions with more positive emotions toward the offender, or "other-oriented" emotions. The theory (supported by research summarized in my 2006 book, Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application) is that four other-oriented emotions "replace" or "neutralize" vengeful, avoidant, angry, bitter, hateful, anxious emotions. These emotions all depend on understanding the other person. Empathy, is understanding the person's point of view, and is also emotionally identifying with the person. Sympathy is feeling sorry for the person. Compassion is feeling sorry for the person and wanting to help. Love is valuing the other person and not devaluing that person. Other emotions that do not focus on the self will help a person forgive, but those emotions are not directly involved with the replacement of neutralization of the resentment and anger. Those "non-self-focused" emotions include gratitude for having been forgiven oneself, hope, and humility.

Korkmaz: Which factors affect our level of forgiveness? Is forgiveness a genetic or an acquired process in people's life?

Worthington: I believe that forgiveness is not "genetic" but is built deeply into the human experience through culture. Animals have evolved to reconcile, but they might reconcile in many ways besides forgiving. But society really is based on forgiveness as being ONE of many ways that people get past unforgiveness, grudges, and hate. But, different cultures value forgiveness differently and understand forgiveness differently. We can easily see that in the religious differences I described earlier. So, people do

need to learn how, when, where, and why to forgive. They learn that through direct teaching of important people like their parents and school teachers and friends. But they also learn it from cultural stories and cultural heroes. Parents usually teach behaviors—like "Say you are sorry to your brother; he didn't mean to hurt you." Or, "Tell your sister you forgive her." Children don't really understand what these are all about until they get old enough to reason, but their behaviors structure the children's experiences. That makes it easier to learn to forgive. Most forgiveness—like most human behavior—is NOT learned rationally. It is learned through copying others or through stories or through television or reading. The reasoning that supports the gut feelings comes along later and provides a way people justify forgiving.

Korkmaz: You mention "injustice gap" which affects our forgiveness level. Could you explain the relationship between justice and forgiveness?

Worthington: Many people think that justice and forgiveness are opposed to each other. They aren't in the way we usually behave. Rather, the more justice we see done after someone has wronged us, the more likely we are to forgive. If we see an offender suffer, we are more likely to forgive. If we see the offender apologize or make restitution (both are costly and are a form of seeing justice done), then we are more likely to forgive. This is the way life operates. As I said before, most of our behavior is NOT governed by our conscious reasoning. Conscious reasoning comes along later. We can use our reasoning to defeat our gut feelings. If we see, for example, that a person is not repentant for hurting us (that is, no justice is sensed; a big injustice gap still remains), we can impose our reason over our gut feeling that says "don't forgive." We can forgive that person. Or, we can feel that a person is sorry for having harmed us, but be raised in a culture that says this person is not to be forgiven (perhaps because he or she is from a different tribe, different ethnic group, or different religion), we can impose our conscious beliefs over our gut feelings that the injustice gap is closed and still not forgive. But the natural way we operate is that the more justice we feel, the more we forgive. The effect also works on the other side. When we forgive, we tend to demand less justice before we think the injustice gap is closed.

Korkmaz: You start forgiveness process with God's forgiveness. If people have problems with God, how does this process work?

Worthington: To forgive is human. When we experience God's forgiveness, it creates gratitude, which makes forgiveness easier. It makes us

feel humble because we don't deserve God's forgiveness, and that makes forgiveness easier. But, we can forgive regardless of whether it is easy or hard. People forgive hard-to-forgive offenses and hurts all the time. It is human to do so.

Korkmaz: You also developed a model of self-forgiveness which is a process for people's forgiveness for themselves. Would you explain this process?

Worthington: Forgiving oneself is, in many ways, harder than forgiving another person. We can't escape our own thoughts and feelings, so we can't escape self-condemning thoughts and feelings once they get a hold on us. Also, self-forgiveness is usually experienced when we believe we are the wrongdoer. But at the same time we are forgiver if we forgive ourselves. So, playing to cognitive roles is harder than just forgiving someone else.

Self-forgiveness is hard also because, as wrongdoer, I have usually done wrong (in the eyes of God, or done a crime against humanity or a crime against nature). I also have usually harmed people with my wrongdoing. I also might have other beliefs (such as a feeling that I ought to be perfect) that are keeping me bound by self-condemnation. Thus, before beginning to try to REACH emotional self-forgiveness or grant decisional self-forgiveness, I need to deal with the preconditions: get right with God, repair the damage I did with others or "pay it forward" by helping someone avoid my mistakes in their life, and get my perfectionistic standards and expectations modified. Then I can apply the REACH Forgiveness model to forgiving myself. Even after forgiving myself, though, I need to accept myself as being a flawed person who is capable of such wrongdoing. Then I must dedicate myself to trying not to do such wrong again.

Korkmaz: You point to the relationship between self-forgiveness and self-condemnation. What kinds of relationship are there between them?

Worthington: Self-condemnation is feeling regret, remorse, shame, and guilt over my wrongdoing. There are many ways to get rid of those feelings. (This is parallel to forgiving others in which there are many ways to deal with my feelings of injustice at being harmed—excusing, accepting, forbearing, etc—forgiveness as one of those.) So, I could seek to get rid of self-condemnation by just letting myself off the hook, by doing things like getting drunk, committing suicide, etc. Those are not good ways to deal with self-condemnation. Best if to take care of the preconditions (dealing with God, others and the self), and then forgiving oneself.

Korkmaz: Why do we need self-forgiveness? And what kinds of relationship do you see between forgiveness and health?

Worthington: Self-condemnation creates negative emotions and is stressful. It creates regret, remorse, sorrow, shame, guilt, sadness, anxiety, etc. (In the same way, unforgiveness of someone else who hurt me creates different emotions, but they are also stressful: resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and anxiety.) The chronic stress of feeling either self-condemnation or unforgiveness affects our body negatively. It puts us at risk for cardiovascular problems (stroke, heart attack, high blood pressure, transient ischemic attacks, etc.), immune system malfunctioning, and high levels of cortisol. Those result in health risks. If we try to cope with chronic stress, we often choose ways of trying to do so that create additional problems: eating problems, alcohol use, drug use. Those also can cause health problems. There are indirect effects on physical health also. Unforgiveness and self-condemnation both cause depression, anxiety, and anger. They do so often because we ruminate with unforgiveness and with self-condemnation, and rumination gets the mental health problems activated. Mental health problems are associated with physical health problems. Similarly, relationship problems that can occur because a person has a grudge against a partner, friend, or co-worker can create additional mental and physical health problems.

Korkmaz: Can people improve their forgiveness level towards themselves and others without getting any professional help or education? Do you have suggestions for people who want to be more forgiving?

Worthington: Yes, people have forgiven others and themselves for thousands of years. But professional help or programs like the REACH Forgiveness program or workbooks (see www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com) that people can do on their own or books the can read (www.forgiveself.com) can help them deal with forgiving themselves or others faster and more thoroughly.

Korkmaz: When we look at the history, there are lots of bad crimes committed not just against personal integrity but also against social order. Can these bad crimes or violence be somehow forgiven? I mean to ask whether or not there is a limit to forgiveness.

Worthington: There is no limit to forgiveness just as there is no limit to love (or unfortunately no limit to hate). Some events just have huge injustice gaps and are very, very difficult to forgive. But when a big event occurs in

society (like, for example, the September 11, 2001, attack on the US World Trade Center), people in that society can reinforce hatred—keeping negative emotions elevated and making it very difficult to experience forgiveness. For a society, tribe, ethnic group, or religion to come to forgive a big event, many transformations are needed. Someone must start forgiveness. Then others must follow. The forgiveness must become viral and catch hold of a society. No one seems to know why some things become viral and others never seem to gain traction. But it seems that at the root of forgiveness is a deep emotional change. Sometimes leaders of groups on each side of a conflict can sit down together, hear each other's stories, gain empathy for each other, and begin to forgive. If those leaders take their forgiving attitudes back to their groups and use things like REACH Forgiveness groups or workbooks, then the forgiveness might begin to spread.

Korkmaz: Some discussions emerged between science and religion especially after the rise of positivism. Along with this also emerged certain debates and biases between religion and psychology. Today, certain scientific fields do not accept religion as a science. So it seems that forgiveness is confined mainly to religion. How do you think psychology and religion could cooperate with a view to solving this problem?

Worthington: Religion and science draw on different sources of authority. Sometimes people on each side have trouble valuing each other. I think that, properly understood, both are teaching largely the same things regarding forgiveness. Religion admonishes us, based on sacred writings, and religious traditions and religious communities, to forgive. It tells us WHY (because God says so) to forgive. But it doesn't give great guidance on how to forgive. Science really cannot give any good reasons why people *should* forgive. Science is descriptive, not prescriptive. Science can relate forgiveness to health (but people have to value health to want to forgive) or can relate forgiveness to less depression, anger, or anxiety (but people have to value those to want to forgive). Science is good at helping people know HOW to forgive.

So this seems like an area where religion and science can help each other. Draw the motivation and community support from religion and some of the methods from science.

Korkmaz: Thank you for sharing your valuable insights with us**.**