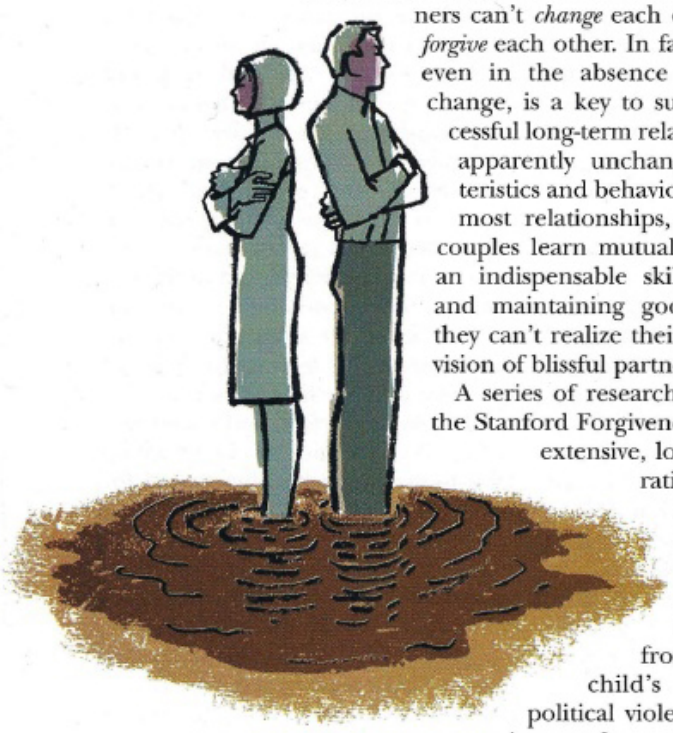
BY FREDERIC LUSKIN, KEN SILVESTRI, AND JED ROSEN

Learning Forgiveness

Peacemaking skills for couples

JOHN GOTTMAN, IN HIS OFTEN-CITED marital research, found that 70 percent of the problems that couples complain about are present from the beginning of their relationship. Too often, these problems devolve into years of criticism and contempt—which, Gottman found, destroy marriages in the long run. Fortunately, Gottman and other researchers have discovered that, even when partners can't *change* each other, they can *forgive* each other. In fact, forgiveness, even in the absence of behavioral change, is a key to sustaining a successful long-term relationship. Since apparently unchangeable characteristics and behaviors are found in most relationships, why not help couples learn mutual forgiveness as an indispensable skill for creating and maintaining goodwill, even if they can't realize their most utopian vision of blissful partnership?



A series of research studies called the Stanford Forgiveness Projects, an extensive, long-term exploration of the healing properties of forgiveness, has explored many difficult issues, ranging from forgiving a child's death from political violence to the letting go of resentment over infidelity. The projects found that people who were taught how to forgive showed statistically significant improvement in physical and emotional well-being. Within couples, the projects defined forgiveness pragmatically as making peace when one partner didn't get what he or she wanted from the other, encompassing injuries as slight as repeatedly leaving a window open to those as grave as causing a child's death.

The findings of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects have more recently been organized by the authors into a therapy approach with individuals and couples. Frederic Luskin conducts training for therapists around the United States and Ken Silvestri and Jed Rosen, each with 25 years or more of clinical experience, have worked to incorporate the teaching of forgiveness skills into their practices. In our clinical work, we've regularly been surprised that clients coming to us have often been to therapists who don't know how to help them forgive and, as a result, have remained stuck in seemingly irresolvable emotional tangles. The following case illustrates a model incorporating aspects of cognitive disputation, narrative therapy, gratitude practice, positive emotion enhancement, and stress management that's designed to help people discover what it means to forgive.

Don and Sara had been married for 25 years and had two children. Ten years before coming to therapy, Sara had told Don about an affair she'd had during the first year of their marriage. She'd quickly discontinued the relationship, but was so plagued by guilt that, 15 years later, she felt compelled to reveal her secret. Don had been stunned by the news, and his hurt and anger hadn't subsided. He couldn't get past his feeling that his wife had permanently humiliated him. Despite the passage of time, he continued to blame her for shattering his trust in and commitment to her.

At the point they came to therapy, Sara's guilt over the affair had morphed into bitterness and resentment toward her husband. She now saw Don's anger as only an excuse to punish her. She complained that his unrelenting criticism had destroyed her self-confidence as a wife and mother. For the past year, she'd refused any sexual relationship with him. "Don says he wants intimacy with me, but he never stops reminding me of the affair," she said. "How can I get close to a person who's so pissed at me all the time?"

Their relationship was characterized by shifts from warm friendship and cooperative parenting to verbal abuse and screaming fights, resulting in polarized standoffs. In one therapy session, Don turned abruptly on Sara: "I can never stop thinking that in those first two years, when I was busting my ass each day running my business, you ►

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were screwing that bastard and then lying to me about it," he said.

Don had recently quit marital therapy with another therapist because he'd found the focus on the past so unsettling that he'd left sessions feeling worse than ever. "Every time the therapist asked me or Sara to bring up what was bothering us, my blood would boil," he said. "We got so angry at each other that all we'd do was accuse each other of the same things. It became a struggle for me not to call an attorney to draw up divorce papers." He still hadn't given up on his marriage, but he felt that time was running out. In our first session, he announced, "If we can't fix this now, there'll be no saving this marriage."

Don's hurt was obvious, as was the fact that Sara's confessing to Don had been her way of trying to shed the burden of her guilt. "I'd hoped that my coming clean after so many years of secrecy would give us a new start," she said. "I now wonder if I should have told Don in the first place." Immersed in his tale of grievance, Don was unable to see anything about Sara's affair beyond his own wounding.

Meanwhile, Sara had ceased to see any of the positive qualities Don continued to demonstrate in their marriage. Instead of considering his continued interest in a sexual life with her as a desire to heal from the marital wound, she saw it as a primitive male power play to collect his due. So while he had trouble forgiving her, she had trouble forgiving his not forgiving her. As is often the case with wounded partners, he feared that forgiving her would make him even more vulnerable. "If I soften up and she hurts me again, I don't think I could take it," he said. "At least when I'm angry, I can't get taken by surprise." Sara lamented to him, "It's been so long since you let your guard down, since you confided in me, since you asked for my advice, I don't know if you're capable of it anymore."

For forgiveness to take root in a couple, both parties need to acknowledge their hurt and then turn their attention to their present relationship and let go of the past. Along the way, they typically find that it's possible to dislike something a partner did, grieve for the experience, and get over it. Just as couples have the inherent capacity for anger and despair, they have the capacity for forgiveness and reconnection. But first, both have to relinquish blame and grieve for their wounds.

Research has amply demonstrated that the habit of anger regularly hijacks our ability to think clearly. Because their chronic anger caused them so much mental and physical tension, the first few sessions with Don and Sara were spent teaching them stress-reduction exercises to relax their bodies and restore calmer thinking. Since they'd "practiced" their feelings of anger so much, their therapist had to model, teach, cajole, and encourage them to find within themselves their underused capacity for relating to each other with kindness and gentleness. They went through a series of guided-imagery exercises designed to calm them down as well as refocus from negative internal images to more positive ones.

The initial focus was on learning that accessing submerged feelings of gratitude, compassion, and love—both in general and toward each other—could come as naturally as accessing blame, shame, and anger. Their therapist asked them to try an experiment: "You know how it feels to mistrust the other. Let's see what it feels like to practice goodwill." In doing this, they were first reassured that they could always return to their old negative interactions, which they already knew how to do very well.

After some time practicing stress-reduction and breathing exercises, Don and Sara felt less automatic emotional reactivity and found that they could listen better to each other. When Sara told Don that his anger kept her from having sexual feelings toward him, he managed to listen quietly without exploding. The mere fact that he could stay still and listen had the effect of relaxing Sara, and she began to lean closer to him when he spoke.

Another initial focus was to diminish mutual expectations of what each partner "owed" the other—what we call "unenforceable rules." People often react badly to not getting what they want, escalating their desires into demands, and then becoming unable to forgive other people for not fulfilling these demands. Don and Sara were punishing each other for their unmet hopes, while being unwilling to realize, as the Rolling Stones put it, "You can't always get what you want." Don had every right to be hurt and angry at Sara's early betrayal in their marriage, but his outrage and inability to forgive her for more than two decades stemmed from his belief that her fidelity was his entitlement. From this sense of entitlement, he drew the "rule" that it was her obligation to make him feel strong and masculine.

Sara's unenforceable rule was that, as the strong male protector, Don must always love her and keep her safe, no matter how she behaved or what mistakes she made. Naively thinking he'd simply appreciate the honesty of her confession, she'd expected that the slate would be wiped clean. As a result, she was completely unprepared for his hurt and outrage. She needed help to see that his hurt about the affair didn't cancel out his protective feelings for her and to realize that her fierce protector was vulnerable, imperfect, and sometimes selfish. Bottom line: he didn't always have to give her what she wanted for her to love him.

For weeks, Don and Sara worked to put aside their rigid rules for each other and develop more flexible ways of thinking about their relationship. Eventually, he dug beneath his feeling that he had a *right* to her fidelity and reached his deeper wish for her to love him genuinely. When at last he expressed his yearning for her love without insisting upon his marital *rights*, his voice cracked. "All I ever really wanted was for you to love me," he said, bowing his head. Sara's smile showed real tenderness at his willingness to admit his vulnerability. Forgiveness therapists are on the lookout for this kind of moment to help the couple ask themselves, "Where did this feeling come from? Is it possible to get back there?" ►

CASE STUDY

Beneath this couple's anger were deeper and stronger feelings of mutual admiration, affection, and loyalty. Don still felt fiercely protective of Sara, while she admired his work ethic and drive: it was the determination of both—to work hard, rise from humble beginnings, and make a good life—that had initially drawn them together. In widening their perspectives beyond the cramped space of mutual grievance, they developed compassion for each other's mistakes and began to accept the reality that they'd each married a flawed, but good, human being.

We constantly remind clients that they're capable of many responses to being wounded, and the goal is to find the one that gives them what they most deeply want. We call this deep want the "positive intention." Sara and Don needed to find and articulate their positive intention and use it to change their relationship story. In one session, their therapist asked them to think of the deepest positive reason they married each other and to make it personal and specific. They were then asked if that deep loving reason was still true and, if so, whether it wasn't time to tell a story about that intention, rather than about how each had failed. Don saw that he'd been hurt badly by Sara precisely because he'd loved and admired her so deeply; he couldn't imagine himself being with another woman. His positive intention was to express that sense of love and commitment directly, authentically, and without qualifications; but to do that and continue nourishing these feelings, he had to forgive her and move on. In turn, Sara's positive intention was to create a marriage so strong that anything could be forgiven—the kind of marriage her parents had *not* had, but which she deeply wanted with Don. To make good on this positive intention, Sara realized that the first major step she must take was to forgive Don for his continuing blame and negativity toward her.

Forgiveness isn't a free pass to any and all bad behavior; it doesn't condone unkindness, infidelity, neglect, or disrespect, or require one to return to an abusive relationship or be a doormat. Research shows that these are some of the commonest misconceptions about forgiveness. But forgiveness or making peace with the various ways life has disappointed us can free us from being stuck in hurt and blame and help us become better and happier partners and people. The simple truth is that when we practice harshness toward our partner, we become good at being harsh. When we practice forgiveness, we become good at forgiveness—which fundamentally means learning to love and accept the imperfect people in our lives and allowing them to love and accept us.