The Effects of an Interpersonal Forgiveness Intervention on the Personal and Professional Lives of Clergy

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“If you cannot free people from their wrongs and see them as the needy people they are, then you enslave yourself to your own painful past. By fastening yourself to the past, you let your hate become your future.”

Lewis Smedes, Forgive and Forget
This research project studied
1. The effects of a forgiveness education intervention on the psychological well-being of clergy

2. Their ability to assist others with interpersonal hurt and pain.

Previous Forgiveness Research:
- Parentally love deprived college students (Al-Mubuk, 1990)
- Incest survivors (Freedman, 1993)
- The elderly (Hebl & Enright, 1991)
- Adolescents (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mubuk, 1989)
- Families (Flanigan, 1987)
- Physicians/unsuccessful treatment (Gerber, 1987)
Benefits of Forgiveness:
- Decrease in depression
- Decrease in anxiety
- Decrease in displacement of anger
- Decrease in use of defense mechanisms
- Prevention of escalation of revenge
- Improved intrapersonal peace

Benefits of Forgiveness continued:
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- Improved affect
- Improved self-esteem
- Reduction in stress symptoms
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduction in insomnia
- Less digestive problems
Despite embracing forgiveness as part of their belief structure, many clergy struggle with interpersonal hurt and conflict associated with:

- Members of their congregations
- Their families
- Churches
- Community members
- Their personal lives/relationships
- Other

The hurt clergy experience often results in emotional, physical, and spiritual problems including:

- Personal Stress
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loss of Energy
- Irritability
- Marital and Family Problems
- Low Self Esteem
- Self Doubt regarding their role
- Anger
Clergy struggle with interpersonal forgiveness for a variety of reasons including:

- The expectation to work things out by self.
- Clergy are to be care-givers.
- The traditional emphasis of vertical forgiveness.
- Lack of a clear understanding of interpersonal forgiveness.
- Difficulty dealing with their own interpersonal pain.

Research questions:

1. Will clergy who are taught a forgiveness education intervention be more willing to forgive and demonstrate a higher psychological state of forgiveness than those who receive relationship skills training?
2. Will clergy who are taught forgiveness demonstrate changes in self-esteem, anger, anxiety, and hope from pre to post forgiveness education intervention?

3. Will clergy who are taught forgiveness differ in their use of forgiveness compared to clergy who receive relationship skills training when responding to hypothetical interpersonal conflict situations?

Clergy Research Study: A randomized two group experimental design with repeated measures (34 participants from 11 different denominations):

Experimental Group (n = 17)
Avg. Age = 48 years
Avg. Years Experience in Ministry = 17 years
Intervention: Forgiveness Education Training

Control Group (n = 17)
Avg. Age = 51 years
Avg. Years Experience in Ministry = 15 years
Intervention: Human Relations Training
Two Independent variables:
- Forgiveness education intervention
- The gender of the offended person

Dependent variables:
- Willingness to forgive
- Psychological profile of forgiveness
- Self esteem, anger, anxiety, & hope
- The practice of interpersonal forgiveness in hypothetical vignette situations
Assessments:
- Psychological Forgiveness Profile
- Willingness to Forgive Measure
- Anger Scale
- Anxiety Scale
- Hope Scale
- Self Esteem Scale

Each measure was administered on six different occasions during the course of the experiment.

Results:

Statistically significant differences were found between the experimental and control groups in regard to participants change over time in their:

- Willingness to forgive
- Use of forgiveness
Result Details:

- Developmentally, the experimental group experienced a change in cognition toward forgiveness as evidenced in their decision to sign a commitment to forgive covenant and in how they perceived past personal offenders compared to the control group.

- The experimental group also increased in their willingness to use forgiveness with others who had interpersonal hurt in hypothetical vignette situations compared to the control group.
Willingness to forgive and psychological profile of forgiveness results:

Experimental group participants experienced a significant increase in their willingness to forgive and a modest increase in their psychological profile of forgiveness.

This suggests that over time, greater increases might also have been experienced in their psychological profile of forgiveness.

Self-esteem results:

Experimental group participants self-esteem was moderately related to their willingness to forgive when responding to hypothetical vignette conflict situations.

This suggests that forgiveness is related to higher self esteem both in practice and when positively dealing with one’s hurt and pain.
Anxiety results:

No significant changes were found in participants state and trait anxiety.

Anxiety is often associated with a specific offense and as an offended person works through their hurt and pain they experience a reduction in anxiety.

Anger results:

As clergy increased in their willingness to use forgiveness in the hypothetical conflict situations, there was a corresponding decrease in trait anger.

This suggests that clergy who practice forgiveness more experience a lessening of anger and possibly more improved relationships.
Hope results:

No significant changes were found with the hope of clergy in the experiment.

This suggests that because hope is an intrinsic belief of Christianity, clergy participants already had high levels of hope, which is essential for a forgiving lifestyle.

The use of forgiveness by group results:

Clergy who received the forgiveness education intervention suggested forgiveness as a possible solution to offended persons in the hypothetical vignettes more than the control group.

This suggests that, though they value forgiveness as part of their belief structure, when clergy are taught about interpersonal forgiveness, they will use it more in conflict situations.
Implications:

1. Theological and pastoral care education needs to be more intentional about incorporating forgiveness education into the curriculum as forgiveness is the application of theology in everyday life.

Implications continued:

2. Forgiveness education needs to have a much greater role in theological education because of the psychological and interpersonal benefits it offers clergy.
Implications continued:

3. Unless clergy are taught about forgiveness and value it enough to practice it in their own lives, it is unlikely that they will be able to effectively help members of their own congregations with forgiveness related issues.

“Foriveness is love’s antidote for hate, beginning with passive hate, the loss of energy to wish people well...you will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.”

Lewis Smedes, Forgive and Forget
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