

Enabling forgiveness and reconciliation in family therapy

Karl Tomm¹

Interpersonal conflicts are almost inevitable within families. The closeness and intensity of family relationships along with differences among family members in knowledge, desires, values, abilities, etc., account for much of this turmoil. Family members are often deeply hurt in the course of their conflicts and sometimes there is a significant breach of trust. Occasionally a family member will consider a certain offence unforgivable and will not seek reconciliation. Usually, however, family members try to recover a sense of personal and relationship wellbeing by endeavoring to forgive and reconcile. This can be a long and arduous process. Therapists are often consulted to facilitate such healing. My purpose in writing this paper is to share my understanding of some of the complexities involved.² The perspective that I adopt is a social constructionist or 'bringforthist' stance. I assume that through caring conversation, it is possible to bring forth preferred ways of thinking and interacting that can lead to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Mutual hurts

The duration and effects of any particular conflict between family members depends on how differences are managed in the nuances of ongoing family interaction. Conflicts vary from brief disagreements that are hardly noticeable, to extremely destructive emotional and physical

battles that last for years. During any major episode of conflict, all parties involved tend to feel unfairly treated by others. For instance, in an ordinary family argument each person will try to protect the self from unfair accusations by using defensive statements or counter-attacks that may end up disqualifying and hurting the other. In these situations, both parties in the conflict feel wronged and both contribute to the hurt and suffering. Mutual wrongs, however, do not balance each other out and there is often a significant 'magnitude gap' with respect to the amount of injury inflicted by each party upon the other. One person usually ends up more traumatised. Thus, if genuine reconciliation is to occur, the person who inflicted the most harm needs to take more initiative to acknowledge mistakes, apologise, and take restorative action, while the other needs to take more initiative to forgive and restore the relationship. Once such a healing process gets started, reciprocity in apologising and forgiving tends to occur and reconciliation becomes more likely.

The need for vindication

In general, whenever a person has been hurt, there is a sense of their worth being diminished as a result of the injury. An automatic healing response to this is to try to restore one's worth by vindicating oneself. There are two contrasting methods whereby people can vindicate themselves. One is to diminish the worth of the other by retaliating or seeking justice

by retribution. Ultimately, however, most people cannot feel good about themselves in hurting others, hence retaliation or revenge seldom achieves an adequate resolution. An alternative pathway to vindicate oneself is by focussing on methods to raise one's own worth. This can occur in different ways. In society at large, this might be achieved by increasing one's personal competence and making greater contributions to the community. For instance, a woman who has been repeatedly abused by her male partner may commit herself to initiate, develop and/or maintain women's shelters and child support services. Within families it might mean becoming more generous and making sustained efforts to restore one's relationships. One such effort might be to extend forgiveness towards the offender for which one can feel good about oneself.

There are various intermediate responses to injury between the extremes of revenge and forgiveness. Some of these can have useful effects. For instance, resentment that is moderated and carefully channelled can serve to energise efforts to hold offenders accountable for their offensive actions. For some people, vindication cannot be experienced without achieving some accountability. Others may choose to extend some circumscribed forgiveness, by giving the offender another chance, but remain vigilant and wary. Each person's propensity to bear resentment or retaliate, as well as the strength of their disposition to rise above the hurt and to forgive, will influence the direction in which the relationship evolves.

Cycles of mutual violence

The impulse to retaliate and seek revenge is common when one is hurt. Acting on such an impulse, however, can obviously aggravate any conflict and make things worse. Hitting back (physically or emotionally) invites further retaliation and may lead to escalating cycles of violence. What is less obvious is how a 'credibility gap' about the nature and severity of the harm done can also make things worse, even when the desire to reconcile is present. A credibility gap refers to differences in understanding what actually happened in the conflict. One's own version of what happened is always experienced as more credible than the other's. A gap may arise through simple misinterpretation, different positions held in the relationship (standpoint epistemology), differences in vulnerability, differences in meanings given to the events, and/or self-serving perceptual distortions on the part of one or both parties. These differences, along with high levels of reactivity (arising from feelings of shame and guilt), create conditions for recurrent arguments about the original offences.

Well-intentioned efforts to simply clarify what happened can turn out to be counter-productive. What is intended as clarifying feedback for accountability may be taken as unfair accusation. This activates self-protective responses of rejection of the feedback, denial of the complaints, and disqualification of the other, which in turn trigger stronger efforts by the other to make the point by intensifying the feedback. If these disagreements evolve into an escalating interpersonal pattern of maximising coupled with minimising, the credibility gap actually widens. The tragedy of this kind of systemic interaction is that attempts at clarifying the injustice can compel the 'victim' to exaggerate the offences committed and perpetrate injury upon the original 'perpetrator'. In other words, the victim is inadvertently transformed into a perpetrator through the communication process. Both parties ultimately become both victims and perpetrators in a pattern of mutual accusation and recrimination that results in more psychological and emotional violence. Thus, escalating mutual violence can arise through defensiveness as well as through retaliation.

Mutual forgiveness

One of the most effective antidotes to these escalating cycles of mutual violence are cycles of mutual forgiveness. Forgiveness implies a willingness to abandon resentment, to relinquish any entitlement to retaliate or seek retribution, and to foster undeserved compassion, empathy, and generosity towards a perceived offender. This is an incredible transformation for anyone to try to undertake. Because of this, many people regard forgiveness as a spiritual practice. Indeed, all the major world religions encourage forgiveness. Psychotherapists and physicians are also increasingly endorsing forgiveness as an important healing process, both for relationships and for personal health. The generosity and love conveyed in forgiving affirms the value of persons who have offended, and often inspires them to respond in a forgiving manner as well. The resultant reciprocity enables the forgiveness to become mutual and strongly supports a process of reconciliation.

Forgiveness and reconciliation differ

While there are important links between forgiveness and reconciliation, they are quite different phenomena. Reconciliation entails the restoration of trust in a relationship that has been damaged. It is a major *interpersonal* achievement. Both parties must be involved and both must

contribute to a resolution. Forgiveness is something that is granted by the person who has been wronged. It can be carried out alone or in interaction with the offender. Forgiveness does not mean that reconciliation could or should occur. For example, a person may choose to forgive a former partner for a betrayal of trust that ended the relationship, but still choose not to reconcile. Yet, even in the absence of reconciliation, forgiveness is a worthwhile goal. It offers the person freedom from feelings of bitterness and resentment. On those occasions when I have been unable or unwilling to forgive, I have experienced myself actively avoiding the person who hurt me or relating to them in a very awkward and narrow manner. I have also experienced the enormous relief that ensues when one is eventually able to forgive.

It is interesting to note that reconciliation does not necessarily mean that forgiveness has occurred or will occur. One or both parties involved in a conflict may set aside the issue or episode and act as if it did not occur. In other words, areas of disagreement and conflict can be separated from other areas of ongoing connectedness depending on the ability of family members in handling such complexity. This method of setting aside conflict is one way to avoid the potential complications of the credibility gap described above. As the memory of the offence and the associated hurt fades, the resentment is gradually abandoned as well. It is in this way that 'time heals'. Unfortunately, however, the memory and pain can readily be reactivated by a similar offence from the original offender or by someone else. If this happens, resentment may redouble and be out of proportion to the most recent offence. As a result, the risk of escalation through the credibility gap is substantially increased. Thus the failure to address and reconcile old hurts leaves one carrying a greater risk for future conflict, as well as the ongoing burden of constraints and restraints due to unresolved resentment. It is partly for these reasons that I am trying to adopt more of a 'forgivingness lifestyle' for myself and that I orient my clients and colleagues to consider the same.

Steps to forgiveness

Some of the first steps involved in moving towards granting forgiveness include recognising and acknowledging that one has been deeply hurt and identifying one's strong feelings about having been wronged. Simply saying 'I forgive you' may do little to relieve the pain and resentment. It is important that the person recognise and let go of certain needs and/or desires that may never be fulfilled as a result of the offence. The losses suffered through the injury need to be

accepted. This may entail a great deal of emotional work. A considerable amount of cognitive work is also required in shifting one's perspective on the offender. Much of this entails thinking things through to the point that one can separate the offender from the offence and develop empathy and compassion towards the offender without condoning the offence itself. Eventually, when the person can construct a new understanding of the whole situation and of oneself and the person who offended within it, the stance of forgiveness can become stabilised. It is still possible to slip back into the old pain and a state of 'unforgiveness', so some situations require a process of re-forgiving again and again.

When therapists try to open space for clients to move towards forgiveness, it is useful to help them recognise the benefits to themselves when they forgive. It is also helpful to identify some of the specific barriers to forgiveness that they may be up against. However, it is important for therapists to recognise that to apply any kind of external pressure to forgive, when a victim is not ready to do so, is to perpetrate a further offence against that person. The imposition simply adds insult to injury and is counter-productive, regardless of whether the pressure comes from the original offender, other family members, friends, religious leaders, or therapists. It is legitimate for an offender to ask for forgiveness, if there has been an acknowledgement of the mistakes made along with genuine expressions of regret and apologies. But it is inappropriate to demand forgiveness under any circumstances. Indeed, any individual attempting to do so should be invited to take some leadership by forgiving the other person for not yet being willing or able to forgive. Despite this danger, a therapist can still contribute a great deal in opening space for clients to recognise the healing value of forgiveness, both for themselves and for the relationships they have with others.

Apology

Because of the injustice involved in putting pressure on a victim to forgive, a therapist should, whenever possible, begin enabling the healing process at the other end of the conflictual interaction by opening space for the perpetrator to extend a genuine apology. This can be difficult for a number of reasons. Offenders often feel too ashamed or guilty to even participate in therapy. They may be unable or unwilling to stop offending. They may have little or no awareness of the harm they have done. They may be so preoccupied with their good intentions that they fail to recognise the bad effects of their actions. They may be too afraid of humiliation and/or

punishment if they admit to their mistakes. Or they may fear the costs of restorative action. Individual work with the offender may be necessary to enable them to recognise how they might be blocking possibilities for forgiveness and reconciliation. A series of skilful, reflexive questions from a therapist can often open space for an offender to recognise the constructive initiatives they can take toward possible reconciliation by apologising and to feel good about themselves in making such a contribution. What contributes to a genuine apology is a clear recognition of the harm done and of the injustice involved, an acknowledgement of the losses and painful experiences of the victim, an expression of deep regret and remorse, and an honest willingness to take restorative action. The absence of any one of these elements can constitute a barrier to the victim's ability to forgive.

Barriers to forgiveness

By the same token, a full and adequate apology may still not clear the way for a victim to forgive. There are many victim-based barriers to forgiveness. These may include overwhelming negative emotions, fear that the transgression will be repeated, assumptions that one needs to forget if one forgives, and fears of appearing weak. In some situations there may be a strong belief that justice will not be served by forgiving and that the transgression is unforgivable. On the other hand, sometimes the status of 'victim' confers certain benefits which could be lost if one forgives. For instance, one might lose the right to criticise, lose the right to retaliate, lose the right to seek compensation, or lose the right to hold some moral advantage over the perpetrator. A further difficulty is the potential danger of betraying third parties from whom the victim sought support during the time that they were in acute distress. These others may have joined in a coalition with the victim against the perpetrator and continue to carry their own resentment about the injustice. Sometimes work needs to be done with these third parties to help them recognise the desire and entitlement of a victim to escape their resentment and move towards survivorship and the freedom rendered by forgiveness. It certainly becomes much easier for a person to extend forgiveness when there is support from such third parties to do so.

Trust

Full reconciliation may still not occur even when apologies have been extended and accepted, forgiveness has been granted and received, and both parties have a strong

desire to reconcile. Reconciliation implies that there has been a prior breach of trust in the relationship and that this trust has been restored enough for the relationship to move into more maturity. Given the centrality of trust in achieving reconciliation, it is useful to examine what might be entailed in bringing it forth. There are two fundamental components of the trust that one person extends towards another. The first has to do with the perceived motivation of the other. In order to trust the other, one has to believe that the other has good intentions towards the self. This is quite obvious and straightforward. The second component of trust is less apparent and has to do with behavioural competence. In order to trust the other, one has to believe not only that they have good intentions towards the self, but that they also have sufficient ability to act effectively to implement those motives. It is this second component that is usually lacking when it seems that reconciliation should be possible but has not yet been realised.

Lack of competence

A number of years ago I worked with a heterosexual couple where the male partner had become sexually involved with another woman. Such actions did not fit with this couple's marital vows and the female partner felt deeply hurt and betrayed. Intense conflict arose between them and a major rupture emerged in the relationship. During the therapy, the male broke off the relationship with his lover, recognised how hurtful his behaviour had been to his partner, expressed sincere regret to her, apologised repeatedly, and took restorative action. Eventually she forgave him and both assumed that they had reconciled. As the years went by, he became progressively more upset as he encountered her continuing mistrust. She believed that he had good intentions to remain true to their renewed commitment and not be sexually involved with anyone else. But she was not yet able to believe that he was able to fulfil his good intentions. At least two patterns in his behaviour contributed to her scepticism. First, he actively tried to forget the past and encouraged her to do the same. The more he did so, the more she remembered, which frustrated him. Remembering past mistakes and what has been learned from them is important if one wants to avoid making them again. However, the locus of remembering needs to be in the right place to do its work. In this situation it needed to be within him rather than her. Only if he continued to carry the burden of remembering could she safely 'forgive *and* forget'. Second, he continued in old habits of being overly friendly with other women. He enjoyed the

attention of females and tended to be somewhat flirtatious. This kept her wondering if he could maintain appropriate boundaries in her absence. Thus she experienced him as untrustworthy despite his clear commitment to not betray her again. Unfortunately, it was not until after they separated that he and I recognised his lack of competence in maintaining clear boundaries and his need to take more responsibility in actively remembering the past.

Self-forgiveness

In retrospect, one could say that this man forgave himself prematurely. He did not enter into his partner's painful experiences deeply enough to generate the awareness he needed. As a result, he did not learn enough from his mistakes to hold himself accountable for his patterns of subtle boundary violation. Additional empathy and self-scrutiny could have enabled him to develop the competence to 'live above suspicion'. Perhaps it is partly because of the beneficial effects of progressive self-accountability through 'unforgiveness', that self-forgiveness is so difficult for some people to embrace. It is not easy to escape deeply entrenched patterns of behaviour that have become part of one's 'personality', and ongoing negative feelings towards oneself about a problematic pattern can be a generative source of corrective knowledge and energy for change.

At the same time, however, undue and unnecessary suffering can occur when strong negative feelings are persistently directed against the self. For instance, intense guilt feelings about wrongdoing can turn towards self-loathing, spill into one's identity and become transformed into pervasive shame. Additional negative memories may be activated and can join to intensify self-demeaning thoughts that have debilitating and paralysing effects. Living in the grip of tangles of shame and guilt is extremely oppressive and can arouse temptations of relief through suicide. Needless to say, other family members can become enmeshed in, and oppressed by, such entanglements of shame and guilt as well. The viability of close family relationships may become threatened. In such situations, movement towards self-forgiveness could be very therapeutic.

One major contribution towards forgiving oneself is to experience forgiveness from those one has hurt. Conjoint therapy can create conditions to enable this. For persons with a strong spiritual orientation, forgiveness from religious leaders, or from their 'God' can have profound effects. When this is not enough, individual clinical work may be helpful. For instance, it is often useful to focus on teasing out,

disentangling, and redefining the specific emotions of shame and guilt. Guilt feelings may easily be mistaken for shame, and vice versa. The pathway for deconstructing shame differs significantly from that for deconstructing guilt. Shame tends to be more closely associated with one's identity and sense of self. Guilt, on the other hand, can be associated with specific behaviours, whether they are acts of commission or of omission. The ultimate sources of shame are external to the self. Shame can arise directly from shaming practices engaged in by significant others, or indirectly through judgemental cultural beliefs and values that have been imposed or are passively internalised. To escape pathological shame, it is extremely helpful for a client to recognise the injustice of such shaming and to identify his or her own acts of resistance against this injustice, no matter how small they might be. As a client begins protesting the shame-inducing practices and beliefs, and starts honouring themselves for resisting such oppression, self-respect and self-appreciation gradually replaces the shame. The pathway for deconstructing guilt is quite different in that the priority is to clearly recognise and acknowledge the mistakes that the client has made. As he or she accepts responsibility for these mistakes, expresses regret, offers apologies, and takes restorative action, a gratifying shift occurs within the client from humiliation towards humility. Therapeutic conversations that open space for clients to recognise these pathways and the steps involved, empower them to sort through these entanglements and move towards self-forgiveness. This process results in a form of liberation that releases emotional energy to invest in further reconciliation, and can add more 'life' to their lives and their connectedness with others.

Notes

1. Karl Tomm is a Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Calgary, Canada., and can be contacted c/o 300, 2204-2nd St SW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2S 3C2, phone (1-403) 228 8320.
2. An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the IFTA Conference at Oslo in June 1999. Many colleagues, families and students have contributed to my understanding of these issues. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of extensive generative and clarifying conversations with Dr Cindy Beck.

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