

## **Living in a World of Hurts**

The Science of Taking Revenge,  
Offering Forgiveness

by Diane Connolly

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Revenge is the noisy stuff of action movies, righteous justice, and heartbreaking crimes of passion. Forgiveness is the potent whisper when the anger and resentment of being wronged is released. Both are the intense focus of researchers whose goal is nothing short of changing the world.

That world is populated by people who can't move beyond the murder of a loved one, a betrayal by a colleague, or other hurts, whether large or small. Revenge and forgiveness are both human instincts, and researchers say their findings can help trigger one instead of the other when hurts happen, as they inevitably do.

"If you understand these connections, then you know what can be done at a local, national, or even international level to help people forgive the harms they've suffered," says Michael McCullough, who directs the Laboratory for Social Clinical Psychology at the University of Miami at Coral Gables.

The payoff is potentially huge: People may be healthier, happier, and have better relationships among families, communities, nations, and groups in conflict.

The need is huge, too. "I don't think I had made myself totally aware of how much people actually hurt each other, or how much there actually is to forgive," says author Frederic Luskin, assessing his dozen years of forgiveness research.

Add to that a culture that is more inclined to blame and avenge than to repair and reconcile. "The themes of revenge really abound in our everyday lives," says University of Northern Iowa professor Radhi H. Al-Mabuk, citing movies, television, and politics. "Not so with forgiveness, with compassion, and mercy."

Forgiveness has a proven power to transform individuals and their relationships. Parents who forgive their children's murderers talk of finding peace and purpose after decades of depression. Forgiveness researchers travel to places like Northern Ireland and Sudan to teach forgiveness to people brutalized by violence. When American Express offered forgiveness training to its employees, productivity went up, Luskin says.

Forgiveness isn't new, of course. It's an ancient and foundational teaching shared by every major world religion. But twenty years of research has helped identify exactly what makes people forgive so that those factors and practices can be put in place in personal and social relationships.

"Lots of groups have devised their own recipes for forgiveness, and these reflect underlying truths about how the mind was put together, but we use science to do better by starting with an exploration of how the mind works, and then figuring out what it needs to produce forgiveness," McCullough says.

Researchers--who emphasize that forgiveness does not involve condoning, excusing, or reconciling and is separate from seeking justice--take different tactics. Many are psychologists, but others focus on medicine, anthropology, criminal justice, or political science. Some focus on personal relationships, whereas others are interested in social or political conflicts. All seem to agree that forgiveness is a process that can be learned.

Luskin, a senior consultant in health promotion at Stanford University, developed a nine-step process to teach forgiveness. His latest book, *Forgive for Love: The Missing Ingredient for a Healthy and Lasting Relationship*, came out in December and helps couples learn to forgive each other. Before that, he wrote *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*.

McCullough's new book, *Beyond Revenge*, due out this April, argues that people need to change their social environments and institutions to encourage forgiveness instead of revenge.

"What I am trying to do is explain why the mind works the way it does, and to formalize all of the insights people have discovered about the factors that encourage forgiveness and present them in such a way that people understand what human minds really need so that they can change their schools, towns, and organizations and make them into more forgiving places," McCullough says.

In researching a book on forgiveness, revenge, and reconciliation, Al-Mabuk, an educational psychologist, discovered ancient communities that emphasized peaceful relations and where people hardly sought revenge. "This made me convinced that (revenge) is a conditioned response, something that is taught by culture," he says. "Forgiveness is something we must learn," he says, something that must be taught and modeled in homes, in schools, and in places of worship.

Revenge has emerged as a research topic in relationship to forgiveness because researchers agree that forgiveness is almost never a person's first response to an offense. Luskin says that besides a desire for revenge, he has seen people experience anger, fear, confusion, loss, self-pity, bitterness, and alienation.

"Forgiveness is not designed to be an immediate response to crisis," he explains.

And what's wrong with some good, old-fashioned revenge when a person has been badly wronged? Sometimes, nothing. Humans' cooperative institutions need the ability to retaliate so that people don't take advantage of them, and communities are sometimes bound by members' ability to enforce a sense of justice, researchers say.

The problem, researchers say, is that when people hold onto a hurt they allow the perpetrator to hurt them twice--once in the initial injury and then by the long-term pain it causes.

Most researchers agree that forgiveness is an internal process that must be learned and encouraged in families, communities, and cultures. Of course, revenge can be learned just as easily.

"If you approach forgiveness and revenge from an evolutionary point of view, as I do, then it's simple," explains McCullough, a professor of psychology and religious studies. "I believe that the instinct for revenge and the forgiveness instinct were crafted by natural selection and that they are sensitive to certain forms of social information. If the organism experiences the right types of social interactions, they feel the desire to seek revenge. Conversely, if they experience the right sorts of social interactions afterwards, they feel a willingness to forgive."

Many date the new wave of forgiveness research back to 1984, when Lewis Smedes published *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. It got a bigger boost in 1997-98, when the John Templeton Foundation sponsored a forgiveness conference and launched A Campaign for Forgiveness Research, which went on to fund forty-eight research studies.

Forgiveness has now moved into the public's consciousness--something that has been helped by the newly blurred lines between science, spirituality, and health.

Religious and moral teachings often supply the "should" of forgiveness. Research documenting the health benefits of forgiveness supplies the "why." Now research is supplying the "how." As a result, "Many more people are open to it," says Luskin, who fields frequent speaking invitations these days and finds engaged audiences eager to learn.

Will the world change? If so, it will happen one corner at a time, as people learn how to encourage forgiveness in their community and as success stories are shared. Meanwhile, Luskin suggests that people start with themselves. "It's like the Nike commercial," he says. "Just do it."

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