

## HELPING MENTAL HEALTH PATIENTS HEAL THROUGH FORGIVENESS

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This reflection touches on the experience of forgiveness as part of palliative care and some options that patients suffering from mental illnesses, addictive behaviors and post-traumatic stress disorders are asked to consider to alleviate their pain and to assess their readiness. The observations are based on pastoral counseling and shared learning with patients in a psychiatric hospital setting. Participant observation, spirituality groups and individual meetings with patients over a period of six years provide the foundation for the case study methodology.

Forgiveness is a topic of special interest to many patients who recognize its importance in order to achieve peace-of-mind, spiritual healing and salvation. This paper encourages patients to explore ways by which to build forgiveness into their daily practices, and offers three strategies for consideration: learning to rely on God as an intermediary between the patient and the sources of pain; learning to use mantras to control and ward off temptations, and cultivating the practice of personal confession to renew oneself and restore one's relationship with God. These approaches to forgiveness can be applied in ways which respect individual religious preference. Each religion has its own special traditions and practices that patients can draw upon to help strengthen their resolve. The narrative below serves as an example based on the Christian tradition. Patients amenable to learning about forgiveness through the example set by Jesus are asked to consider the following.

When Jesus experienced his most intense human suffering, he cried out, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) He could have forgiven his persecutors himself but was in too much pain to do so. His request that the Father forgive them was a spontaneous response to callous and brutal treatment from others. You are asked to consider doing much the same thing by turning to God to serve as your intermediary in responding to debilitating thoughts and hurtful feelings resulting from the actions of others or from what you have done.

Forgiveness does not mean reconciliation with the "enemy" but is a process of "letting go" of memories that can trigger anxiety and depression. Forgiveness means letting go of deep-seated feelings such as anger, grief, guilt and shame so that you can move on in your life and start to be free of the emotional baggage that weighs you down in body and spirit. The essence of forgiveness usually entails the resolution of difficulties which impair your peace of mind. Victims of sexual abuse and criminal acts can demonstrate forgiveness by finding courage to convey the truth to appropriate authorities and by cooperating to hold offenders accountable. Forgiveness is found in actions which help to restore your sense of value and worth: respecting yourself and others; overcoming feelings of heightened vulnerability and shame in order to do

the right thing; being open and honest with yourself in identifying your strengths and weaknesses, and working to take care of yourself physically, mentally and spiritually. Spiritual healing can be a source of help by focusing your attention on God, and by challenging you to trust and rely upon God's power, love and mercy. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28)

Your spiritual journey to heal through forgiveness requires you to be an active participant and to be courageous in difficult situations. Strong and permanent emotional scars may limit your ability to let go. Nagging memories can test your resilience and hamper your resolve. You will need persistence in giving God the full weight of your trust and commitment, and in relying upon God to do the "heavy lifting" when temptations occur and painful memories try to take over. If you are able, through prayer and focused effort, to put yourself in "God's hands", you can weaken the power of your pain to afflict you. You can sense progress when you experience a reduction in the intensity and dominance of strong negative emotions. You can begin to appreciate the meaning of forgiveness as you draw closer to your ever-present source of strength and enlightenment. The options that follow may be of help to you along the way.

**Jesus as Your Guide and Advocate:** There are no simple solutions to keeping the "enemy" in its place, but you can learn from the experiences of others strategies that work for them and coping skills that also may work for you. Spiritual healing starts with learning techniques by which to bring God into your life as a divine reality by finding ways to experience God's love and presence in a timely fashion. For many, following the example set by Jesus is a start. The New Testament reveals the meaning of God's love in action, particularly the narrative about the last week of Jesus' journey. A fully-human, fully-divine Jesus, subject to betrayal, temptation and the fullness of suffering, is always present to the Father especially during times of crises. In giving witness to your pain, he can be just as present to you as well and serve as your advocate with the Father. You may be able to gain courage, comfort and insight by learning from him, by retracing his steps and learning to apply his words and actions to your own life. Even though God "does not play favorites", don't be surprised if you should experience a special love from God when you encounter deep and at times debilitating suffering in your daily journey because of the experiences you share in common with Jesus and your close proximity to God's only Son.

**Mantras as a Resource:** Another strategy that may be helpful in finding courage to forgive centers on the use of "mantras" as prayers to ward off hurtful thoughts and temptations. For this purpose, a mantra consists of calling upon God for help by repeating the same phrase over and over, until menacing thoughts are drowned out by your prayers. When practiced and used repeatedly, a mantra can become an instinctive response to negative stimuli and an

effective resource for neutralizing invasive thoughts. Mantras are useful by helping you to focus solely on God for support, especially when trying to dispel harmful thoughts. A traditional mantra covering a wide range of spiritual needs is the Jesus prayer. “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Another example would be continuous repetition of a phrase such as: “Oh God, please keep bad thoughts away from me, I beg of thee, I beg of thee”. Mantras are very adaptable and personal statements. You may want to pick and choose until you find (or develop) a mantra that works for you.

**Confession can Help:** Another aid to promote forgiveness and encourage closer contact with God is the practice of personal confession to a priest or directly to God. By identifying your “sins and failings” and confessing them, you are able to let them go, renew your relationship with God and move on. Overcoming doubts that you are truly forgiven because of repeated failures can dampen your best of intentions and test your resolve. But, no matter how often you may relapse, once you have confessed your sins and asked God for forgiveness in a spirit of sincerity and love, you have done what you can. There is no need to reflect on painful memories again and again. Letting go requires a trust born of faith that once you have confessed your sins, they are forgiven. You are freed of the guilt and the pain and can start over with a “clean slate”. When you seek and accept forgiveness from God, you are able to acquire a peace of mind that can strengthen and help you to move forward. The words that Jesus used in the *Lord’s Prayer* are gentle reminders of the close proximity between God’s forgiveness and your possible courageous response, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” (Matthew 6:9) Just as God forgives your sins, you are asked to reciprocate by finding ways to extend your forgiveness to others.

For some of you, faith and trust in God can be put to the test if you are not ready to forgive, or if you carry the burden of believing that what you have done or experienced cannot be forgiven, or does not deserve to be forgiven because of the magnitude of the trauma. For those of you to whom this observation may apply, such openness and candor in thinking on your part may be God’s way of beginning and not ending a conversation in the search for your healing through forgiveness. Your beliefs may be the basic raw material by which God is nudging you to explore ways and means by which to “melt the ice”, set aside your hesitations, and work to make forgiveness in your daily living a meaningful reality. Even though you may be reluctant, don’t miss out on this opportunity.

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