Swallowing Traumatic Anger

Family Abuse and the Pressure to Forgive

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Abstract

In many cases of family trauma, victims are left with the burden of rebuilding relationships that have been damaged. This paper illustrates that inappropriate pressure to forgive can harm victims of abuse. This pressure can come from a combination of assumptions. Firstly, often forgiveness is conflated with reconciliation, and those who put pressure on victims to forgive do so to avoid uncomfortable blame or estrangement. Secondly, anger is often inappropriately understood as a morally blameworthy emotion to hold. I draw on Amia Srinivasan's (2018) work on affective injustice to address this assumption and argue that pressure to forgo anger, forgive, and reconcile stems from a mistaken interpretation of these concepts and is ultimately harmful. I demonstrate this by using examples where victims have found their voices stifled by the mistaken coding of anger as morally blameworthy and forgiveness as morally required.

"To not have your suffering recognized is an almost unbearable form of violence."

—Andrei Lankov[1]

1. Introduction

Anger is a painful and frequently felt emotion following trauma, especially trauma resulting from abuse. Some philosophers, well-wishers, and even health professionals argue that one should endeavor not to feel anger, but this pressure to abandon anger can be harmful. Even philosophers who look more favorably on anger can echo popular cultural expectations that place what the victim needs from anger and forgiveness in a secondary role and the perpetrator's moral status in a primary one. I will not give a full account of anger or forgiveness here, only highlighting popular misconceptions about these ideas. Although ideas about anger and forgiveness are themes in this piece, I will be keeping my examples to instances where the concept of anger is wielded in a pernicious way, often in tension with what the process of forgiveness entails.[2] I will focus my argument around examples from sibling abuse cases because there are unique circumstances surrounding the norms and management of sibling behavior that exacerbate the problems with swallowing traumatic anger.

Where abuse happens in the context of a family, the negative impact on the victim can be compounded. In these cases, there is often no escape from the abusive family member and the abusive behaviors can start from a young age. Barriers that the victim may experience to getting help can be worse. It is harder to remove oneself from a family setting than a social one, and some aspects of emotional abuse, such as denial of the abuse, can alter the way that the victim sees their own situation. Fighting and rivalry between siblings is so common that it can be difficult for victims or caregivers to establish that the sibling relationship is abusive. Only recently has the potential for sibling relationships to become abusive been acknowledged. The difference between abuse and rivalry manifests in one sibling persistently victimizing the other and having physical or psychological dominance over them. Unlike school bullies, children cannot escape siblings at home, and parents can fail to intervene effectively. In extreme cases, and especially cases of sexual abuse between siblings, parents can

1. Quotation widely attributed to Lankov. See Sean Bell and Yarin Eski, "'Break a Leg – It's All in the Mind': Police Officers' Attitudes towards Colleagues with Mental Health Issues," *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 10, no. 2 (2015): 95–101.

2. Some advocates of forgiveness as a therapeutic resource see experiencing anger as a necessary part of forgiveness. See, for example, Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).

be reluctant to acknowledge abuse because they do not want to hear such painful information. Some victims have reported that their parents or caregivers treating their testimony with doubtful responses has added a secondary harm.

Long-term effects of sibling abuse can include anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and eating disorders. Sadly, abuse between siblings is the most common form of domestic abuse.[3] Despite the negative effects of this abuse, victims can be put upon by their families to forgive their tormentors. In asking this, often family members do not value the forgiveness itself, rather they want the victim to set aside their anger or not speak about the abuse in order to promote harmony within the family.

Srinivasan's "The Aptness of Anger" introduces the idea of affective injustice by arguing that denying the right to appropriate anger creates an unfair and burdensome conflict in the individual whose anger is denied.[4] Srinivasan's article focuses on cases where the injustice takes place at a systemic level. I argue that affective injustice can also take place in responses to interpersonal abuse and that victims of sibling abuse are at risk of suffering this injustice. I will do this by illustrating that arguments against appropriate anger from philosophical and cultural sources can parallel damaging silencing tactics that abusers and enablers use and can echo epistemic barriers that victims of family abuse face.

2. Motivating the Paper

It is difficult to examine the detrimental effects of sibling abuse and traumatic anger because research on the topic is scarce. Two studies exist that examine the responses to sibling abuse and the effects of those responses. One study looked only at sexual abuse while the other looked at physical abuse.[5] In both studies, the top responses from parents to learning about the abuse included silencing, normalizing, trivializing, and victim blaming. In the later study, one participant reported feeling blamed for not forgiving her abuser and feeling responsible for tearing their family apart.[6] The researchers also conclude that current abuse can be viewed by family members as the victim's fault for refusing to forgive past abuse. In this way, forgiveness as a value is weaponized against the victim to alienate them either from the reality of their abuse or from their hopes for a resolution. In this section I will discuss some accounts from survivors of family abuse. These are given by volunteers from a support group and the names have been changed for anonymity. Whilst these stories are only anecdotal evidence for my claims, I hope that they create a plausible picture of how minimizing strategies, including inappropriate pressure to forgive, can be damaging.

2.1. Rose

Rose describes experiencing emotional abuse at the hands of her older sister:

> At family dinner my sister would start being nasty to me, negative comments about my weight or appearance, usually my weight. I just had to sit and ignore it. Others at the table would laugh. When I got sick of it and would say something back, I was yelled at for starting a fight.

Rose's account illustrates a common pattern for survivors of sibling abuse. A response to the abuse that causes discord will elicit a negative response even if it is appropriate. This could be because the abusive sibling is more volatile than the victim, so the victim is expected to put up with the abuse because they are easier to discipline. Rose also describes her sister lying about the abuse, with Rose herself not being believed. This is common with abuse survivors and can be both traumatic in itself and create a risk of secondary trauma when survivors meet skepticism later in life.

3. John Caffaro and Allison Conn-Caffaro, "Treating Sibling Abuse Families," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 10, no. 5 (2005): 604-23.
4. Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 123-44.
5. Margaret R. Rowntree, "Responses to Sibling Sexual Abuse: Are They as Harmful as the Abuse?" *Australian Social Work* 60, no. 3 (2007): 347-61; Courtney McDonald and Katherine Martinez, "Parental and Others' Responses to Physical Sibling Violence: A Descriptive Analysis of Victims' Retrospective Accounts," *Journal of Family Violence* 31, no. 3 (2016): 401-10.
6. Courtney McDonald and Katherine Martinez, "Parental and Others' Responses to Physical Sibling Violence: A Descriptive Analysis of Victims' Retrospective Accounts," *Journal of Family Violence* 31, no. 3 (2016): 401-10.

2.2. Bella

In Bella's case, the whole household was abusive and the abuse was both physical and emotional. It was so severe that she developed selective mutism for the first part of her life. Her father was awarded custody when courts found out about the abuse, but even he oscillated between believing her and not believing her. When she told members of their church what happened, they told her that she would be blameworthy if she did not forgive unconditionally and did nothing to intervene on her behalf even though she was still being abused. The narrative of forgiveness as an obligation was used to deny Bella's right to be angry and was followed up with no help to be safe from further abuse.

2.3. Josie

In Josie's case, she was subject to repeated violence from a sibling. She later found that any attempt to express anger, and even remove herself for her own safety, was met with negative judgement by family until she finally told a supportive friend. She explains,

> I didn't understand that what had happened was abuse. I didn't understand why I was so angry, I thought that I was bad for feeling that way. . . . When I told a friend that I felt guilty for my anger, she told me that she was glad I was angry, that I should be after what happened. That was the first step to accepting that what happened to me was abuse. I was later diagnosed with PTSD and able to get help. Anger was a big part of that.

Josie's account shows us anger can be necessary to understanding abuse. It also gives us a perspective where the anger constitutes part of the trauma. The anger is a source of discomfort and only becomes easier to live with when it is legitimized. In this story, anger is not just useful for communicating the damage of the abuse, it is also necessary to enable the victim know what happened to her.

2.4 Claire

Claire was sexually abused by her brother and blackmailed and shamed into not speaking about it. Years later, she has tried to tell her family about the abuse. Her parents will not discuss what her brother did, and if she speaks about it, they resent her for causing them pain. Talking about what happened is treated as an attempt to hurt her brother and parents. She wants to be heard, her family refuses. The fact that her brother was a child at the time makes him not blameworthy in their eyes, and this enables them to pressure her not to talk about the abuse as to talk about it and be angry about it is seen as blaming him.

In Claire's case, pressure not to discuss the abuse was part of the abuse. Many victims of sexual abuse experience something like this. This makes pressure not to discuss the abuse later in life damaging, it can be a reiteration of parts of the abuse. People who are abused by family members are more at risk of this because, especially in cases of sexual abuse, other family members find the abuse hard to acknowledge.

From what we have seen in these testimonials, the pressure to suppress appropriate anger was damaging to these victims and rarely done in the interests of the victim's own wellbeing. The pressure acts, instead, as a deflection to avoid dealing with some part of the victim's trauma. In Claire's case, the parents did not want to face the truth of what happened. In Bella's case, a religious mandate for forgiveness was given with no thought to what would benefit Bella, but it was used to justify the church member's victim blaming and failure to help. For Rose, her family members blamed her for any anger to avoid having to address her sibling's abusive behaviour. Josie's account show us how helpful acknowledging anger can be to understanding one's own trauma.

What the accounts have in common is the fact that, when dealing with trauma survivors, condemnation of anger and praise for forgiveness are both misused. Instead of being directed at helping survivors process their anger or forgive sincerely, all these victims found that condemnation of anger was used to shut down any attempt to share trauma.

There are two main motivations for shutting down those conversations present in these accounts. Firstly, some do not want to have to acknowledge what is happening or what hap-

pened. This is most present in Claire's story and very common among family of victims of sexual violence from siblings. This can be the result of guilt, shame, and feelings of denial from caregivers who are meant to be responsible for preventing harm to children. In McDonald and Martinez's study, a participant recalled telling a teacher about the abuse.[7] After a meeting with the teacher, the victim's mother told the victim that they had embarrassed her by talking about it. Although, in this instance, it is not clear that the mother feels any guilt, it is clear that the mother understands her responsibility to prevent the abuse and does not want to face it.

The second motivation for shutting down conversations about trauma is a discomfort with anger and pain. This is present in Rose's story, her anger was depicted as "starting a fight" where her sister's vitriol was tolerable so long as it was not acknowledged as bullying. Sarah Montana, in her 2018 talk "The real risk of forgiveness and why it's worth it," found that "everyone wants you to forgive quickly so that they can feel more comfortable and they can move on." I will discuss Sarah's work more later, but what she has in common with these survivors is the impression that immediate forgiveness was something morally required. This ignores the role anger has in processing trauma.

3. Sibling Abuse and Affective Injustice

Affective injustice, as Srinivasan describes it, is the injustice of having to choose whether to be angry where anger is appropriate but counterproductive.[8] It is an injustice of emotional, or affective, reality because the agent is put in a position where they are not given space to be angry. Even though anger is appropriate, the reaction others may have to their anger may be harmful in other ways. Srinivasan argues that this injustice is harmful because it imposes a kind of "psychic tax" on the person experiencing it. Srinivasan claims that victims can experience a normative conflict, where it is wrong to abandon appropriate anger but the price of holding onto it is high. Another concern Srinivasan raises is that arguing against anger for pragmatic reasons puts the responsibility for fixing the problem onto the victim rather than the perpetrator. This mirrors Rose's story from the previous section.

Srinivasan's examples focus on responses to racial oppression, where the victims are unfairly given the responsibility for bringing about change for a wrong that they did not create. In my examples, social change is usually not the goal. The goal is healing, something that the victim is burdened with regardless of how their anger is treated. The affective injustice here is that victims are asked to carry a part of their trauma so that they do not burden the perpetrator or enabler with it. This is a secondary injustice along with the initial injustice of the fact that victims are already responsible for putting in the work to heal damage that someone else did.

As we saw in the previous section, some of the calls for forgiveness that come from third parties are more self-interested than they are interested in forgiveness. However, whatever the internal reasoning, a common line of argument given by those who pressure victims to forgive is based in a misunderstanding of anger and forgiveness. Anger is seen as an ill-wish towards the perpetrator of the abuse.[9] Although this is often a product of anger, it is not a necessary part. Anger can be a way of recognizing harm.[10] Anger can also be a form of communication, seeking external validation and acknowledgement, and a call to action for the harm to stop.[11]

However, some philosophical accounts put perpetrators and their relationship with victims at the forefront of discussions on anger. For example, Nussbaum argues for unconditional love, as anger is wrong and even forgiveness itself is unkind in this account.[12] In Nussbaum's view, anger is characterised as a morally problematic emotion because it indicates a malicious

7. Courtney McDonald and Katherine Martinez, "Parental and Others' Responses to Physical Sibling Violence: A Descriptive Analysis of Victims' Retrospective Accounts," *Journal of Family Violence* 31, no. 3 (2016): 401-10.
8. Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 123-44.
9. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016).
10. Lorde (1981)
11. Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 123-44.
12. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016).

feeling towards the target. There is no room in this account for productive anger.[13] Nussbaum condemns as malicious a transactional kind of forgiveness, where forgiveness is granted after some acknowledgement or penance is paid on the part of the perpetrator. Nussbaum prefers unconditional forgiveness but even condemns this as "smug."[14] In this account, both anger and forgiveness are considered to be directed by one's feelings towards the perpetrator, rather than one's feelings towards oneself and how one ought to be treated.

Pettigrove argues in favor of "meekness" in the face of appropriate anger, as anger is often counterproductive.[15] Although Pettigrove does not condemn anger in itself, his argument for meekness in favour of anger stems mostly from ways in which anger is misdirected. On its own, this argument is compatible with the idea that anger is necessary to process negative experiences, but the praise of meekness in favor of anger echoes a common cultural phenomenon where meekness as a virtue is at times misused and overemphasised amongst those who have the most to gain from properly experiencing their anger. To illustrate: Rose's experience with hostility from her family for her anger can be seen as a call to behave meekly, even though the family witness her being bullied, her lack of meekness is seen as the real problem. Meekness as a virtue is too often weaponized against those who would benefit most from experiencing and expressing their anger.

Also, Radzik gives an account of anger and forgiveness geared towards the perpetrator's redemption.[16] Radzik's book gives a much more sympathetic account of anger, and even acknowledges that victims of wrongdoing should not have to engage with their perpetrators if it is going to affect them negatively. However, Radzik still suggests that, all other things being equal, victims should enable the perpetrators' redemption, if possible, and allow them to make amends. Although this account does do well to avoid extra harm to the victim wherever possible, it still keeps the role of anger and forgiveness focused on the moral status of the perpetrator. This is not problematic in itself, but this idea can leave victims feeling that they are selfish for not enabling reconciliation or that they are obliged to do the work required in order to allow perpetrators to make amends, even though this may have nothing to do with the victim's own wellbeing.

Although Nussbaum's critique of anger and forgiveness is based on an idea of anger that is not wholly accurate, outside of philosophical and psychological study this view is pervasive. Anger is often seen as an inherently vicious emotion, and this view can be used as a mandate to prevent victims from feeling it. Though Pettigrove's meekness and Radzik's making amends are based on more accurate accounts of anger, both the concept of meekness as a virtue and a perpetrator's right to make amends are too often used in bad faith to manipulate victims into responding to trauma in certain ways. Unfortunately, as illustrated by the first-hand accounts, what we see in reality is pressure against anger and pressure to forgive used as distractions from dealing with abuse. As Cherry argues, moral praise of forgiveness is often weaponized against the oppressed.[17] This manifests differently in a family scenario where harm is interpersonal and not systemic, but there are some important parallels. There is evidence to suggest that moral pressure to forgive can provide a mandate for further abuse of the unforgiving.[18] In Bella's example, forgiveness was given as religious advice in lieu of help or intervention to protect the victim from further harm. I believe that attempts to encourage victims of abuse and oppression into forgiveness without properly engaging their anger are, at best, more likely to result in an insincere denial of psychological reality than a real recovery from the trauma that they are experiencing. At worst, such attempts can become barriers to acknowledging trauma.

13. Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).
14. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016), 149.
15. Glen Pettigrove, "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger," *Ethics* 122, no. 2 (2012): 341-70.
16. Linda Radzik, *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009).
17. Myisha Cherry, "Forgiveness, Exemplars, and the Oppressed" in *The Moral Psychology of Forgiveness*, edited by Kathryn J. Norlock (Baltimore: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 55-72.
18. Courtney McDonald and Katherine Martinez, "Parental and Others' Responses to Physical Sibling Violence: A Descriptive Analysis of Victims' Retrospective Accounts," *Journal of Family Violence* 31, no. 3 (2016): 401-10.

With sibling abuse, where the abuse is so often normalized, third parties can incorrectly judge the victim's anger as inappropriate and gaslight them out of believing that they were abused and that they have a right to be angry.[19]

A potential solution to these unhelpful conceptions of anger may be that forgiveness or the lack of anger should be set aside as a goal. Instead, allowing the victim to come to terms with the harm that they have suffered should be the goal, which may entail letting go of anger in some cases. In this way, the goal is not to control the victim's feelings or communication, the goal is the victim's own wellbeing. We may understand this through Stanlick's concept of reconciling with harm.[20] Stanlick concludes that, in the victim reconciling with harm, the perpetrator of that harm can become irrelevant. When considering anger, it is very hard to separate anger from the perceived target of the anger, but it can be helpful to do so. This is especially the case with sibling abuse because in many cases, when the abuse takes place, the perpetrator is only a child, though the impact on the victim can be just as bad as if any adult were the abuser. We have already seen that anger can be useful for victims trying to understand their own abuse and communicate about it. Given these aspects of anger, the perpetrator's relationship with the anger is a secondary aspect of the emotion but is put at the front of arguments to abandon it. If, instead, we understand anger as part of the process of reconciling with harm, the arguments to condemn it become less credible. If forgiveness is part of the picture, I suggest that a way forward may be to see forgiveness as a potential part of psychological healing, but it should not be the goal in itself of healing from trauma.[21]

4. A Changing Cultural Understanding of Anger and Trauma

Anger has a cultural history of being seen as an emotion of violence, destruction, and power. In their longer testimony (shortened for reasons of space) one of the survivors quoted earlier describes seeing a psychotherapist about her anger and being presented with a treatment plan designed to help manage a short temper. The treatment plan seemed more suited to her abuser than herself and included the assumption that her anger was inappropriate and an overreaction rather than the troubling but legitimate response to years of abuse. Anger is frequently inappropriately morally coded as automatically negative. Forgiveness, too, is inappropriately morally coded as the "correct" thing to do. Writer and speaker Sarah Montana describes her own process of coming to forgive the man who killed her mother and brother by first talking about how societal pressure to forgive leads to victims trying to forgive for the wrong reasons. In her 2018 TED talk she states: "You think that forgiving quickly will make you a good person."[22] In her case, forgiveness helped her eventually, but common narratives around forgiveness were a substantial impediment to that process. Understanding forgiveness as a virtuous action led her to believing that to be a good person she had to forgive immediately, which did not lead to the benefit she later found in forgiveness.

However, there is growing appreciation of ways in which legitimate anger should be heard. In her 2018 book and accompanying TED talk, Soraya Chemaly explains the pressure to subdue rage, specifically female rage. Her book illustrates the ways in which women are expected to manage their own emotions but also those of the men around them by deferring to their emotional needs. Chemaly puts this in terms of several forms of oppression, as well as gendered oppression, and I believe that what she illustrates is also at play in cases of sibling abuse. If we replace the men in her example with the "person who has the power" in a family dynamic, a similar effect takes place. In cases of

19. Myisha Cherry, "The Errors and Limitations of our 'Anger Evaluating' Ways," *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. by Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan (Baltimore: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 49-65.
20. Nancy A. Stanlick, "Reconciling with Harm: An Alternative to Forgiveness and Revenge," *Florida Philosophical Review* 10, no. 1 (2010): 88-111.
21. Though some advocate for forgiveness as a therapeutic goal those models of forgiveness still keep the victim's healing as their main target. See, for example, Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).
22. Sarah Montana, "The Real Risk of Forgiveness- And Why It's Worth It," TEDxLincoln Square, May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEK2pliZ2I0.

sibling abuse, the power can come from being older, bigger, male, having more support from other family members, or being so emotionally volatile that others will work harder to placate you. The kinds of objections to anger levelled at women that Chemaly illustrates parallel some of the examples we have seen in the philosophy literature and can be linked to Cherry's "sympathy gap" and Srinivasan's observations, both that anger is linked to lack of control and that some groups have been excluded from ever participating it. In cases of sibling abuse, this exclusion can come from the isolated power dynamic between the siblings and given the amount of time siblings have together, this can have a similar powerful effect on the individual as cultural power constructs such as racial oppression and misogyny.

There is also growing acknowledgement of the way wrongful pressure to forgive makes forgiveness as a concept triggering. Articles in *GoodTherapy*, *Medium*, *The Good Men Project*, and *Psychology Today* discuss the fact that forgiveness can be a trigger for trauma patients because of the way that its perceived necessity can be used as a silencing tool.[23] Those who advocate forgiveness therapy also argue that this should come alongside acknowledgement and expression of anger.[24] Acknowledgement of anger is also a growing part of restorative justice projects such as Hidden Water. These changes come alongside a growing number of people who advocate for the inclusion of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a clinical diagnosis and a subset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Anger can constitute a key symptom of C-PTSD, especially, but also PTSD. Survivors of chronic abuse may experience emotional flashbacks to powerless anger experienced at the time of the abuse. Popular trauma treatments, such as eye movement desensitizing and reprocessing (EMDR), can sometimes incorporate treatment to allow the victim to process their anger, as there are health problems associated with suppressing it.

Increased public acknowledgement of legitimate anger goes alongside an increased societal intolerance of abuse as a whole, including sibling abuse. Journalistic reporting, psychology research, and activism have seen a recent surge in discussions of sibling abuse. As the long-term impact of sibling abuse becomes clearer, the dissemination of public knowledge on the issue is growing. *The Irish Times* recently published a series of articles on the subject and features about sibling abuse have appeared in *Psychology Today*, *BBC News Magazine*, and the *New York Times* among others.[25] Sadly, despite this increase in public awareness, victims still face significant barriers to help and prevention when compared with other types of bullying and violence. The family dynamic can mean that anger policing and forgiveness pressure can be bigger and more damaging than in other abuse scenarios. In the case of sexual violence, there is the added barrier of stigma.

5. Conclusion

Victims of trauma should not face pressure to set aside their anger. In doing so, victims may risk hindering their own recovery, as anger can be a crucial part of coming to terms with the abuse that they have suffered. Given the communicative power of anger, asking someone not to be angry is a form of silencing that can be especially damaging when silencing was part of the initial abuse. In cases of sibling abuse, victims can face extra barriers to understanding their abuse that may be made worse

23. Anastasia Pollock, "Why I Don't Use the Word Forgiveness in Trauma Therapy," *GoodTherapy*, January 20, 2016; W.R.R., "When 'Forgive' Is an Abuse Trigger," *The Good Men Project*, January 20, 2013; Rosenna Bakari, "Forgiveness is the Wrong Response to Trauma," *Medium*, May 13, 2020, https://medium.com/illumination/forgiveness-is-the-wrong-response-to-trauma-37a002774ade and "How to Deal with Childhood Trauma without Forgiving the Person Who Caused It.' *Medium*, September 18, 2020, https://medium.com/swlh/how-to-heal-childhood-trauma-without-forgiving-the-person-who-caused-it-e83ac9e0c5a1; Deborah Schurman-Kauflin, "Why You Don't Always Have to Forgive," *Psychology Today*, August 21, 2012.

24. Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).

25. Emma O'Friel, "Sibling Bullying: Humiliated and Scorned by a Family Member…This Is Not Just 'Sibling Rivalry,'" *The Irish Times*, January 2, 2018 is part of a series of articles in the *Irish Times* on the topic of sibling abuse. See also Darlene Lancer, "Sibling Bullying and Abuse: The Hidden Epidemic," *Psychology Today*, February 3, 2020; William Kremer, "Bully in the Next Bedroom—Are We in Denial about Sibling Aggression?" *BBC News Magazine*, November 8, 2013; and Katy Butler, "Beyond Rivalry, A Hidden World of Sibling Violence." *New York Times*, February 28, 2006.

by pressure to reconcile. This, combined with the fact that the family dynamic puts sibling abuse victims at increased risk of being asked to forgo anger, puts survivors of sibling abuse at risk of being unable to heal from their trauma. By putting relationships rather than understanding at the front of reactions to anger, third parties can create affective injustice for the victim.

However, growing research into both anger and sibling abuse gives us some reason to hope that in the future traumatic anger may be met with proper acknowledgment. Our goal of dealing with anger should be reoriented towards hearing and healing abuse survivors. We should give victims space to express and experience their anger instead of asking them to swallow it.

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The Power of Forgiveness for Abuse Survivors

A Public Holistic Response

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The beliefs that you hold about forgiveness open or close possibilities for you, determine your willingness to forgive, and as a result, profoundly influence the emotional tone of your life.

—Robin Casarjian[1]

1. Introduction

In recent years, forgiveness research, education, and therapy have received a great deal of theoretical and empirical attention. Past research illustrates the potential benefits of and interest in forgiveness therapy[2]; however, misunderstandings and misconceptions about what it means to forgive are common. Georgina Mills's important article illustrates common misunderstandings and misuses of forgiveness, the danger of not recognizing and validating abuse survivors' feelings of anger, as well as the danger in pressuring and/or forcing survivors of abuse to forgive and/or reconcile with their abuser and family of origin. In Mills's words, the focus of her paper is on "how the concepts anger and forgiveness are used in a way that often misconstrues both concepts." Mills explains that it is beyond the scope of her paper to give a full review of the psychology of interpersonal forgiveness or forgiveness as a healing response. Thus, this public response serves to discuss current literature's definition of forgiveness, including what it is and is not, as well as how forgiveness, if properly understood and freely chosen can be an effective approach to healing for individuals who have been abused.

2. Definition of Forgiveness

Although many definitions of forgiveness exist, a popular and commonly used one defines forgiveness as "a willingness to abandon the right to resentment, negative judgment and behavior toward the one who unjustly injured the individual, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and perhaps, love toward him or her.[3] Forgiving does not mean reconciling, forgetting, pardoning, or condoning, even though it is frequently misunderstood or mistakenly linked with these concepts.[4] Forgiveness is an individual decision and process, and it is not something that occurs overnight as reflected in the 20-unit, four phase, process model of interpersonal forgiveness developed by Enright and colleagues. Simply defined, forgiveness is the decreasing of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward one's offender and, perhaps, gradually over time increasing positive thoughts, feelings, and sometimes, behaviors. Forgiving is usually explored after the injured realizes that the way he or she has been coping is not working.

1. Robin Casarjian, *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart* (Bantam, 1992), 12.
2. Robert D. Enright and Richard P. Fitzgibbons, *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, D.C.: APA, 2000), http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/10381-000; Suzanne Freedman and Tiffany Zarifkar, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness and Guidelines for Forgiveness Therapy: What Therapists Need to Know to Help Their Clients Forgive," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 3 no. 1 (2016): 45-58, https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000087; Terri-Ann Legaree, Jean Turner, and Susan Lollis, "Forgiveness and Therapy: A Critical Review of Conceptualizations, Practices, and Values Found in the Literature," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 33, no. 2 (2007): 192–213, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2007.00016.x.
3. Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001), 46-47, emphasis added; Joanna North, "Wrongdoing and Forgiveness," *Philosophy* 62, no. 242 (1987): 499-508.
4. Suzanne Freedman, Robert D. Enright, and Jeanette Knutson, "A Progress Report on the Process Model of Forgiveness" in *Handbook of Forgiveness*, edited by E. L. Worthington, Jr., 393-406 (New York: Routledge, 2005).

3. The Role of Anger in the Forgiveness Process

In her introduction, Mills states that many people, including philosophers, well-wishers, and even health professionals, believe that abuse survivors should try and abandon their feelings of anger, and that this pressure to abandon anger can be harmful. I totally agree that pressure to abandon anger, when an individual has experienced any deep, personal, and unfair hurt, such as abuse, is wrong and unhealthy. However, the assumption that forgiveness includes this suppression of anger is incorrect. In fact, anger is the second unit in the 20-unit process model developed by Enright and the Human Development Study Group.[5] Anger is recognized as a natural and normal emotion after being deeply hurt. According to Enright, the first step in forgiving is recognizing that you are angry, and for some people, this may be the hardest step.[6] While anger, in the context of abuse or any deep hurt is justified, normal, and natural, without moving beyond it, it can be destructive. Forgiveness allows the injured the opportunity to both express his/her anger, be validated for it and then move past it to achieve healing.

4. The Role of Apology in the Forgiveness Process

Although not addressed by Mills, there is debate in the literature regarding whether one should forgive if she or he has not received an apology.[7] As Klatt and Enright point out, the choice to forgive "is not based on the deservingness or actions of the transgressor, but rather the injured person's desire for emotional healing."[8] If you don't allow yourself to forgive until you receive an apology from your offender, you may be reinjuring yourself, in that you cannot let go of your anger and heal until you receive an apology or admittance of wrongdoing from your offender. Unfortunately, this does not occur for many individuals, especially survivors of sibling abuse. Of course, an apology or repentance from the offender does make forgiving easier, but it is not necessary. Regardless of the offender's actions, the person forgiving can work on becoming free from the burden of anger and resentment. In addition, the forgiver is making it clear that what was done was wrong, should not have been done, and will not be tolerated in the future.[9]

5. The Difference Between Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Although frequently confused with reconciliation, forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation and forgiving does not automatically lead to reconciliation.[10] This is especially important to emphasize for survivors of sibling abuse. One can forgive and choose not to reconcile. Forgiveness is something the injured can do on his/her own, while true reconciliation requires a change in behavior on the part of the offender; possibly including an apology and the admittance of wrongdoing. Some criticize forgiveness because they think that advocating forgiveness leads to further abuse. However, in the case of a woman abused by her sibling and not believed by her parents, she can separate from her family and work on forgiving without interacting with the abusive sibling or the unsupportive family. When a woman chooses to forgive, she makes the decision herself, from a position of safety, knowing that forgiving is not the same as reconciliation. As stated by an incest survivor twenty-four years after her participation in Freedman and Enright's intervention study,[11] "The most fascinating part

5. Robert D. Enright and The Human Development Study Group, "The Moral Development of Forgiveness," in *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development*, Vol. 1, edited by William Kurtines and Jacob Gewirts, 123-52 (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991).
6. Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001).
7. Joram Graf Haber, *Forgiveness* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991); Margaret R. Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1993): 341-52.
8. John S. Klatt and Robert D. Enright, "Initial Validation of the Unfolding Forgiveness Process in a Natural Environment," *Counseling and Values* 56, no. 1-2 (2011): 25-42, 26.
9. Suzanne Freedman and Tiffany Zarifkar, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness and Guidelines for Forgiveness Therapy: What Therapists Need to Know to Help Their Clients Forgive," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 3 no. 1 (2016): 45-58, https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000087.
10. Suzanne Freedman, "Forgiveness & Reconciliation: The Importance of Understanding How They Differ," *Counseling and Values*, 42 (1998): 200-16, http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.1998.tb00426.x.
11. Suzanne Freedman and Robert D. Enright, "Forgiveness as an Intervention Goal with Incest Survivors," *Journal of*

of the forgiveness concept introduced to me by you was the fact that I didn't have to see or associate with the person I forgave."[12]

6. Research and Personal Statement Illustrating the Power of Forgiveness

When properly understood and practiced forgiveness can be healing for survivors of abuse and other individuals who have experienced deep hurt. Freedman and Enright[13] reviewed three intervention studies focusing on the psychology of forgiveness for women who have been abused. All three used the process model of forgiveness, with randomized experimental and control groups, and examined effectiveness through pre-test, post-test, and follow-up assessments. Results illustrate that forgiveness is an effective way of restoring psychological health following abuse, as well as increasing forgiveness toward the offender. The following quote comes from a female survivor of interpersonal violence.[14] Her words illustrate how forgiveness, freely chosen, can be healing for survivors of intimate partner violence and other abuse survivors, how forgiveness differs from reconciliation and how holding onto anger and resentment is not healthy. She states:

> Upon forgiving, I have not forgotten what happened. In remembering I make different choices in my intimate relationships. I do not condone what was done to me. It was morally wrong and undeserved. This forgiveness is not pardon, for I do not excuse his behavior or pretend it never occurred. My process of forgiveness was not reconciliation. In fact, mine was the opposite. It was a fracture that will never be mended. … Forgiveness only became an option for me after I severed the marriage.… When I decided that I did not want to keep my trauma alive, I moved toward forgiveness. I believe forgiveness is the best way to care for myself after years of sacrificing self-care. It is ridiculous, after years of being made to feel guilty; that I would allow anyone's misconceptions about forgiveness to make me feel guilty for (finally) taking care of myself. I admire and appreciate those survivors who publicly fight against intimate partner violence. I thank them for their work and for the ways that it has benefited me. However, I will not sacrifice my personal health and well-being to retain my anger. I discovered a different kind of power, a power that has come through forgiveness.

7. Conclusion

Research supports forgiveness therapy as an effective form of treatment for those who have endured deep hurts. Three different meta-analyses were conducted and all illustrate that as people learn to forgive, their psychological health improves in a statistically significantly way.[15] Articles like Mills's are appreciated, as they help clarify the dangers of forced forgiveness, as well as the misuse of forgiveness because of faulty understanding and practice.[16] The purpose of this response is to clear up any preconceived notions surrounding what it means to forgive, illustrate the role of anger in the forgiveness process, and highlight the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation. Hopefully, this response also clarifies

Consulting and Clinical Psychology 64 (1996): 983-92.

12. Personal communication.

13. Suzanne Freedman and Robert D. Enright, "The Use of Forgiveness Therapy with Female Survivors of Abuse," *Journal of Women's Health* 6 no. 3 (2017), https://doi.org/10.4172/2167-0420.1000369.

14. Suzanne Freedman and Tiffany Zarifkar, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness and Guidelines for Forgiveness Therapy: What Therapists Need to Know to Help Their Clients Forgive," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 3 no. 1 (2016): 45-58, https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000087.

15. Thomas W. Baskin and Robert D. Enright, "Intervention Studies on Forgiveness: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 82 (2004): 79-90; Nathaniel G. Wade, William T. Hoyt, Julia E. M. Kidwell, Everett L. Worthington, "Efficacy of Psychotherapeutic Interventions to Promote Forgiveness: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82, no. 1 (2014): 154-70; Nathaniel G. Wade, William T. Hoyt, Julia E. M. Kidwell, Everett L. Worthington, "Efficacy of Psychotherapeutic Interventions to Promote Forgiveness: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82, no. 1 (2014): 154-70; Sadaf Akhtar and Jane Barlow, "Forgiveness Therapy for the Promotion of Mental Well-Being: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 19, no. 1 (2018): 107-22.

16. Suzanne Freedman, Robert D. Enright, and Jeanette Knutson, "A Progress Report on the Process Model of Forgiveness" in *Handbook of Forgiveness*, edited by E. L. Worthington, Jr., 393-406 (New York: Routledge, 2005).

how forgiveness can be healing for individuals who have been abused, especially by family members. As stated earlier, forgiveness is an individual choice and as such, we need to recognize that an individual's choice to genuinely forgive is just that, his/her choice, and needs to always be respected. It is important that individuals have accurate information regarding what forgiveness is and is not, so they can make the choice to forgive, from an informed and educated position, if they so desire.

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