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Thriving Through Past Hurts:
A Primer on the Benefits of
Interpersonal Forgiveness

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Presentation Questions

- What is (interpersonal) forgiveness?
- What does scientific research tell us about forgiveness?
- Is forgiveness different for multicultural students and students of faith?
- Can students learn to forgive? What is the path to forgiveness?

Story of Schopenhauer's Porcupines



Cautionary Views of Forgiving

Doesn't discussion of forgiveness ...

- ... communicate condemnation to the victim?
- ... invoke moral/religious imperatives?
- ... usually fail because the offender doesn't apologize or accept responsibility?
- ... encourage return to dangerous relationships?
- ... reduce the likelihood of positive social change by stripping away the motivational force of anger?

What is Forgiveness?

- Forgiveness is not:
 - ❌ Minimizing
 - ❌ Condoning / tolerating
 - ❌ Justifying
 - ❌ Pardoning / excusing
 - ❌ Forgetting
 - ❌ Reconciling
- Forgiveness is:
 - ✅ An intrapersonal *process*
 - ✅ Freely chosen
 - ✅ Decrease in negative / antisocial feelings
 - ✅ Increase in positive / prosocial feelings

Forgiveness Defined

- A multifaceted process (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, motivational) ...
... in which unforgiving (e.g., vengeful, hostile) attitudes toward an offender are reduced ...
... and are replaced by increased prosocial (e.g., empathic, compassionate) attitudes.
- An intrapersonal process regarding interpersonal relationships

How Forgiveness Works

- “Note that forgiveness does not erase a transgression. It does not change the nature of the transgression to somehow turn a wrong into a right. When we forgive, we change the emotional attachments to the transgression. That reduces negative emotions and increases positive emotions.”
(Worthington, 2003)

Benefits of Forgiving

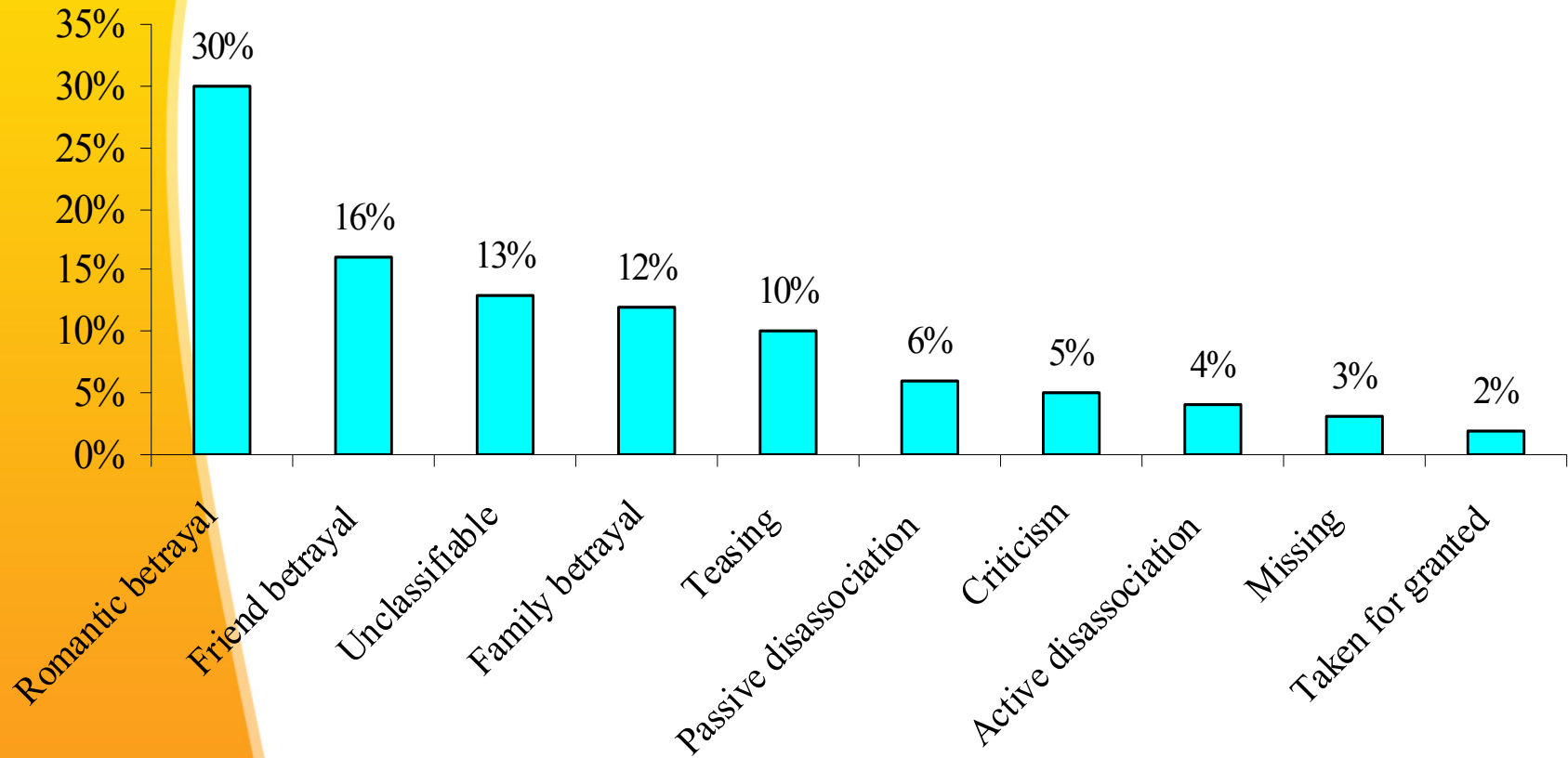
Positive correlations:

- ↑ subjective well-being
- ↑ meaning in life
- ↑ positive emotions
- ↑ life satisfaction
- ↑ health habits
- ↑ task coping
- ↑ immunity

Negative correlations:

- ↓ depression
- ↓ sadness
- ↓ anxiety
- ↓ anger/hostility
- ↓ aggression
- ↓ grief
- ↓ stress hormones
- ↓ drinking / smoking
- ↓ blood pressure
- ↓ cortisol reactivity

Types of Hurts Reported by College Students



Source: [Goldman \(2009\)](#)

Classification system: [Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans \(1998\)](#)

Cultural Factors

Factor	Individualistic worldview	Collectivistic worldview
View of Self	Independent	Interdependent
Primary face concern	Self-face	Other-face & self-face
Forgiveness & reconciliation	Distinct	Closely related
Central goal of forgiveness	Personal well-being	Social well being
Primary tools for forgiveness	Psychotherapy, self-help resources	Rituals, narratives, communal healers

*Adapted from [Sandage & Williamson \(2005\)](#) and [Sandage & Wiens \(2001\)](#)

Forgiveness in the Context of Religious Meaning Systems

- As a meaning system, religion would be expected to influence individuals':
 - Beliefs
 - Emotions
 - Actions





Judaism

- Forgiveness is commanded by God in scripture.
- God has forgiven us. Therefore, we should forgive others
- Forgiveness is obligatory only if the transgressor:
 - Expresses remorse
 - Compensates the victim
 - Promises to never repeat the offense.
- Reconciliation is not required



Christianity

- Similar to Judaism, we are to forgive because God first forgave us.
- God and Christ serve as role models of forgiveness.
- Does not require reconciliation.
- Unlike Judaism, forgiveness is not conditional upon transgressor's repentance.



Islam

- The Qur'ān, as interpreted by some scholars, teaches that the search for forgiveness is more virtuous than the search for justice.
- God gives a special blessing to those who forgive rather than seek revenge.



Buddhism

- Compassion.
- Forbearance.
- Interconnectedness of all things.
- Karma.



Hinduism

- Forgiveness is one of the concepts necessary to follow the path of *dharma*, or righteousness.
- Lack of forgiveness in this life will be repaid with negative outcomes in a subsequent life.
- All people have the power to forgive, because each person has divinity within his or her being.

Practical Implications

How do we apply this information to the students we work with?

- Assess for forgiveness-justice orientation.
- Work to highlight centrality of forgiveness in particular religion.

Forgiveness Intervention Research

Intervention Models:

- Enright's Process Model (Enright et al., 1991)
- Worthington's (2001) REACH Model

Meta-analyses on forgiveness intervention studies:

- Worthington et al. (2000): $d = .43$
- Baskin & Enright (2004): $d = .82$ (group); $d = 1.66$ (individual)
- Wade et al. (2005): ($ES = 0.57$ vs. $ES = 0.43$ for comparison tx)

How Do People Forgive?

- Pyramid Model to **REACH** Forgiveness
(Worthington, 2001)



- **R**ecall the hurt
- **E**mpathy for the offender
- **A**ltruistic gift of forgiveness
- **C**ommit to forgiveness
- **H**old on to forgiveness

Images of Forgiveness

Holding a grudge is like ...

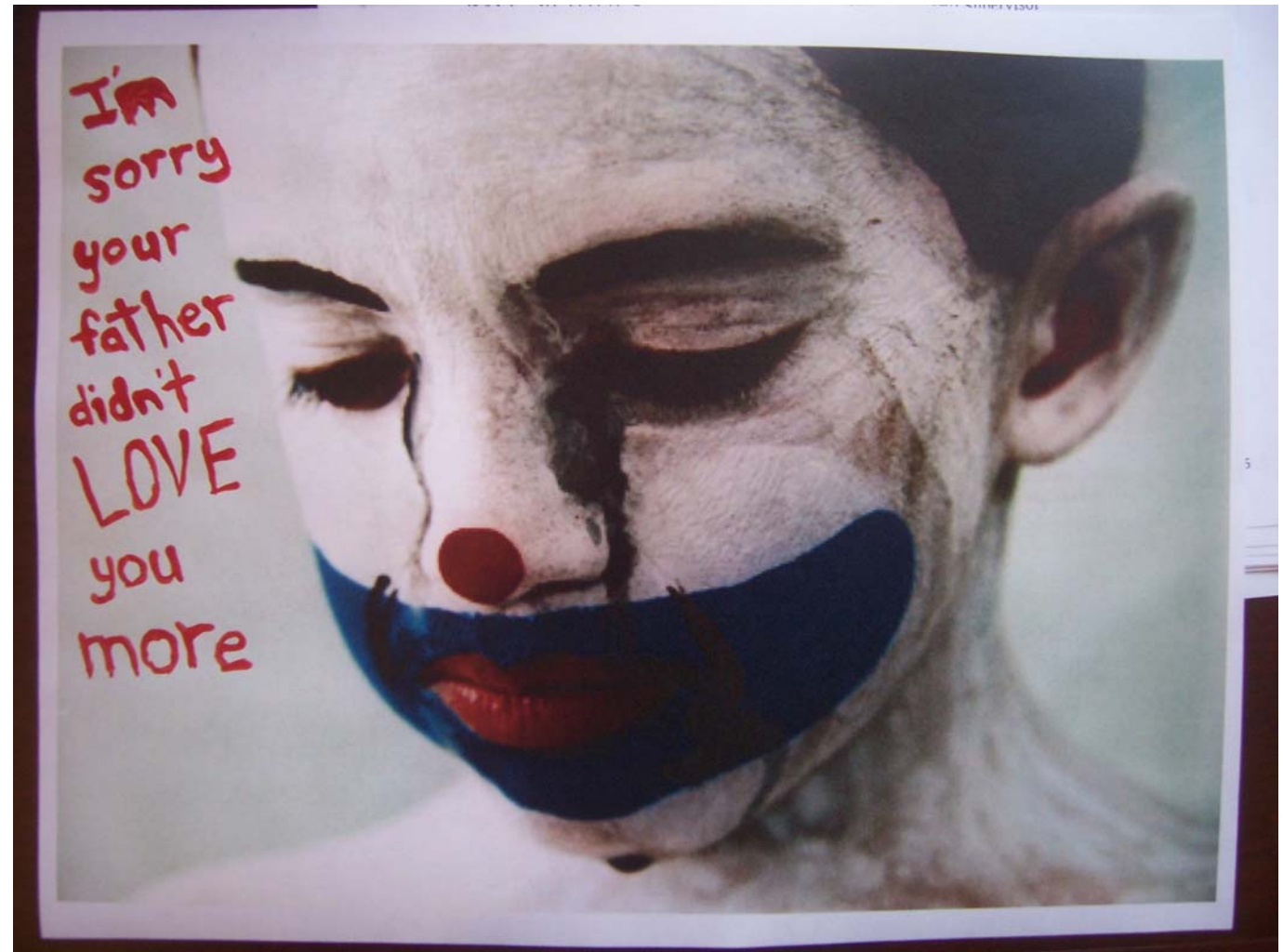
- ... grasping a hot coal w/ the intent of throwing it at someone else
- ... swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to die
- ... being stung to death by one bee

Forgiving is like ...

- ... gathering up all the garbage that's been cluttering the garage and disposing of it
- ... washing your hands clean of germs that have been making you sick for a long time
- ... finally finishing a marathon you've been running for a long time



Using Art



Using Art



Final Thoughts on Forgiveness

- People often *want* to forgive, so don't be afraid to discuss forgiveness.
- Forgiveness occurs *within* the hurt person, and does not require anything on the part of the offender.
- Attitudes toward forgiveness are influenced by cultural and religious factors.
- There are *many* paths to forgiveness.
- Forgiveness takes time.

Forgiveness Meditation

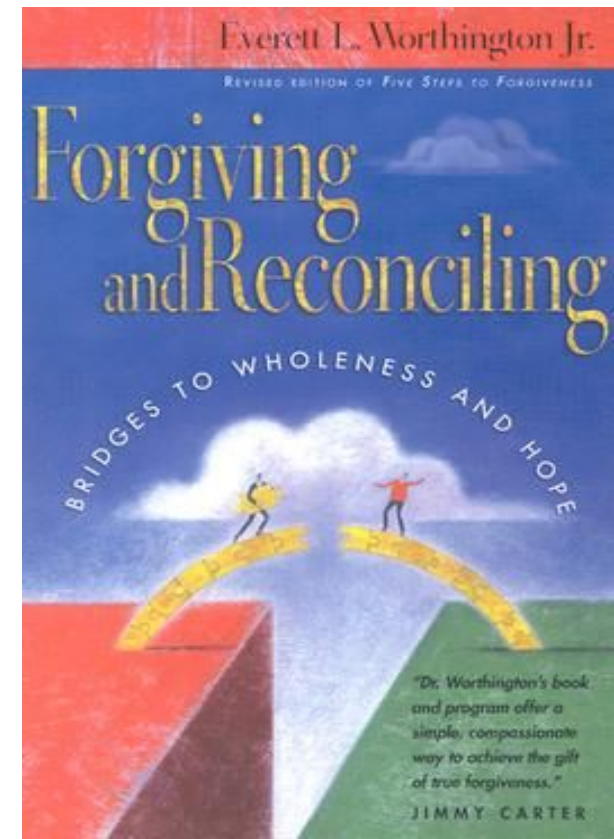
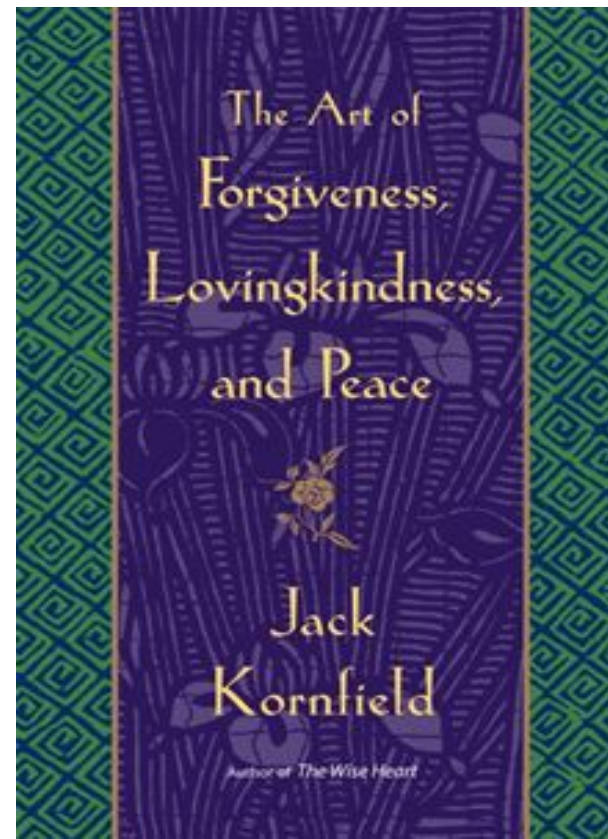
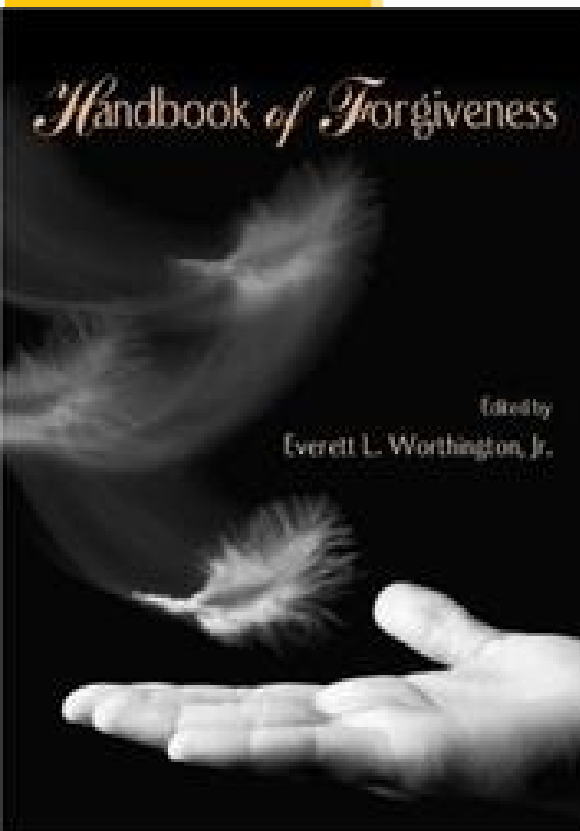
- **FORGIVENESS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE HURT OR HARMED YOU:** There are many ways that you have been harmed by others, abused or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word or deed. Let yourself picture and remember these many ways. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this past and sense that you can release this burden of pain by extending forgiveness when your heart is ready. Now say to yourself:

I now remember the many ways others have hurt or harmed me, wounded me, out of fear, pain, confusion and anger. I have carried this pain in my heart too long. To the extent that I am ready, I offer them forgiveness. To those who have caused me harm, I offer my forgiveness, I forgive you.

-- Jack Kornfield

Additional Resources

- <http://www.learningtoforgive.com/>
- <http://thepowerofforgiveness.com/>
- <http://www.forgiving.org/>



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