

SWEPT UP *in* FORGIVENESS

BY JANICE ARENOFSKY



With dozens of forgiveness-themed books on the market, it's easy to see why many people fall into the trap of feeling pressured to forgive those who betrayed or harmed them. Forgiveness therapy fits into the niche of positive psychology, an approach that promotes a feel-good, let's-be-happy message. For these reasons, whether they have been hurt by betrayal or victimized by abuse, many women are convinced that forgiveness can empower them.

A closer look at the issue of forgiveness, however, reveals its complexity and its contradictions. How does forgiving empower someone if they feel pressured to sweep aside their own rage? Is it possible to forgive someone in the absence of an apology?

According to Sharon Lamb, a psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts and co-author of several books and articles on forgiveness, the pressure to forgive may actually perpetuate feelings of inequality.

"Forgiveness therapy is a victim therapy that makes no claims to helping stop victimization," Lamb wrote in her article "Forgiveness Therapy: The Context and Conflict," which was published in the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*.

Part of the problem is that gender norms bestow on women such warm and fuzzy virtues as compassion, gentleness and empathy. Women are also socialized from birth to swallow their anger. As a result, they often learn to fear confrontations and dismiss violations against them for the sake of harmonious relationships. Socialization also places responsibility for the preservation of relationships squarely on the shoulders of women, and pressure to forgive can distract women from expressing their anger.

Kathryn Norlock, in her scholarly book *Forgiveness from a Feminist Perspective*, notes how women are conditioned to suppress righteous anger and tend to blame themselves. When they express their anger, they are often rewarded with pejorative labels such as "difficult" or "emotional," or else they are told they are overreacting.

Yet there are clear benefits of women's collective anger. "Realizing and acting on anger has led to greater rights and freedoms," according to Lamb, while repressing it has led to subordination. For example, until women as a group got angry about sexual harassment, they were encouraged to tolerate abusive behaviour in the workplace. The same thing happened historically with wife abuse: Women were expected to forgive their husbands' battery.

Anger was actually embraced by the early women's liberation movement as an essential element of social change. Naomi Scheman, a philosophy professor at the University

of Minnesota, wrote in 1973 that consciousness-raising groups provided rare opportunities for women to express anger. She concluded that the seriousness of a woman's pronouncements "may enable her to come in touch with buried feelings."

Because women were historically denied the opportunity to express anger—they simply had no legal recourse against injustices committed against them—their husbands, bosses and other perpetrators could also ignore it.

If that were not bad enough, according to Sylvia Burrow, an associate professor in the department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia, feminine politeness also steals power from women. In her paper "Verbal Sparring and Apologetic Points," published last year in *Informal Logic*, she notes that "Women in argumentation contexts face oppressive limitations ... because their authority is undermined by gendered norms of politeness." If anger emerges due to others ignoring this authority, this emotion also is dismissed, says Burrow. This can compromise their self-worth.

Along those lines, Arizona State University philosophy professor Jeffrie Murphy, the author of *Getting Even*, believes people with low self-esteem may be more inclined to forgive than to defend their moral beliefs. This primes women for positive psychology and its goal of self-contentment. It doesn't hurt, either, that the short-term, problem-oriented format of forgiveness therapy is highly compatible with the short-term coverage provided by workplace health insurance plans. Forgiveness therapy can be broken down into neat steps, unlike traditional psychotherapy or cognitive behaviour therapy.

Unfortunately, some mental health professionals continue to pathologize women's anger, instead of validating it as a natural response. Women are often encouraged to cope, heal and mend relationships with their perpetrators. The result is that anger can build, and its damage may go unrecognized. "Forgiveness domesticates the angry female," says Lamb. "It produces a 'good girl.'"

We are bombarded with the forgiveness message in magazines and books, and on TV talk shows like *Oprah*. There are dozens of classes, courses and workshops available online and elsewhere offering self-help through forgiveness circles. However, the ubiquity of forgiveness information does not automatically endow it with ethical authority. Lamb, also the co-editor of the book *A Bone to Pick: Of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Reparation, and Revenge*, writes that "forgiveness as an act of self-help may be in some way immoral.... The act of battering is not just a personal insult; it is an insult

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to all women and makes it more dangerous for all women to exist in the world.”

Social and cultural expectations aside, individual acts of forgiveness for crimes like domestic abuse and sexual abuse may also send negative messages to others. Anger can even be valuable when it is used to enact better legislation and engineer better social programs.

Unquestionably, forgiveness can be part of a person's healing process, given the right motivation and set of circumstances. However, because the pressure to forgive can come with a potential loss of self-respect, disempowerment, repressed anger and inauthenticity, it should be considered within a wider social context of gendered power. Norlock sums it up by noting that the “disproportionate cultural expectation that women are more forgiving than men is a reason for women to pursue other methods of recovery.”

Fortunately, there are methods of recovery that use a feminist ethic that incorporates justice and fairness. It is an approach that encourages women to perform what Marquette University faculty member Margaret Urban

Walker, author of *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*, calls moral repair or “the task of restoring or stabilizing ... the basic elements that sustain human beings in a recognizably moral relationship.”

Offender apologies fit into the category of moral repair. According to psychotherapist Cloe Madanes, a family therapist and the author of *Relationship Breakthrough*, an apology is made up of four crucial elements: an acknowledgement of the truth; a demonstration of empathy; an assumption of full responsibility; and, lastly, reparations. While forgiveness is often believed to be the consequence of a sincere apology, an apology is only sincere when given freely and with no expectation that forgiveness will follow.

So it is that forgiveness is neither a universal psychological antidote to harm inflicted by others nor a pragmatic, common sense path towards empowerment. At best, it can reduce open hostilities and start a dialogue. At worst, it can devastate a person's self-worth. ❖

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Healing and Justice

BY JANICE ARENOFSKY

Many different modes of anger management or stress relief and therapy may be beneficial to those who have been victimized. Some methods or steps include:

1. Support groups and social activism. These may improve self-worth and return control to victims.
2. Conflict resolution, victim-offender conferencing, mediation or family group conferencing. Each may facilitate emotional release.
3. Victim impact statements. Delivered in a courtroom, they can include an offender's apology. When victims tell their stories, and when their narratives are validated, those harmed recognize that they interpreted their pain correctly.
4. Restorative justice. In some circumstances, it enables victims to be heard, to receive apologies and to begin healing.
5. Letting go (without forgiving). Supportive counselling may help victims distance themselves from their pain, establish an identity separate from the hurt and build self-esteem. Therapists can help clients understand the offender's role.
6. Remember and resist. Cognitive or rational-emotive therapy may help change thoughts and reduce conflicts.
7. Relaxation, visualization, mindful meditation, yoga or hypnosis. All may help restore self-worth and return control to victims.
8. Live with grief of anger without being overwhelmed. As Sharon Lamb says, “Find release from anger by embracing it.” ❖