

Forgiveness

Intro

Welcome back to session five – this is the last but one session and we are going to think about forgiveness!

Scripture

"Be kind to one another, tender hearted forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you" Ephesians 4:32

Question

After the last session – how did you find being kind to yourself? Have you been able to tap into your soothing system this week? How are we feeling right now, threatened? Driven? Relaxed?....

The topic of forgiveness can be a really difficult one, and can bring up strong emotions and memories, especially if people have deliberate and seriously harmed us in the past. It's really important in this session to be kind to ourselves and each other, there may be subjects and hurts you don't wish to speak about or address in this session, that's completely ok. If you want some more support or time to talk 1-1 let your facilitator know.

What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a powerful tool, that enables us to transform feelings of anger and bitterness, sometimes it enables us to even feel more positive about the person who has harmed us.¹

Forgiveness is intentional, voluntary and driven by a deliberate decision to let go and move on. It is a choice which involves taking a fresh perspective however this doesn't mean that the relationship always goes back to how it was before the transgression, you can forgive and put healthy boundaries in place which create more safety.

Forgiveness can be instant but it usually a process requiring great patience, trust, persistence and prayer.

Sometimes forgiving others can be hard, especially if the person continues to sin against us or if we never receive an apology from the person who hurt us.

Forgiveness is different from pardoning, condoning, excusing forgetting or denying and doesn't necessarily mean that reconciliation takes place.²

Everett Worthington a christian psychology professor who has spent his life researching forgiveness says there is a distinction between decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness.

"God requires decisional forgiveness from you, he desires emotional forgiveness for you"³

In other words, God asks us to make a decision to forgive, but it can take our emotions a while to catch up. A bit like changing our thoughts to change our feelings that we looked at in previous sessions. When it comes to forgiveness we may 'decide' to forgive someone but there will be a passage of time before we 'feel' different towards them.

Discussion

Why do we find it hard to forgive others?

- We are angry
- We are afraid of being hurt
- We become used to becoming a victim
- We think the person does not deserve it
- We are waiting for an apology.

What does the Bible say about Forgiveness?

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." Ephesians 1:7

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" 1 John 1:9

First of all the bible is really clear – Jesus has forgiven us! If he has forgiven us – how does he expect us to behave towards those who sin against us?

"Be kind to one another, tender hearted forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you" Ephesians 4:32

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Colossians 3:13

Our forgiveness of others, flows from knowing we have been forgiven ourselves. How can knowing Jesus has forgiven us, help us when we have to forgive others?

Peter asked Jesus "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Jesus said "I do not say to you, up to seven times but up to seventy times seven" Matthew 18:21

In this conversation with Peter Jesus appears to tell him to constantly forgive! Do we think forgiveness is a one-off event, or something that we constantly practice? How might that relate to Everett Worthington's Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness?

What happens to our emotions and minds when we don't forgive?

When we hold on to the anger, hurt and resentment associated with what another person did to us then we are still allowing them to cause damage in our lives.

Unforgiveness is associated with anger, sadness and feelings of not being in control.

"Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die"
Marianne Williamson

What happens to our emotions and minds when we do forgive?

When you forgive others you are releasing yourself from the anger and negativity that binds you to the person. Forgiveness restores positive thoughts, feelings, behaviours towards the offending party.

People who forgive find that they "become more open, less rigid, and emotionally stable, developed overall relationship satisfaction, and attained a sense of purpose and meaning in life." Forgiving can also improve our own sense of self acceptance.⁴

Forgiveness helps the forgiver let go of the past and move on with their lives and restores the forgiver's sense of personal power.

Discussion

How do I forgive – The REACH METHOD

Everett Worthington gives five steps to practice as we seek to walk in forgiveness

You can find out more about his REACH method here:

<http://www.evworthington-forgiveness.com/diy-workbooks>

Recall the hurt. When we are hurt we often try to protect ourselves by denying the hurt. To heal we must recall the hurt as objectively as possible. Forgiveness is not dismissing the pain that you have been caused.

Empathise. To forgive, try to feel the oppressors feelings. Try and understand why they behaved the way they did, try and put yourself in their shoes.

Altruistic. Give forgiveness as a gift, remember how it feels to be forgiven, and then offer that gift to another. It is really important that we don't just forgive to help ourselves move on, but that we seek to offer forgiveness as a gift to the other person who has harmed us.

Commit. Write a letter, or tell someone that you are going to forgive. Or write yourself a certificate saying on this day I choose to forgive.

Hold on to forgiveness. When you doubt you have forgiven remind yourself of the steps you have taken.

Case Study

Sam has a friend, and they have known each other since childhood. Sam recently confided in this friend that Sam has been having difficulties in her marriage, and suspects that her husband may be having an affair. Recently at a social gathering, another friend mentioned to Sam that she is willing to support her to confront her husband if she needs. Sam knows that she has only told her childhood friend that she suspects her husband is having an affair – and now she feels humiliated and angry that this trust has been broken, dealing with her marriage was hard enough but now she feels doubly betrayed.

Discuss as a group – how might you help Sam walk through the REACH method. What could Sam do for each step?

Activity

Holding onto the cross. When we think about forgiveness, and how others may have hurt us it can bring up very strong thoughts and emotions. Just because we may have faith in Jesus, doesn't mean we don't feel very real human emotions when we have been wronged. We do have a choice though – every time we experience difficult thoughts and emotions we can choose to hang on to them, or we hold onto something else.

The cross is a great symbol of love and forgiveness, rather than focussing on the hurt we have received, we can focus on how much Jesus loves us, and how his forgiveness flows to us.

For the next few minutes, take a holding cross in your hand, and pause, you might want to close your eyes, breath deeply, and try and gently focus your thoughts on how much Jesus loves you. You might find your mind wanders back to difficult thoughts and painful emotions, thats ok – simply talk to Jesus about them and squeeze the cross in your hand to remind you that He is always with you.

Prayer and Close

Lord God I thank you for forgiving me and loving me. I thank you the by your grace I can come to you exactly as I am.

I pray that by your Spirit you will help me to forgive others as you have forgiven me and I pray you'll continue to heal and restore me as I put my trust in you.

In Jesus name. Amen

Next Session

In the next session we are going to look at our purpose, its the last one! This week why don't you try:

- Keep offering yourself compassion. Forgiving others, and forgiving ourselves can be really tough - we need compassion as we walk this journey.

- Perhaps you have a situation that you want to walk through the REACH method with, maybe revisit the exercise on the reach method, but see how you can apply it to a situation in which you wish to offer forgiveness

- How do you feel about the next session being our last? You might be excited, nervous, or even sad! However you feel it's ok - next time we will think about moving forward with all we have learnt!

References

1. Seligman, M. *Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. London: Nicholas Brealey 2011
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3. Worthington, E. *A Just Forgiveness: Responsible Healing Without Excusing Injustice*. IVP Books 2012.
4. Paul Raj, C.S. Elizabeth & P. Padmakumari (2016) Mental health through forgiveness: Exploring the roots and benefits, *Cogent Psychology*, 3:1,

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