A Model for School Counselors Supporting African American

Youth With Forgiveness

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Abstract

The authors describe how practicing school counselors can appropriately and effectively work with African American youth regarding forgiveness. Further, the authors discuss the challenges that African American youth face. They illuminate how school counselors can help emotionally injured African American youth. As a school counseling intervention the forgiveness process can be conducted in a manner that is congruent with, and sensitive to, the development of positive African American ethnic identity. The use of forgiveness in school counseling is described, including the theory (Enright, 2001), and a case study, related to a process model of forgiveness.

Keywords: forgiveness, African American, counseling, youth, schools, anger

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The construct of forgiveness has received worthwhile attention from the counseling research community in recent years. Moorhead, Gill, Minton, and Myers (2012) found empirically that forgiveness among counselors-in-training contributed significantly and positively to their overall wellness. Balkin, Freeman, and Lyman (2009) illuminated how the Jewish concept of forgiveness can be integrated by counselors in their professional work. Additionally, Klatt and Enright (2011) examined the natural process that people tend to use when forgiving, and how this relates to the practice of counseling. All of these articles involve the positive impact of forgiveness broadly. In more specific investigations, Worthington and Langberg (2012) examined self-forgiveness for soldiers; Strelan and Wojtysiak (2009) explored the relationship between forgiveness and coping strategies; Poston, Hanson, and Schwiebert (2012) discovered a positive relationship between forgiveness and psychosocial development. These results support the efficacy of school counselors helping students to resolve interpersonal injuries, potentially leading to higher trust and better psychosocial development. This has potential to aid many groups of students, particularly emotionally injured and angry African American students.

Many systemic concerns exist within the African American community. These include limited access to quality education and quality health care. African American youth often contend with many stressors, including the stress of violence, which has been a persistent challenge for the African American community. Inadequate physical healthcare also includes inadequate psychological health care access and delivery.

Further, institutional racism impacts discrimination in housing, education, criminal justice and employment (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Thus, multiple factors contribute to racial/ethnic health disparities. Consequently, African Americans bear a disproportionate burden of disease, injury, and disability. This paper discusses how school counseling can support African American youth in schools using forgiveness.

Many different issues have been identified as barriers to African Americans seeking out counseling and barriers to the success of counseling when it is sought. Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar (2004) conducted a study to identify these elements in order to better accommodate and serve the African American community. This study analyzed the responses in twenty-four different focus groups of 201 African Americans to identify concerns that are prevalent within African American communities regarding counseling. This study found that many African Americans view counseling interventions as synonymous to weakness, diminished pride, and a lack of strength within the family. Stigma emerged as a major barrier to the utilization of counseling within the African American community. Individuals identified shame, embarrassment, rejection, and labeling as stigmas brought on when counseling was sought. Thus, there is a need to find counseling interventions that are more acceptable to African Americans.

School counseling using forgiveness aims to bridge the gap between traditional counseling and the values and beliefs held within the African American community. Due to the importance placed on historical experiences, African Americans may be less likely to trust traditional counseling, but may be more likely to embrace counseling that respects the premise of, and spiritual ideology behind, the concept of forgiveness (Thompson, et al., 2004). This connection can be seen in the work of Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1958). Dr. King proclaimed, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude." The concept of forgiveness is intertwined with spirituality, and spirituality has been identified as a way that African Americans feel more comfortable coping with mental health issues (Thompson, et al., 2004). This may help African American students to view forgiveness as less of a lifestyle change and more as something that has been embedded in their lifestyle and belief system all along.

Model for Using Forgiveness in School Counseling

The process of using forgiveness with hurt or angry students in school counseling begins with listening to a student and assessing their concerns. School counselors can help students to recognize and analyze their anger, including its source and severity. Once a student has recognized their areas of concern, the process of forgiveness can be initiated. There are different phases in the process model of forgiveness (Enright, 2001). The four phases are uncovering anger, deciding to forgive, working on forgiveness, and discovery and release. At each step the student has the opportunity to apply it to their situation, and to learn practical mental health life tools.

Phase 1 - Uncovering Anger

In the first phase, uncovering your anger, a student is encouraged to ask themselves, "Am I afraid to expose my shame and guilt?" (Enright, 2001). According to Enright, often times victims feel ashamed and guilty because they have been victimized or they may believe they may be partly responsible for the action. Shame involves the fear of what others will think when they find out what has happened to the victim. Shame can be a barrier to facing anger, and one can address this barrier by telling a school counselor their story. Guilt may occur when the victim realizes they have violated

their own standards of right or wrong. When discovering if guilt is present, a student can begin by answering questions with the counselor about whether they believe that they have done something wrong toward the person who hurt them.

In the next step of this phase, a student is encouraged to ask themselves if the anger associated with the event has affected their health. Anger requires energy, and if their energy is directed at thinking about the offense and the offender, this may harm their ability to act effectively in other areas of their life. Anger can make one ill. It can also impact a student's ability to achieve in school. Another step is for the student to ask themselves if they have been obsessed with the injury or the offender. Sometimes students cannot get an injury or the offender out of their minds. They find that they dream about, or think about, the person or event excessively. Additionally, the school counselor can explore with the student whether the student compares their situation with that of the offender. Although making comparisons can be depressing, it can also be a positive step. Upon reflection, the student may discover that the offender is not as well off as they had imagined.

The school counselor can also help the student to examine if the injury is being remembered accurately or if it has been distorted. Next, the school counselor can help the student to explore if the injury caused a permanent change in their life. Oftentimes the greater the loss, the more difficult forgiving may be. When addressing this question the student is asked to reflect on any permanent losses and how they have affected their life. The final step in this phase is for the student to examine if the injury has changed their worldview. Injustice can cause people who were once optimistic and trusting to become cynical and embittered. When addressing this question a student is

encouraged to write about their worldview before the hurtful event, and how it has changed following the event. The student can then discuss with the school counselor if they want to stay with their new worldview, or if they want to explore forgiveness.

Phase 2 - Deciding to Forgive

The second phase focuses on deciding whether or not to forgive. The first step in this phase is for the student to explore whether what they have been doing so far to address the injury has been working. A student must evaluate their emotional state regarding the person who hurt them. This begins by listing the solutions one has attempted in the past, and assessing how effective those solutions have been. If the solutions have not been effective, the student can ask themselves if it is time for a change.

The next step of this phase is to consider if the student wants to work towards forgiving the offender. Change can be scary for many students, so potential willingness to forgive is explored before there is any need to make a decision about forgiving. In this step the student is encouraged to review exactly what they are considering, by describing what forgiveness is and what it is not. The final step of this phase is deciding whether to forgive or not. Forgiveness is a choice and the student is free to begin, or stop the process, if it becomes too painful. A willingness to forgive means putting aside any claims of revenge against the one who hurt the student. This decision requires patience and perseverance.

Phase 3 - Working on Forgiveness

The first two phases focus on the victim and their anger. The third phase focuses on understanding the offender. Although sometimes it may seem that offenders

are irrational and their actions are senseless, in many cases, offenders act as they do for reasons. Even though this does not excuse or condone the behavior of the offender it may however help the student to see that the offender may have many issues, and may not be as well off as the student is tempted to imagine. The offender may have been struggling poorly with their own challenges. Further, the student is asked if it is possible to separate the offense from the offender. Sometimes a student may suffer a terrible wrong from a person who in many other ways has been good to them. This type of understanding may aid in the forgiveness process. However, sometimes the actions of the offender are so tragic, and the offender is so unrepentant, that it does not work to understand them based on examining their past. The victim may choose to consider the offender's humanity. They may see the offender in light of human weakness. This aspect does not mean the victim should look the other way when injustices arise or pardon the offense. Punishment in its proper context is appropriate. The victim may incorporate a spiritual or ethical component as the source of their ability to forgive. This is forgiveness that is entirely undeserved by the perpetrator. Due to the strong spiritual component present within the African American community, this perspective is widely applicable. The next step of this phase involves working toward compassion. As the victim works toward understanding the offender, positive feelings may emerge. But when this does not occur, it may take extensive time to change, if change occurs at all, in this area. A further step, accepting pain, encourages the student to deal constructively with the pain so that self-destructive behaviors do not occur. This involves facing the offense with all its pain and grief.

Phase 4 - Discovery and Release

The final phase includes experiencing discovery and release from an emotional prison. At this step the student is encouraged to explore if they learned something from the unjust experience, whether it made them a stronger person, and whether others somehow gained because of what they endured and how they matured. Each person finds meaning in a different way and in a different place, but no matter how terrible the suffering, there is always the potential for meaning to be found. This is a common concept, and is often times expressed within the African American community.

The next step is for the student to examine their own need for forgiveness. This encourages them to recollect times when they may have been in the undesirable position of being an offender in the past. It encourages them to explore how they felt when they realized that they had done wrong to someone, whether they felt it was important for them to be forgiven by the victim, and possibly what it is like to receive forgiveness. A related next step is for the student to see that they are not alone in the forgiveness process. The school counselor, and potentially family, friends, and other support systems can all be a part of the healing process. This may also include famous role models, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who have struggled with and overcome injustices through the utilization of forgiveness.

A further step is for the student to focus on whether the forgiveness process has given them new purpose or direction in their life. Often times students decide to help other victims, who have been through similar circumstances. The final step includes discovering the freedom of forgiveness. This involves the student courageously confronting their anger, being able to label the offender's behavior as wrong, accepting

that someone has hurt them deeply, and working on changing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward the offender, even though the offender has not earned the right to any kindness. This release is not instantaneous or automatic, but the student can feel freedom and growth from the process.

Protection From Being Reinjured by the Same Person

An important point is that forgiveness is consistent with protection from being reinjured by the same person. This means that students can be encouraged to both forgive, and also to protect themselves from those who have not shown themselves to be trustworthy. This is related to the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. Freedman (1998) clarified that forgiveness is not necessarily linked with reconciliation. This can be important in blocking being reinjured from perpetrators that cannot be trusted to act safely to those they have previously hurt. Thus injured students may forgive those who hurt them, but may decide not talk to, or reconcile with them, as it may not be safe.

Case Example

This is an actual case of forgiveness through school counseling, based on true events; however, details have been modified to ensure confidentiality is protected. Brittany was a 15-year-old African American ninth-grade female who participated in a forgiveness counseling intervention at school, supervised by a school counselor, and implemented by a school counseling intern. Following an initial anger screening, evaluations were given to further evaluate for depression and anxiety. Brittany scored high on all three constructs. Overall, Brittany was a model student who did very well academically. However, she also had a quiet, sad side that she kept hidden under a

bright smile. Initially, it was hard to understand why such an overtly cheerful student would need extra school counseling; however, reasons became clear as counseling progressed. Brittany often indicated that she felt misunderstood by her overprotective parents. She indicated that she had a hard time communicating her true feelings to them. Brittany was beautiful inside and out; however, she did not believe that she was. Through school counseling it became evident that Brittany did not just cover up her hurt feelings inside, she also covered up scars that were all over her arms and legs.

Once a trusting relationship was established, Brittany revealed the reason she had these scars. At a very young age Brittany suffered severe abuse at the hands of her babysitter. The babysitter, someone the family trusted, was physically and emotionally abusive to Brittany. Brittany's siblings were present, but not abused. Brittany was the babysitter's target. Fighting back tears, Brittany described a day she would never forget, a day when her babysitter decided to boil a pot of water and dump it on Brittany's defenseless body. This was the day that the forgiveness intervention took on a whole new life. This was the day when Brittany began to uncover and expose her feelings of anger, confusion, and resentment for a life that was forever changed in a single day by a single person. When these new feelings were revealed, Brittany opened up to the possibility that this one life event, because it was so salient and traumatic, may have permanently and adversely changed her. Upon acknowledging and exploring these new feelings through the forgiveness lens, Brittany began to develop a new understanding of, and respect for, herself.

The first step in the intervention was to help Brittany feel safe and secure in the new counseling relationship, which was challenging. In the first few sessions Brittany

was very vague and apprehensive. She talked mainly about her friends and was careful not to show her scars. Once her experiences with the babysitter were revealed it became obvious why trust was something that needed to be earned. Brittany was afraid to expose what had happened to her because she felt personal shame and guilt about the traumatic experience. Once trust was established Brittany began to open up. She soon realized that what was done to her was unfair and that the abuse had permanently altered and penetrated into many aspects of her life.

The intervention helped Brittany gain insight into herself, her parents, and her offender. Through the exploration of the forgiveness process, Brittany began to demonstrate a new found self-confidence, and recognized that what was done was not her fault. Brittany's exploration allowed her to begin the process of unbinding herself from her traumatic past. Furthermore, it allowed her to begin her journey towards the acknowledgment of, and release from, the smoldering resentment and anger towards her offender and her altered appearance. She began to realize that her past and scars were holding her captive and controlling her in many ways.

Through the intervention, Brittany began to recognize and examine her suffering, and she grew in her understanding of how to release herself from it. Talking about the traumatic experience, and discussing her feelings, helped Brittany begin to understand them further, and see how they were inextricably linked. Brittany began to develop a deeper understanding of her parent's protective nature and her own inherent worth (Enright, 2001). She began to discover that her parents may have been "overprotective" because they may have felt guilty and unable to forgive themselves for leaving her with the babysitter. Furthermore, through talking about her inner feelings, Brittany began to

understand that her scars did not define who she was; however, that they were forever a part of her.

Possible Benefits of Forgiveness for Youth

Each student is unique and presents a different developmental level. For children and adolescents, this is a crucial time period in an individual's life. Early problems left unrecognized or untreated have the potential to fester and grow. School counseling using forgiveness has the versatility to effectively meet these individualized diverse needs and uncover longstanding issues. This perspective includes the idea that at the core of each deeply hurt student exists hidden anger and resentment. Counseling in schools not only has the potential to uncover this hurt, but to also help each student to understand it. This perspective respects the fact that each student's situation is unique, and strives to meet each student where they are at in order to elicit positive results.

Summary

It is imperative that our society begins to address and take into consideration the detrimental psychological consequences that smoldering anger and resentment brought on by disproportionate levels of crime and victimization can cause students within the African American community. Dealing with, and understanding, the underlying cause of anger in general, and within one's own community, requires specially considered interventions that ultimately improve service delivery to the African American population (Dana, 2002). School counseling using the model of forgiveness presented in this paper, allows students to realize and explore their own inherent worth, facilitate self-love, and develop strong ethnic identity. The concept of self-worth is heavily intertwined with the ideals of forgiveness. Developing a positive sense of self-esteem and ethnic

identity has been found to be protective against a variety of stressors.

Future research may support the value of a forgiveness model applied in a school counseling setting. This would happen through applied research that measured levels of forgiveness vis-à-vis levels of self-esteem and ethnic identity; and through interventions that measure changes in these areas – especially with African American students.

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Appendix

Process Model of Forgiveness

From Enright (2001)

Phase One – Uncovering Anger

       Avoided anger?

       Faced anger?

       Afraid of shame and guilt?

       Anger impacted health?

       Obsessed about injury or offender?

       Compare yourself to offender

       Injury caused permanent change?

       Injury changed worldview?

Phase Two – Deciding to Forgive

       Decide what have been doing hasn't worked

       Willing to begin to forgive

       Decide to forgive

Phase Three – Working on Forgiveness

       Work towards understanding

       Work towards compassion

       Accept pain

       Give offender a gift – unearned forgiveness

Phase Four – Discovery and Release

       Discover meaning of suffering

       Discover your need for forgiveness

       Discover you are not alone

       Discover purpose in life

       Discover freedom of forgiveness!