ACT with Depression: The Role of Forgiving

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Issues of forgiveness likely have been part of the fabric of human interpersonal relationships ever since the evolution of language by homo sapiens. The ability to form arbitrary relationships among events as one of the defining properties of languaging (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001), created the capacity to evaluate our interpersonal interactions along a number of qualitative dimensions such as those encompassing justice, fairness, and equality. Rethinking about how we had been wronged by others ensured that we would not “forgive and forget” and thereby possibly prevented further mistreatment, but at the cost of prolonging the emotional pain that comes with interpersonal transgressions.

This chapter is about how human suffering that is linked to issues of forgiveness may be alleviated in conducting acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) with clients who struggle with depression. We are not suggesting, nor do we wish to, that struggles with forgiveness are unique to depression or that ACT is the only approach for possibly alleviating such difficulties. Indeed, as we will discuss, religious and other psychotherapeutic approaches to forgiveness have predated ACT. Neither do we wish to imply that withholding forgiveness or continuing to “hold a grudge” is inevitably dysfunctional. As with any behavior, it is most useful to evaluate such actions by their impact upon psychological flexibility and the capacity of clients to lead full and valued lives. We have, however, been struck by how often depressed clients appear to be stuck in life when fused with reports of victimization and mistreatment by significant figures within the life stories they tell.

We have also noted the favorable response of other mental health professionals within ACT workshops on depression when how to address forgiveness issues with traumatized clients
has been covered. This chapter is informed by our own work in this areas as well as suggestions and insights offered by workshop attendees who have shared their related clinical experiences. As such, it encompasses one set of practical suggestions and guidelines from an ACT-perspective for responding to depressed clients for whom forgiveness is a central issue and supplements previous coverage that this topic has already received within the ACT literature.

Forgiveness as a form of willingness first received some explicit, albeit limited, discussion in the original ACT book (Hayes et al., 1999, pp. 257-258). Strosahl (2004, pp. 240-241) subsequently extended this approach to the clinical management of multi-problem clients and Walser and Westrup (2007, pp.170-174) to the reduction of trauma-related suffering. While Zettle (2007, pp. 213-216) more recently addressed forgiveness issues as they specifically relate to ACT with depression, this chapter both expands upon this coverage and provides a broader context within which to situate this work. In particular, we will first discuss various ways in which forgiveness itself may be conceptualized. Next, we will consider how forgiveness has more specifically and typically been regarded within several major religious traditions and review how psychotherapeutic approaches, in general, and those from a cognitive-behavioral perspective, in particular, have addressed forgiveness before concluding with a presentation of the unique way that ACT seeks to promote it. Apart from a consideration of self-forgiveness from an acceptance and commitment perspective, our primary focus will be upon forgiveness that may be offered by those who have been transgressed against. Including a discussion of the array of unique and intriguing issues involved when the offending party is the one seeking forgiveness from those who have been wronged, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Conceptualization of Forgiveness
Even a cursory review of the forgiveness literature reveals a lack of consensus about how to conceptualize it. While most dictionary definitions include synonyms such as “excuse” or “pardon,” many contemporary authors (e.g., McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000) specifically exclude these terms in their exploration of what forgiveness is not. From a philosophical perspective, the following “ingredients” have been suggested as being necessary for forgiveness: (a) a moral agency is invoked; (b) a “real” (as opposed to perceived or imagined) wrong must have occurred; (c) negative feelings, that are a result of the harm, must be present; and (d) an effortful attitudinal change must be accomplished (Yandell, 1998).

In their recent review of the forgiveness literature, Legaree, Turner, and Lollis (2007) found that a common thread in the disparate conceptualizations of forgiveness is the cessation of feelings of resentment toward another person who has inflicted harm. However, according to North (1998); and echoed by Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998); the mere eradication of resentment or anger is not sufficient to constitute “forgiveness” because the former process lacks the moral quality of bestowing an undeserved gift to the offender.

In the original ACT book (Hayes et al., 1999) an etymological definition of forgiveness is offered. Viewing “forgive” as a compound word, the authors suggest that the first part of the word conveys the sense of “before,” while the second part means “to give.” Thus, to forgive is to “give what went before.” Similarly, Recine, Werner, and Recine (2007) offer a linguistic definition that links the first part of “forgiveness” to a sense of “away;” hence to forgive is to “give away.” While both of these etymologies are based on “forgive” being a result of compounding, Ayto (1990) defines the term as a calque, in which the literal translation of the separate parts of a foreign compound word are recombined into a new word. According to this source, then, the compound parts of “forgive” convey a sense of “giving wholeheartedly.”
combination of these etymologies, "giving wholeheartedly that which came before," underscores the ACT view of forgiving as a form of willingness and committed action.

**Religious Approaches to Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is a central concept within major world religions. In this section, we summarize the findings of a survey conducted by Rye and colleagues (2000) of scholars from a variety of religious traditions.

**Judaism**

In Judaism, forgiveness is defined as the total expunging of an offense or debt, and is largely contingent on the offender performing the process of *teshuvah*, or return. This involves eight clearly defined steps, including public acknowledgement of the offense and a promise that the transgression will not be repeated. Forgiveness is a required response of the victim, both as a matter of theology and of law; failing to forgive after return has been performed casts the original victim as a transgressor. While forgiveness may be offered as a matter of expediency without *teshuvah* having been performed by the transgressor, freely offered forgiveness is discouraged, as this may imply that the transgressor is free to commit the same offense without fear of consequence. Receiving God’s forgiveness on the high holy day *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, is contingent on petitioners having been forgiven by those they have wronged. Reconciliation is a separate process from forgiveness, and while encouraged, may be denied even if forgiveness is given, or may be offered even if forgiveness is not. The overarching theological basis for forgiveness is the all-forgiving nature of God which humans are charged to imitate.

**Islam**
In Islam, forgiveness refers to "closing an account of offense against God or any of his creation" (Rye et al, 2000, p. 21) and must be sincere. Repentance is encouraged, though not required, of the offender; however, one must repent in order to be forgiven by Allah. Revenge is permitted in equal measure to the offense, but as it is sometimes easy to ask for recompense in excess of the damage, engaging in forgiveness protects the victim from becoming the transgressor. Similar to Judaism, Islam teaches that forgiveness ultimately comes from God, and that those who seek forgiveness must be willing to bestow it on others.

_Hinduism and Buddhism_

Both Hinduism and Buddhism draw from a number of different traditions. Hinduism, like the Abrahamic religions, has exemplars of forgiveness in the acts of various divinities. Additionally, those who wish to follow the path of dharma (righteousness) must engage in moral practices such as compassion, duty, patience, and forgiveness. In both theistic and nontheistic Hindu traditions, karma, the natural law of cause and effect, ensures that contingencies of actions in life must be faced in future reincarnations. As a nontheistic tradition, Buddhism teaches that if one is wronged and holds onto resentment or hatred, that person is likely to be hated by others in the future, through the law of karma. Buddhism has no concept directly analogous to "forgiveness," but it is contained within the twin virtues of forbearance and compassion. From the Buddhist perspective, forbearance involves both enduring a wrong and the renunciation of resentment. Compassion involves an attitudinal shift wherein a transgressor is viewed as the one who is suffering, and a consequential effort to ease the suffering of the other. By practicing forbearance, one seeks to keep from causing additional suffering, to oneself or to another.

_Christianity_
Forgiveness is at the heart of Christianity. References to forgiveness pervade the Gospels, and some of the most recognizable Biblical quotes and stories extol forgiveness and its related concepts of mercy and compassion. Jesus entreats God to forgive his crucifiers from the cross. In the Lord’s Prayer, God is asked to “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Ultimately, Jesus was born and died to forgive the sins of all who are willing to accept this fact. God offered this gift, not because humans are “deserving” by virtue of their acts, but because of his own compassion for humankind. As is the case in other theistic traditions, God is the exemplar of forgiveness, and humans strive to emulate this model.

Psychotherapeutic Approaches to Forgiveness

As McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2000) discuss, the concept of forgiveness has been largely ignored within psychotherapy until recently, even by major theorists in the field. According to them, some modest attention to the concept was paid between 1932-1980 in the fields of social and developmental psychology and in the work of Milton Rokeach (1973) investigating human values. During this same period, forgiveness was addressed in a counseling context primarily by pastoral counselors or other professionals acting from a religious perspective. In the period since 1980, counseling and clinical psychologists have followed the lead of earlier pastoral counseling traditions in examining forgiveness as a potential path to increased mental health.

In essays drawn from personal and case experiences, Brandsma (1982), Hope (1987), and Pingleton (1989) suggest forgiveness as a psychotherapeutic goal, utilizing a psychodynamic model and tying forgiveness to Christian theology. These authors speak to the debilitating effects of resentment and anger and the healing effects of forgiveness. Hope frames a state of
unforgiveness in psychodynamic terms which evokes a sense of karma: “... if persons condemn others, they may be expected to have a harsh and punitive superego monitoring their own behavior” (p. 242). These authors also address both the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of forgiveness, giving equal weight to forgiveness of others and self. Pingleton proposes a tripartite model designed to demonstrate an integration of the theological and psychological aspects of forgiveness: “... (a) forgiveness can only be received from God if given by others, (b) forgiveness can only be given to others if received from self, and (c) forgiveness can only be given to self if received from God” (pp. 33-34).

Denton and Martin (1998) surveyed clinicians to determine if professionals who were regularly engaged in the process of treating clients agreed with a specific definition of forgiveness. The authors operationally defined forgiveness as:

... involving two people, one of whom has received a deep and long-lasting injury that is either psychological, emotional, physical, or moral in nature; as an inner process by which the person who has been injured is released from the anger, resentment, and fear and does not wish for revenge; as slow in coming; and as not necessarily eradicating all the painful memories. (p. 284)

While at least 80% of their respondents agreed with four of these six criteria, one-half of the sample disagreed with or were neutral regarding the interpersonal requirement (i.e. “involving two people”), and a majority of respondents either disagreed with or were neutral regarding the nature of the offense (long-lasting, psychological, etc.). Similarly, Konstam et al. (2000) found that a majority of practitioners also did not emphasize the interpersonal aspects of forgiveness,
and concluded that this majority appears "to view forgiveness as a gift primarily to the self alone, in contrast to a gift to the offending person as well as the self" (p. 265).

The above findings are in contrast to the conceptualization of forgiveness by North (1998) and Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998). According to North, "Forgiveness is not something that we do for ourselves alone, but something that we give or offer to another. The forgiving response is outward-looking and other-directed . . ." (p. 19). Enright and colleagues also argue that "the essential quality of forgiveness" is lost if "the response of goodness toward the offending person" is eliminated (p. 50). Moreover, according to these authors, "...equating forgiveness with a generalized acceptance brings the construct away from the moral qualities of generosity and/or moral love" (p. 51).

Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga, and Zungu-Dirwayi (2000) identified several models of forgiveness based on prominent personality and psychopathology theories, including psychoanalytic, Jungian, object relations, and existential approaches. Similarly, in their review of the forgiveness literature from 1990-2005, Lagaree et al. (2007) concluded that a number of prominent authors evidently adopted assumptions from psychodynamic theory supporting the conceptualization of forgiveness as a "discovery" that occurs over time. The primary component in these therapies is a commitment to "working through" emotional difficulties that are a result of past hurts. Forgiveness, which can be construed as an emotional state, consequently can emerge within the therapeutic environment, even if not suggested or directed by the therapist.

However, Lagaree and colleagues (2007) found that the majority of authors stress a position of intentionality in the forgiveness process. Intentionality is most often described as a cognitive change or shift. Lagaree et al. place the position of DiBlasio (2000) clearly at the "decision" end of their "intentionality" continuum, and cite his "...transparent...alignment with

The cognitively oriented psychologies will be concerned with the need for forgiveness of real, as opposed to imaginary, wrongs, and this will require a thorough examination of the beliefs and assumptions the victim holds about his or her attacker. Any theory of forgiveness that emphasizes “reframing” on the part of the victim, as the Enright-North view does, is obviously cognitively oriented. (p. 39)

Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches to Forgiveness

Cognitive-behavioral approaches to psychotherapy propose that distorted thoughts lead to unhealthy negative emotional states (Burns, 1999). According to this perspective, clients must identify and challenge these cognitive distortions and develop more positive, realistic thought patterns in order to alleviate negative emotional states, including depression and resentment. For our purposes, we define a cognitive-behavioral approach to forgiveness as one which seeks to reduce negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward offenders through the process of cognitive restructuring.

The current state of the cognitive-behavioral literature on forgiveness appears to be rather fragmentary and disconnected in nature. It appears as though several theorists – each which we will discuss separately - have developed their own approach to forgiveness without attempting to build upon the work of others. Although four prominent cognitive-behavioral approaches to
forgiveness have been developed within the past decade (DiBlasio, 2000; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Wade & Worthington, 2005), these models contain many different steps through which clients must progress in order to attain forgiveness.

At the same time, there are also several common elements among these approaches. For instance, all suggest that clients must make a cognitive decision to forgive the offender in order for feelings of injury and betrayal to be resolved. In order to resolve negative feelings toward the transgressor and decrease the desire for revenge, the client is encouraged to give the transgression some type of meaning. This may involve exploring aspects of the relationship with the offender, and a consideration of environmental stressors and the life history of the offender in order to gain a better understanding of why the transgression occurred. This process is thought to result in an increase in empathy and compassion for the offender. Following this increase in positive emotions, the client is then encouraged to reconcile with the offender when it is safe and reasonable to do so.

*Worthington and Wade’s Emotional Dissonance Model*

Similar to the approaches of Brandsma (1982), Hope (1987), and Pingleton (1989), Worthington and Wade (1999) define unforgiveness as the negative emotional state that occurs when an offended individual experiences bitterness and anger toward a transgressor. The transgression in question must be an objective event that external observers would agree inflicts psychological or physical pain or injury on the client. Forgiveness is regarded as an emotional process in which an individual chooses to abandon unforgiveness and seeks to reconcile with the offender when it is safe and possible to do so. By choosing to forgive, the individual begins to experience empathy, love, and other positive emotions that compete with the cold emotional
state associated with unforgiveness. Therefore, choosing to forgive the transgressor is one way in which an individual may transform feelings of unforgiveness to those of forgiveness.

For example, in marital infidelity, the first step toward forgiveness would be to encourage the offended partner to experience events or thoughts that are incongruent with unforgiveness. This may involve requesting that the offender provide the offended partner with a reasonable explanation for the infidelity (e.g., dissatisfaction with the relationship), sharing of good memories, or expressing love toward the offended partner (e.g., “We’ve shared many good memories. We can work through this obstacle in order to rebuild our relationship.”).

The incongruence between the cold affective state associated with unforgiveness and positive thoughts toward the unfaithful partner produce a state referred to by Worthington and Wade (1999) as emotional dissonance. Emotional dissonance can then be resolved by rejecting or accepting the positive emotional state produced by positive thoughts about the unfaithful partner. Clients may choose to accept the positive affect by changing their perceptions of the transgression. For example, the offended partner can explore and gain a better understanding of why the offender decided to have an affair. Alternatively, clients may choose to reject the positive affect by ruminating about the original pain produced by the unfaithful act. For instance, the client may choose to hold onto anger, resentment, and bitterness toward the offender (e.g., “I’ll never be able to trust my partner again. He ruined my life!). The former would allow the client to move away from unforgiveness and toward forgiveness. The latter would be resolved by moving back toward unforgiveness.

*DiBlasio’s Decisional Model*
DiBlasio (2000) conceptualizes forgiveness as decision-based process in which an individual makes a cognitive decision to let go of negative emotional states (e.g., anger, bitterness, resentment) associated with a perceived transgression. Once clients decide to forgive, they take steps to move forward despite feelings of hurt. This model involves a step-by-step process in which clients make a decision to forgive the transgressor, identify with the offender's hurt, and engage in a ceremonial act that represents the forgiveness of the offender.

In the example of marital infidelity, the first step toward forgiveness would involve defining forgiveness and identifying some of the key components within the process, explaining that forgiveness is a decision to let go of the negative emotional state associated with the transgression. The therapist also explains that it is possible to have emotional pain while controlling negative thoughts (e.g., thoughts of revenge) and that forgiveness can lead to positive emotional states. In the second step of the decision-based model, both partners have an opportunity to seek forgiveness for any actions for which they wish to be forgiven.

Once the couple has moved through the first two stages, the forgiveness intervention is introduced. Both partners take turns working through the forgiveness intervention separately. Each states the offense for which they are asking forgiveness and provide an explanation for the transgression. Subsequent to the explanation, the nonparticipating partner is allowed an opportunity to raise questions about the offense. The therapist helps the couple discern which details are appropriate and helpful and which details may be harmful. Next, the offended partner gives emotional reactions to the transgression by expressing hurt, anger, anguish, and other emotional reactions to the offending partner. After the offended partner has had an opportunity to express the emotions associated with the affair, the offender provides empathy for the hurt caused to the victim and develops a plan to stop or prevent the harmful behavior.
In the next step of the forgiveness process, the offended partner identifies with the offender’s hurt. Then, emphasis is placed on the choice of letting go to the negative emotional state associated with ruminating about the transgression. In this step, the client can choose to forgive or not to forgive. In the subsequent step, the offender makes a formal request for forgiveness. According to DiBlasio, the offender must extend a request for forgiveness before the offense can be forgiven. Once each partner has gone through the forgiveness process, a ceremonial act occurs as an expression that the offense has been forgiven. For instance, in the case of marital infidelity, a couple may choose to renew their vows as a ceremonial act.

*Gordon and Baucom’s Synthesized Model*

According to Gordon and Baucom (1998), forgiveness consists of three components: (a) a realistic view of the relationship; (b) a release from negative affect toward the offender; and (c) a decreased desire to punish the offender. Forgiveness is conceptualized as a step-by-step process in which clients recognize and assess the need to forgive, begin to understand why the event happened, and eventually attain a decrease in distorted cognitions about themselves and the offender.

In instances of marital infidelity, the first step toward forgiveness is to recognize and assess the need to forgive the unfaithful partner. Once clients become aware of the transgression, they feel that the unfaithful partner has treated them in an unjust manner and that such a violation may occur again in the future. This leads to uncertainty, confusion, and negative cognitions about their partners (e.g. “My partner is not capable of fidelity.” or “My partner was unfaithful because he is selfish.”), as clients may not be able to predict the occurrence of future unfaithful actions or other transgressions.
Within this stage of therapy, the therapist explains the process of recovery and that it may take as long as necessary for clients to change their assumptions about the offense and their relationship with their partner. The therapist also allows offended partners to express the impact of the infidelity on themselves and their views of the relationship with a main goal of helping the couple solve current problems and set boundaries on "lashing-out" behaviors and interrogations about the infidelity.

The second step involves giving the infidelity some type of meaning and helping the client realize why the infidelity occurred. The therapist helps clients explore several factors surrounding the infidelity, including relationship issues, outside influences, and the life histories of both partners in order to challenge the initial attributions made toward offenders during the first stage of the forgiveness process. Recognizing the role that various factors may have played in the infidelity does not excuse the offending partner, but offers clients important information about the context in which the offense occurred and thus helps reduce negative affect.

The client is also allowed to express anger and other negative emotions toward the offending partner in order to legitimize such emotional states. During this stage, an apology is often necessary in order to promote healing by giving clients a sense of power over their partners. The couple is encouraged to think about ways in which their behaviors may be contributing to or hindering the process of forgiveness. For example, clients may be punishing their partners by waiting for an opportunity to engage in an action that may "pay them back" by offending them. Alternatively, the couple may choose to focus on behaviors that may be beneficial to the relationship, such as ending the likelihood that the unfaithful partner will have contact with the other participant in the affair.
In the final step of successful therapy, clients achieve a decrease in cognitive distortions surrounding themselves, their partners, and their relationship. Through cognitive restructuring, clients experience a reduction in anger and desire to punish their partners. Clients are encouraged to view their partners as individuals with both positive and negative qualities rather than continually seeking information that would justify withholding trust. Additionally, clients are encouraged to create realistic expectations and assumptions about the behavior of their partner rather than idealizing them or the relationship. This new understanding of the unfaithful partner allows clients to reduce their anger regarding the unfaithful act and minimizes the likelihood of retaliatory actions. At this point, the couple must decide whether to recommit to their relationship based on a more rational, realistic understanding of it formulated throughout the process of forgiveness. The partners can decide to terminate the relationship and still gain the beneficial effects received through the process of forgiveness.

*Enright and Fitzgibbons' Phasic Model*

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) define forgiveness as a process in which clients relinquish resentment and replace associated, negative emotional states with compassion and generosity. Throughout the forgiveness therapy process, clients and therapist examine the ways in which they were treated unfairly to help clients understand the offender and learn how to replace anger with a positive response of goodness toward the transgressor. This model involves a step-by-step process in which clients become aware of their pain (uncovering phase), decide to forgive the offender (decision phase), shift their view of the offender (work phase), and notice any personal benefits that result from the forgiveness process (outcome phase).
In cases of marital infidelity, the therapist in the uncovering phase helps clients better understand how the affair has impacted their psychological health. Throughout this phase, clients are encouraged to explore negative emotional states associated with the infidelity. For instance, clients are encouraged to confront and release anger rather than harboring it. Clients are also encouraged to become aware of the amount of time that is spent ruminating over the infidelity by asking them to keep a journal in which they note each time they think about the offender.

In the uncovering phase, clients also become aware of ways in which their world view has changed. Before the infidelity, clients likely saw the world as a place in which others attempt to act fairly. However, following the pain associated with the affair, their world view often changes to where they now believe that others are not to be trusted. The therapist may ask clients how their world view has changed because of the infidelity.

In the decision phase, clients are asked to judge how well they are coping with the current situation. By analyzing patterns uncovered in the previous phase, most clients begin to see that the ways in which they are responding to the infidelity are not working and that changes must be made. At this point, clients are given the opportunity to choose or reject forgiveness as an alternative way in which to respond to the infidelity.

In the work phase, the therapist asks questions designed to challenge client views of their partner. For example, to attain “cognitive insight,” the therapist might instruct clients to examine their partner’s childhood and the events surrounding the infidelity. After doing so, clients are asked to examine the emergence of empathy and compassion for the offender. If they are unable to express empathy for their partner, the therapeutic process moves back to the cognitive insight stage, and further cognitive restructuring is attempted.
Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) note that compassion appears to emerge as part of the forgiveness process, and no particular exercises or techniques are used in this stage to foster its development. Clients are asked to bear the pain as a part of their life history prior to seeking justice in ways other than those that may occur when they are angry or upset. The next step in the process involves giving a “gift” to the unfaithful partner. This gift could involve preparing a nice meal for the partner as an extension of beneficence toward them.

In the outcome phase, the first step is to give the suffering some type of meaning. In doing this, the therapist may ask clients what good might come from suffering or whether the suffering might benefit others. Clients are also encouraged to think about a time they wronged another person and if forgiveness was offered. This helps clients understand the process of forgiveness from another’s point of view and allows them to let go of the idea that it is wrong to forgive their partner. At the end of forgiveness therapy, clients begin to realize that, as their negative emotions decrease and positive emotions increase, they experience less anxiety and depression and higher levels of hope and self-esteem.

Forgiveness as the Acceptance and Commitment Therapist Views It

Unlike other perspectives on the matter, forgiveness within ACT is critically regarded as a behavior rather than as an affective state, emotional condition, or array of thoughts and feelings. In this respect, the gerund “forgiving” rather than “forgiveness” is a more useful way of speaking. Forgiveness is not viewed as a noun or thing that is felt or passively experienced, but as an act of willingness and commitment that is freely chosen. As such, forgiving is under the control and choice of depressed clients, while the resentment, desire for vengeance, memory of how they have been “wronged,” and related private events that serve as barriers to forgiveness
of others are not. Forgiving is not dependent upon forgetting a wrong that has been inflicted as failing to remember a transgression would render forgiveness of it moot. Moreover, forgiving can be freely chosen even if the client does not feel like offering it or believe that it is warranted or deserved.

Forgiving like many behaviors is not a single one-time event, but can occur to varying degrees in a gradual step-like fashion. This does not mean, however, that forgiving inevitably unfolds within a fluid process. It may be offered on one occasion, only to be withdrawn later. This applies to both types of forgiving that we will now consider in greater detail – that which involves relationships with others and that which also entails self-forgiveness.

Forgiving Others

Certainly not all depressed clients will display nonforgiveness of others to a level that requires that it be addressed in therapy. The first indication that it may be an issue usually comes in listening to the life story of clients. We recommend that clients fairly early on in ACT – often within the first session – relate their life story with depression. The purpose in doing so is not to take what the clients have to say literally, but instead to initially gauge the degree to which explanations offered for depression are held onto rigidly. Spontaneous client comments like “Anyone who was mistreated as badly as I have been would be depressed” or “I have every right to be depressed given how often I’ve been lied to” reveal a level of investment in and fusion with a verbal construction that is likely to be problematic.

Whether or not fusion with a traumatic life story is problematic ultimately depends upon the degree to which rigid attachment to such a narrative serves as a barrier to valued living. In essence, clients who are highly invested in an abused life story see themselves stuck in their own
depression as an inevitable outcome of the mistreatment they have born. Because time only moves in one direction and past events cannot be altered, living a valued life becomes permanently blocked by the solidified psychological distress that results from causally relating depression to transgressions at the hands of others. The extent to which fusion with an abused life story prevents valued living can be further assessed by asking the following hypothetical questions: “If you had not been mistreated the way that you have, how would your life be different? What would your life look like and what might you be doing differently?”

Client answers may not only help gauge the degree of psychological rigidity surrounding the life story, but perhaps equally, if not more importantly, tell a great deal about what they value. This information can then be used as a focal point in organizing and directing the rest of therapy, in general, and any subsequent forgiveness work, in particular. For example, a client who indicates that she would have a more rewarding career can be asked if working towards this would be a worthy therapeutic goal, and if so, whether forgiving her transgressors would move her closer to or further away from it.

*Rewriting the Life Story*

One way of beginning to loosen the grip of the life story and thereby facilitate the process of forgiveness is to ask clients to reconstruct it. In doing so, ACT is similar to narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) in its view that changing their life story may have a liberating impact upon clients (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Before discussing in greater detail how to accomplish this objective, a few cautionary and advisory comments are in order. It is not uncommon for clients to feel threatened by the possibility that their life story could be anything other than what it is. Indeed, such client reactions are likely to occur in direct proportion with
their degree of fusion with and attachment to the life narrative—questioning their story about depression is functionally equivalent to challenging their personal integrity. As a consequence, be sensitive to how clients may react to the suggestion to rewrite the life story and be prepared to respond to such reactions with further defusion and acceptance work if necessary. In particular, it is useful to emphasize that the fact that a client was mistreated is not being called into question by a request to rewrite the life story. The critical issue is not what happened or did not happen in the past, but how whatever happened continues to impact the client in the present.

The potential costs and risks associated with encouraging clients to rewrite their life story are typically offset by the possible benefits that may be derived from doing so. One such instance was cited by Zettle (2007, p. 104) of a client who found it difficult to forgive herself for a failed marriage. Her initial life story presented her as being solely responsible for the divorce. When the client protested upon being asked to rewrite the story with a new conclusion that did not end in her depression, she was asked to approach it as a creative writer might. Her second narrative “uncovered” new facts about how her husband’s behavior now contributed to the divorce. Still, two more reconstructions of the narrative in which additional external, historical facts were incorporated into it were necessary to create enough defusion from the life story for the client to forgive herself and begin to move her life in a valued direction.

The rewriting of the life story can occur within-session though we recommend structuring it as a series of homework assignments. The first step asks clients to put their life story in writing so that facts within it can be underlined. Clients are then instructed to take those same facts and formulate a narrative with an alternative ending that does not culminate in depression. As seen in the case just summarized, it may be necessary to request that clients construct several iterations of the life story to create sufficient separation from the original
version. For some clients, rewriting the life story may be all that is needed to initiate and maintain forgiveness. For the majority of clients, however, the goal is to simply clear out enough psychological space for subsequent forgiveness work to gain some traction. This additional work can involve committed action, mindfulness and enhancing the contextual self (both which will be discussed later in this chapter within the context of self-forgiveness), and the defusion and acceptance of further experiential barriers to forgiveness.

 Forgiving as Committed Action

In our experience, most clients are not accustomed to seeing forgiving as a freely chosen action. Rather, it is more commonly viewed not as a change in overt behavior, but as an alteration in their judgment or evaluation of what happened to them. Moreover, forgiveness is commonly construed as something that is verbally offered, even if done so grudgingly, to the transgressor provided certain conditions are met. For example, many clients withhold forgiveness unless the transgressor apologizes for any wrongdoing and specifically requests forgiveness of it. Accordingly, it is usually necessary to assist clients in reframing forgiving as committed action if defusion from the life story is not sufficient to initiate it.

Explicitly framing forgiving as value-directed behavior underscores that is undertaken for the benefit of the client and not for the perpetrator of the wrongdoing. As with any committed action within ACT, forgiveness itself is important only insofar as it moves the client's life in a valued direction. Some additional values identification and clarification may be necessary following the telling and rewriting of the life story if it is still unclear how a lack of client forgiveness may be sapping life of its vitality and helping to perpetuate depression. Both indirect means (Zettle, 2007, pp. 119-122) – such as the “what do you want your life to stand for?”
(Hayes et al., 1999, pp. 215-217) and epitaph exercises (Hayes et al, 1999, pp. 217-218) – as well as direct means, employing values questionnaires (Blackledge & Ciarrochi, 2005; Wilson & Groom, 2002), can be used in further clarifying client valuing.

As suggested earlier, the occurrence of forgiving as any committed action frequently unfolds in a discontinuous fashion. Forgiveness may be offered on one occasion, only to be later taken back. In addition, while forgiving happens in all-or-nothing fashion whenever it does occur, the amount of wrongdoing that it encompasses may vary from occasion to occasion. A useful metaphor within ACT is to liken forgiving as a form of committed action to jumping (Hayes et al., pp. 240-241). Like jumping, forgiving can’t occur partially – any jump can’t occur “just a little.” However, the height from which a jump is made can be freely chosen, just as clients can determine how much wrongdoing to encompass in a single act of forgiveness. A sequence of jumps that start out small, but graduate to greater heights may be undertaken in attaining the goal of jumping from a predetermined terminal height – jumping off a series of progressively higher diving boards may work up to taking a plunge off the high dive. Similarly, it may be useful with clients who have compiled a fairly extensive list of mistreatment to support forgiveness as a series of small, incremental steps where relatively minor transgressions are forgiven before major instances are targeted. For example, clients can be asked questions such as: “Of all the wrongdoings that you say have been inflicted upon you, which ones would you like to forgive first? Which ones would be the easiest for you to forgive and which ones would be the most difficult for you?”

As is the case in supporting any committed action within ACT, it may be both necessary and useful to clarify with clients several other critical dimensions of forgiving. Of perhaps greatest importance is holding forgiveness as a choice that is freely made by clients for their
benefit. Forgiving as committed action is not made to nor for the therapist or the wrongdoer, but to and for the client who chooses it. If forgiving is not chosen, but is made as a decision, it becomes hostage to both private events of the client surrounding the mistreatment – wanting revenge, feeling resentment, believing that the wrongdoer does not deserve to be forgiven, and so on – as well potential actions on the part of the transgressor. For example, clients may claim that forgiveness cannot be offered unless the perpetrator apologizes, makes amends, displays remorse, and asks for forgiveness. Such preconditions for forgiving are compounded even further if the whereabouts of transgressors are unknown or should they be deceased. Like any other committed action from the perspective of ACT, it useful to regard forgiving as being freely chosen with reasons rather than an action that is decided upon because of reasons. We will have a bit more to say about how private events of the client that may function as barriers to/ reasons against forgiving can be approached with additional defusion and acceptance work shortly.

Included among the reasons present when forgiveness is chosen can be the personal costs associated with fusion with the life story. It is useful to review with depressed clients two sets of costs that accrue with continuing to play the right versus wrong game. One set of costs constitutes the “pain of presence” (Hayes & Smith, 2005, p. 15) and includes the resentment, anger, depression, and possible sense of betrayal and violation that clients have struggled with following their mistreatment by others. Another set of costs that may be even of relatively greater importance are those that come from the loss of life’s vitality. Termed as the “pain of absence” (Hayes & Smith, 2005, p. 15), such costs include how much valued living has already been compromised and sacrificed while clients remain mired in depression and stuck within the role of victim. In extreme instances, clients may even be willing to pay the ultimate cost with their own lives to validate their mistreatment and/or extract revenge from their transgressors. In
effect, to prove that a grievous crime has been committed, clients produce their own corpse as
motive may be revenge against transgressors, particularly if the suicide is carried out in such a
way that they discover the body. In less dramatic instances, remaining chronically depressed
may serve the same function. The client is not literally dead but has psychologically ceased to
live.

The purpose in reviewing with depressed clients the personal costs they pay in
withholding forgiveness is not to transform forgiving into a decision for which a persuasive list
of supportive reasons can be compiled. Instead doing so explicitly situates the act of choosing to
forgive or not to forgive within the context of valuing. If anything, such a move makes it very
clear to both you as the therapist and your client what is a stake. It is nonetheless not unusual for
clients at this point to comment that they will try to forgive as a means of shirking the responsi-
ability of choosing. If and when this occurs, forgiving can again be likened to jumping. Trying
to do either is not an option and neither requires any effort. Jumping is not hard to do and is
merely what happens when we choose to put our body in a space where gravity does what it
does. Likewise, the act of forgiving does not require strength, but rather willingness and
commitment. Once it occurs, experiential gravity does the rest. The distinction between “trying
to forgive” and the act of forgiving can also be addressed further if necessary with a trying
versus doing exercise (Zettle, 2007, p. 129) in which clients are asked to try to pick up an object
such as a pen. Clients find that they can pick up the pen or let it lie, but that they cannot
successfully try to pick it up, thus underscoring the words of Yoda: “No! Try not. Do. Or do
not. There is no try.” (Yoda Quotes, n.d.)

Enacting Forgiveness
There are at least two means that can be used within sessions through which clients can symbolically; or as Diblasio (2000) has termed it, “ceremonially”; enact forgiveness. Unfortunately, we know of no data attesting to their collective efficacy nor of any research that has directly compared their relative therapeutic benefits. The two procedures are accordingly being discussed and recommended primarily because they seem to make sense clinically and have been fairly useful in our experience. One is the empty-chair technique (Hayes et al, 1999, p. 257; Walser & Westrup, 2007, pp. 173-174; Zettle, 2007, p. 214) and the other letter-writing (Zettle, 2007, p. 214). Clients are able to offer forgiveness to their transgressors in both without the perpetrators being present, apologetic, having asked for forgiveness, or having met any other preconditions for forgiveness on their part. One possible relative advantage to letter-writing is that it may be possible to send what has been composed to the wrongdoers still living and whose whereabouts are known. Regardless of which means of forgiveness enactment is used, its ultimate utility must be gauged by the impact they have in moving clients from being bogged down in depression to resuming an active and valued life.

*Weakening Barriers to Forgiving: Acceptance and Defusion*

Numerous thoughts, feelings, memories, bodily sensations, impulses, and other psychological experiences related to having been victimized may stand in the way of forgiving. Especially when it comes to thinking about forgiveness and the events it may encompass, single thoughts as well as more complex networks of relational framing at a molar level, such as reason-giving and the life-story, can function as barriers to forgiving as committed action. We focus here on lessening further barriers to forgiving, such as specific thoughts, that occur at a more molecular level of experience.
The full range of defusion and acceptance techniques and procedures within ACT can be applied to supporting forgiving as an act of willingness. Because of obvious space limitations, our coverage of these tactics here will be limited to a few examples that share the strategic goal of establishing the conditions under which clients can learn the discrimination between responding to experiential barriers to forgiving in an avoidant versus accepting manner. We have found the "tug-of-war with a monster" metaphor (Hayes et al., 1999, 109) and a variation on "carrying your depression" exercise (Zettle, 2007, pp. 110-111) to be particularly useful in conducting this experiential discrimination training with clients stuck in unforgiveness.

Specific thoughts (e.g., "What happened to me wasn’t right," "My offender doesn’t deserve to be forgiven," etc.) and feelings (anger, resentment, betrayal, desire for revenge, etc.) can either be individually or collectively likened to a monster with which the client is engaged in a tug-of-war. If the client were to win the struggle, the emotional pain and psychological fall-out from having been wronged could be eliminated forever as the monster is pulled into the abyss lying between it and the client. However, most clients will experientially acknowledge that they, rather than the monster, are being pulled ever closer to the bottom-less pit. Many of these same clients though don’t experientially realize that another way of responding to this struggle is to simply drop the rope. The discrimination between pulling on the rope versus dropping it can be magnified by enacting the metaphor physically between you and your clients. Produce a rope, towel, or belt that both of you can pull on. Ask your client to pull as hard as possible and to notice the difference between that experience and that of dropping the rope. Further ask your clients to consider the possibility that their struggles to forget or get over the hurt of having been wronged is like engaging in an unwinnable tug-of-war with a monster.
Because forgiving, as mentioned, is not a one-time event, it is quite common for clients to drop and pick-up-and-pull-on-the-rope numerous times. These occurrences can be viewed as constituting the multiple trials required for successful discrimination training. Each time clients appear to be experientially avoiding and/or escaping from private events related to an interpersonal transgression is an opportunity to ask them if they are at that moment in the process of pulling on the rope or dropping it.

It is useful to regard acceptance or willingness as not the mere absence of experiential avoidance. Accordingly, simply disengaging clients from experiential control exemplified by dropping the rope is not tantamount to accepting the unforgiveness monsters against which they struggle. As alluded to earlier, we have found it useful in promoting acceptance and willingness to supplement the tug-of-war metaphor and exercise with a “carrying” exercise. Unwanted thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, impulses, and other private events surrounding the transgression can be likened to a trash can that clients, because of their mistreatment, have no choice but to carry with them throughout the rest of their life. They are free, however, to choose how they carry it. In particular, we ask clients to first walk around carrying the trash can as far as way from themselves as possible. They are then asked to walk similarly, but this time while cradling the trash can as they would cuddle a baby. The differing degrees of physical discomfort clients experience underscore the discrimination between the clean pain of acceptance versus the dirty pain of unwillingness.

Acceptance can also be facilitated by defusion from specific thoughts or beliefs that stand in the way of forgiving. We will only elaborate on two specific defusion methods here, although as mentioned earlier, the full array of defusion and acceptance strategies and techniques within ACT can be used in your work with unforgiving clients stuck in depression. One method is a
variation on the “milk, milk, milk” exercise (Hayes et al., 1999, pp. 154-156). Clients can be asked to rapidly say aloud key words or phrases (such as “unfair,” “backstabber,” or “liar”) contained within thoughts about the transgression with which they remain fused.

A second defusion procedure uses an adaptation of the “bad cup” metaphor (Hayes et al., 1999, p. 169; Zettle, 2007, pp. 100-101) to differentiate evaluations from descriptions. Unforgiving clients commonly hold their evaluation of what happened to them (e.g., “It was wrong,” “It was unfair,” “I didn’t deserve it,” etc.) as psychologically equivalent to a description of the mistreatment (“My husband had an affair,” “I was lied to,” “My best friend betrayed me,” etc.). For this reason, it is often useful to use additional discrimination training to magnify the distinction between the two. A physical object such as a cup or chair can be used as a referent in this process. Multiple examples of both evaluations (e.g., “It’s a good cup,” “That’s an ugly chair,” etc.) and descriptions (e.g., “The cup is white,” “The chair is made of wood,” etc.) can be offered and contrasted against each other before the same process is extended to client thoughts about their mistreatment and offender.

Forgiving Oneself

Issues of forgiveness involving others and oneself are not mutually exclusive as some depressed clients will struggle with both, while others may be solely blocked by unpardonable sins of omission or commission that have been committed against others or oneself. Still there are other clients for whom either form of forgiving is inconsequential. As with our coverage of forgiving others, we don’t wish to imply that withholding forgiveness towards oneself is inevitably dysfunctional. This must be determined by assessing the degree to which guilt and not letting oneself “off the hook” contribute to psychological rigidity and compromise valued living.
Three Senses of “Self”

ACT has found it useful to speak of three different aspects of the self (Hayes et al., 1999, pp. 181-187; Zettle, 2007, pp. 68-70): (a) self as process, (b) self as concept, and (c) self as context. Briefly stated, self as process, or our ability to be aware of our ongoing stream of experience as it unfolds, is implicated in mindfulness and exercises that enhance it (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Self as concept refers to a verbally-constructed network about who we are (i.e., “I am married”, “I cheated on my spouse,” etc.), while self as context is that part of us that is aware of what we are aware of. Self as context can be regarded as the sense of “I-ness”, or what is referred to in ACT as the “observer” or “observing self” (Hayes et al., 1999, p. 184), that transcends experience.

The various strategies and techniques within ACT to promote forgiving of others that have already been discussed can also be extended to issues of self-forgiveness. In what follows we will discuss a few additional procedures that, while also applicable to forgiving others, appear to be particularly relevant in helping depressed clients free themselves from guilt. Specifically, exercises for enhancing mindfulness and the observer self can be used to further solidify self as context and differentiate it from the self as concept. In doing so, a transcendent and spiritual dimension of self (Hayes, 1984) can be in position to freely choose to extend forgiveness to the transgressing conceptual self (Zettle, 2007).

Acquiring Mindfulness

Mindfulness has been defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Mindfulness can be usefully regarded as a skill that can be experientially acquired and shaped by a series of exercises that
initially focus on eating and drinking and progress to “just noticing” depressing thoughts and other troublesome private events (Zettle, 2007). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to present any of these exercises that have been detailed by Kabat-Zinn and adapted into mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches to the prevention (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007) and treatment of unipolar depression (Zettle, 2007, chapter 8). While the primary purpose of mindfulness training is to strengthen self as process, it also provides clients with the opportunity to observe their experiences from the same invariant perspective. In doing so, mindfulness exercises additionally indirectly promote self as context as the vantage point from which the conceptual self can be forgiven.

*Enhancing Self as Context*

The perspective of self as context can also be enhanced by the presentation of several exercises common to ACT more broadly. In particular, the chessboard metaphor (Hayes, 1987, pp. 359-360) and observer exercise (Hayes, 1987, pp. 360-361; Hayes et al., 1999, pp. 193-195) can be adapted to be somewhat more responsive to the experiences of clients who struggle with depression (Zettle, 2007, pp. 148-155). Due to space limitations, neither will be presented here; the interested reader is encouraged to consult the cited references. While these techniques can be introduced separately and independently of each other, our general recommendation is to precede their implementation with a series of mindfulness exercises. Also, it seems preferable to introduce the chessboard metaphor prior to the observer exercise if both are presented.

*Summary and Conclusions*

In this chapter we have presented one approach to addressing forgiveness with depressed clients that we believe is consistent with the model upon which ACT itself is based. As such, it
is not the only approach as others that are also ACT-consistent are certainly also possible. Until further research is conducted, the approach and guidelines that we have presented here cannot be favored over other possible ACT-based alternatives based upon empirical guidelines. For that matter, what we have offered also cannot be recommended on empirical grounds over other cognitive-behavioral, broader psychotherapeutic, or even religious approaches to forgiveness.

In closing, we would also like to acknowledge that this chapter has not addressed instances in which asking for or seeking forgiveness by others may play a central role in liberating clients from depression. Further conceptual, clinical, and empirical work is obviously needed if we are to make further progress in alleviating emotional suffering that is perpetuated by the withholding of forgiveness of others and/or oneself.
References


