A Conceptual Model of Forgiveness and Mental Health: A Philosophical Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of hate, forgiveness, and interconnectedness in human relationships. Hatred often arises from conflicts with personal expectations but can be transformed into forgiveness by adopting an impersonal, holistic perspective. Drawing on evolutionary theory, psychological insights, and Buddhist philosophy, the paper argues that forgiveness is essential for individual mental well-being and societal harmony. The Buddhist concept of "two arrows" illustrates that while pain is unavoidable, suffering stems from emotional reactions and can be mitigated. Embracing the interconnected nature of events allows individuals to transcend psychological suffering and cultivate compassion. Forgiveness, distinct from condoning or forgetting, is a profound process of healing and self-liberation with significant implications for mental and physical health. By integrating philosophical and psychological perspectives, the paper highlights forgiveness as a biological and psychological necessity, improving mental health, life satisfaction, and fostering both personal and communalistic harmony.

Keywords: Forgiveness; Mental Health; Trauma; Resentment; Psychological Well-Being

The Healing Power of Forgiveness

Forgiveness can be defined as, "allowing room for error or weakness," and "to forgive" as, "to cease to feel resentment." There is a clear distinction between forgiving and condoning or forgetting whatever injury has been done. Forgiveness recognizes human frailty, that everyone can (and does) hurt others. But that in no way condones or excuses the hurting. And it does not free the perpetrator of responsibility for his or her actions or any owed reparation. The benefit of forgiveness is often more for the one who is hurt. Resentment and bitterness exact a cost on the body and mind that can actually do further harm. Forgiveness could save your life. A mind free of resentment and bitterness is more peaceful, and the body therefore less stressed. Reduced stress is healthy for our blood pressure, hearts, immune systems, and more.

So, more than anything, forgiveness is, indeed, much more for our own health than for the benefit of the other [1]. Just like holding onto anger is like holding onto a burning stone hoping for the other person to be burned, in the same way holding onto hatred and grudges towards someone is only harmful to us and not towards the person or the object to which hate is directed. But still, forgiving someone is not something which happens very instantly like a love at first sight which doesn't require any process, just an instant attraction towards someone out of nowhere. Forgiveness is something which takes time as the act of forgiving is based on coming to terms with what actions of the other challenged us and traumatized us in the past. Trauma is something which gets stored in the body and isn't something which is just confined to the head, that's why just rationally motivating oneself to move out of a certain situation or let

go of a particular situation or a person doesn't work in the long run. Forgiveness is a process which takes time because the body also must develop a sense of safety (internal safety) after the experience of trauma/unexpected event. After a traumatic event, the fear response of our brains become very active which starts to detect threat even if unchallenging and less fearful circumstances arise, which has a direct impact on our mental health and well-being because if we start to see even a normal and mundane situation as dangerous, then it will hinder our day-to-day functioning in our daily living. In cases of generalized anxiety disorders and phobia of any kind, there forms an irrational belief in the mind that there is danger everywhere in the environment and therefore the patients who have generalized anxiety disorders, there situation is just like being in a constant flight-fight mode activated by the amygdala in our brain.

When someone acts outside our expectations, it often triggers a strong emotional response of hate or resentment. We inherently construct mental frameworks and expectations of how people and the world should behave. When these expectations are violated, we take it personally which leads to feelings of hate, distrust and grudges. As these emotions amplify, they can ignite conflicts – on a personal level, between communities, and even between nations. However, if we examine hate closely, it becomes clear that it is nothing more than a fleeting emotion that arises and passes through our consciousness. Hate generally starts with bias that is left unchecked. Bias is a preference either for or against an individual or group that affects someone's ability to judge fairly. When that bias is left unchecked, it becomes normalized or accepted and may even escalate into violence. When hate manifests against a person or group of people, it usually derives from ignorance, anger, fear, a sense of injury, or a perceived threat to the status quo [2]. If we are look and question the biases and blind-spots that we have in our beliefs and our way of perceiving the world, then we would start the see the loopholes in the biases which are giving rise to hate in the first place, which would result in developing a sense of flexibility in our judgements leading to a sense of ease, open and a relaxed way of seeing things, rather than seeing them as rigid and not bound to change. And this relaxed way of seeing the situation at hand will eventually develop a sense of total clarity regarding that situation which results in developing a sense of allowing and forgiveness. The emotion of hate has no intrinsic life of its own or any type of enduring reality outside of the field of our minds. When we become aware of the temporary nature of hate and observe it for what it is – a passing emotional reaction – something remarkable happens: the hate begins to dissolve. What follows is the emergence of forgiveness, a natural outcome of perceiving the situation holistically rather than in a fragmented way. In the state of hatred, we view the actions of others solely through our own limited lens of minds desires and expectations. We

judge others based on how their actions align with or deviate from our own expectations. This creates a distorted version of reality, where everything becomes personal. We fail to recognize that, according to the laws of the universe, nothing operates personally. Most of the processes in the cosmos are impersonal – they are not concerned with the desires or expectations of any one person, community or a nation. The universe operates for the welfare of all its constituents down to the tiniest particle.

The Psychological and Evolutionary Path to Healing After Trauma

Just after a breakup, a death of a loved one, or any unexpected event that happens, it is very difficult to let go of that situation and move in life and forgive ourselves and the person or the situation that were involved in the unexpected event because the unexpected leaves a deep imprint in our unconscious mind which doesn't only lie at the level of conscious mind which can be corrected just through a single therapy session or just some motivational lecture or session. Moving on from an unexpected event and developing a sense of forgiveness requires us to develop a sense of what happened in the unexpected event, and make come to a sense of acceptance with it. Because in psychotherapy and clinical psychology sessions it is very often the case that the person is in a denial or a rejection mode that the unexpected event really happened. Whenever they are asked about that event or person which caused them to close-up and feel insecure in their bodies and minds, they try their best to forget the memories and the thoughts related to that event. To forgive something, someone or a situation, is to totally accept it with our entire being. Till the time there won't be a sense of acceptance developed in us with regards to a situation or a circumstance, until then forgiveness cannot happen because we are suppressing the parts of the unconscious which are coming up in the conscious mind. The memories of the traumatic event, unexpected event or situation come to our psyche or the mind to remind us of the fact that till the time we give space for these thoughts and emotions to rise in our psyche, till that time these imprints will continue to haunt us and harm our sense of mental health and well-being. Forgiveness is a sense of safety, understanding, and a deep and utter sense of acceptance of any unexpected event towards which we have develop hatred towards and so this takes time and a constant process of coming to the full knowledge of what actually happened because when a challenging situation arises, the best form of psychological self-defense of the individual is to dissociate oneself from the situation and view it which doesn't let the body and the mind to fully embody the unexpected event. Full embodiment of the unexpected event with a radical acceptance of the situation is a combination that can make us to forgive ourselves and the situation that created something challenging. But no matter

the situation, the circumstances and the person which created our experience of hatred, we have the responsibility to move past this hate and slowly and gradually develop a sense of forgiveness which is good both for our physical and mental health both. At its core hatred stems from a fragmented and a narrow way of perceiving the world. This fragmented view is not beneficial for either our survival or our evolution. Evolution, both biological and social, teaches us that progress and growth are achieved not through individualistic and fragmented thinking, but through holistic and communitarian thinking. Revenge and forgiveness are thus intertwined aspects of cognitive systems designed to navigate the difficult terrain of complex social interaction. According to the evolutionary model, cognitive mechanisms for revenge and forgiveness function to optimize fitness outcomes resulting from engagement in a web of relationships that offer both the promise of cooperative interchange and the peril of malicious exploitation [3]. Human beings have evolved and advanced largely because of their capacity to cooperate, share, and form bonds within and across species. This ability to care for others, even when their actions may not align with personal desires is fundamental to the survival and prosperity of any community. Forgiveness, therefore, is not just an ethical or a moral ideal, but rather it is a biological and psychological necessity for human evolution. Within a community, when someone's actions go against another's expectations, the practice of forgiveness ensures that communal harmony is maintained. Forgiveness allows individuals to transcend personal grievances and see the larger picture, fostering unity and growth. In my own life, I have observed that holding onto hatred and resentment only burdens the mind and deteriorates our mental health, while forgiveness offers a path of mental clarity and peace leaving the mind space free to engage in important and creative tasks of daily living with the maximum efficiency and creativity. As someone who does not hold a formal degree in psychology but has lived through 26 years of observing my own psyche, I can attest that forgiveness not only benefits the person who committed the perceived wrong but also liberates the forgiver. The act of forgiving releases the mental burden of carrying resentment and hate, making way for inner peace and emotional well-being.

Restoration of Harmony and Well-Being

Forgiveness is a good medicine that can relieve us of the disease of hatred and as any disease takes time to heal and the medicine also takes time to get dissolved in the body, in the same way the medicine of forgiveness also takes time to clean the disease of hatred from our psyche making our emotional, mental and physical health to function in a harmonical way. The act of forgiveness results in an increased sense of life satisfaction, happiness, self-worth, self-confidence and an overall sense of calmed nervous system

[4]. Most of the times when we develop a hatred towards a person or a situation that sense of hatred starts to permeate our being which makes our that hatred to turn towards ourselves, which makes us to hate ourselves and hating ourselves is not a good option anyways for our mental health. An example can illustrate how a sense of hate towards the other can eventually turn for hate for oneself. The example is as follows - Kenneth was offered his dream job in another part of the country, but he could not find a way to leave. He was depressed, discouraged. His relationship with his mother, Carmen, was non-existent because of the constant and harsh criticism he had endured from her when he was a child. Recently, Carmen had made an attempt at reconciliation with Kenneth, now that he was grown and she no longer felt pressured to parent him. Just the thought of meeting with his mother enraged Kenneth, however. He was exhausted. "I will not meet with her now—she robbed me of my childhood," Kenneth contended. He felt utterly defeated and yet, deep down, he began to blame himself for all of the conflict. "What did I do wrong? What could I have done differently?" he wondered, over and over. The accusations swirled around in his head, and so he could not pack to leave because he did not have the energy or the focus. He started to dislike the himself the most. As he began his internal dialogue, Kenneth became his own harsh critic of himself. His inner dialogue always reverted back to his inadequacies, his failures, his seeming inability to be loved. He just did not like who he was. We may or may not relate to the particulars of Kenneth's experience, but it's likely that we all have heard our own share of self-accusatory rumblings—those thoughts that come and go in our mind, carrying messages of our failures and wrongdoings. Self-criticism seems part and parcel of the human experience. If we are not careful, however, these critical inner dialogues can and do become a part of us, hurting us sometimes even more than the original injustices did. Under these circumstances, the injustice wins twice: once in its hurtful actions and a second time by its effects dominating every aspect of our lives. Kenneth stated early in therapy that he would never forgive his mother for her ruthless criticisms years ago. It was just too much. Kenneth's announcement that he would never forgive his mother was not said in defiance of the forgiveness therapy itself. He was just giving a friendly warning that the therapy would not work. He was saying this more for the therapist's sake than for his, so that the therapist would not feel badly when the treatment failed. Despite this initial pessimism about it, Kenneth proceeded to examine forgiveness and to take the other keys and enter the other doors of forgiveness. At the end of his therapy, he not only forgave his mother but also agreed to meet with her to hear what his mother had to say, and he reminded himself that he would listen with a genuine and open mind. His depression, which was considerable at the beginning of the sessions, went away. Sometimes depression can be cyclical, coming and going, but in his case the depression was still

absent four months after the therapy ended. Having a greater appreciation of himself and a renewed energy and enthusiasm for life, He was healed of the effects of his mother's harsh ways so many years ago now. Kenneth got his life back [1]. This example of Kenneth clearly shows that how the sense of forgiveness plays a vital and a crucial role for our own mental health. When we are emotionally immature, we think that not forgiving a particular person for what he did which caused us to feel hurtful will make him feel hurtful, but if we continue to hate anything, that hate instead of harming the person towards which the hate is directed, starts to turn into a bitterness towards our own selves. forgiveness causes not only a reduction in felt anger but also improvement in the functioning of the heart, which can be affected by the level of anger a person has. Before forgiveness therapy, when some men were asked to tell their story of being hurt by the unjust treatment, the amount of blood flow through their hearts would decrease. After forgiveness therapy, when they retold that same story of the one who was unfair to them, the blood flow through their hearts was not negatively affected. As the head of cardiology in that hospital told us, we had helped these men to reduce the possibility of chest pains and sudden death. practicing forgiveness leads to an improvement of a major organ in the body. The hearts were not completely restored to health by forgiveness therapy, but the therapy did play a part in aiding an already- compromised cardiac system [5]. So, forgiveness not only has an effect on the mind's functions and well- being but also on the biological functions and the processes in the body. Forgiveness can also cause a reduction in the levels of stress, anxiety and depression. It is not to say that the act of forgiveness itself will completely make the person to be able to reduce the levels of stress, anxiety and depression by 100%, but even a slight reduction in the amount of stress, anxiety and depression can have a good effect on our overall mental health and well-being which will make us to function in an integrated and an harmonical way in society. There was also a study conducted on terminally ill cancer patients those who told of increased quality of peace and well-being even after there physical condition deteriorated as time went by, but as they were asked to forgive the people those who done them harm or caused them any sort of hurt in a psychological, emotional or a physical level, they reported a sense of increase in their internal sense of security, abundance and well-being even after being in the pangs of such a dangerous disease called cancer [6]. Therefore, it can be said that forgiveness plays a major role in the realm of what type of mental health and functioning of the body that we have. In hating something we more often than not avoid the strategy of not thinking of the person or the situation or the circumstances that cause us to feel uncomfortable psychologically. But, this strategy of avoiding uncomfortable situations in life gives a signal to the brain that the situation is dangerous which further gives rise

to the sympathetic nervous system response of flight- fight or freeze. But, if we instead of fighting the uncomfortable sensations and thoughts, we let them be there without resistance or fighting against them, then it gives rise to the parasympathetic response of rest and digest which makes the mind to calm down and relax. When we stop judging the uncomfortable sensation as either good or bad, then the fuel of the uncomfortable sensation on which it relies for its perpetuation and survival gets dislodged and it passes away sooner than expected. In mental health circles, there is a strong emphasis on the prescription of "not thinking", but I have a strong intuitive sense that this presumption or prescription of not thinking about a particular thing – like an uncomfortable experience that we may have had years ago makes the imprints of the memories of that experience even stronger. The moment we try to control or manipulate the natural flow of thoughts in our mind, the more out of control the mind gets. The more we try to not think about something, the more we start to ruminate on it or think about it [7]. The act of forgiveness allows one to let go of the effort or the force to have the option of not thinking or thinking about a hurtful memory, situation or a person. By the act of forgiveness, the cloud of hate in the mind dissolves leaving a clear consciousness from which our activities can even flow in a much more harmonical and integrated way.

The Peace Amidst the Chaos

Further it can be said that most of the people (even those who have decently normal lives, not just those who have had some painful event in the past) fail to differentiate between the arising of thoughts, emotions and sensations and the active effort of "thinking about" those thoughts, emotions and sensations. The thoughts, emotions and sensations will continue to arise in the mind till the time the physical body continues to exist, but we as an individual have a choice to think a particular thought or not. I believe most of the mental health problems arise when our thinking is based on thoughts of belief about the past or the future, rather than thinking those thoughts which are related to the situation in the present moment. Good mental health and developing it in a good way is about having the ability to let go of thinking about thoughts which are no longer relevant to the situation at hand, being comfortable in the midst of uncomfortableness, the ability to regulate our emotions with regard to the situation and the ability to tolerate distressing situations and still being able to carry on with our daily activities efficiently. Good mental health is not that we will have no thoughts, or memories, or emotions arising in our mind. That will be like a robotic and bland state of existence without any vitality. On the contrary, having a nice, relaxed and composed mental space is all about the way in which we deal or the relationship that we have with these thoughts,

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emotions and sensations. I want to say further that mental health is all about the type of choice we exercise over the contents of experience (thoughts, emotions, sensations). One choice is of resisting the content of experience and another one is accepting and embracing the content or the field and the realm of experience for what- it-is rather than expecting it to be different from the one it already is. The first choice gives rise to psychological suffering and the second choice leads to inner calm and ease leading to mental wellbeing. Acceptance and the art of letting go are the two most important facets when it comes to maintaining and operating from the space of good mental health [7]. This description of mental health where we don't accept the absence of seeming bad thoughts and traumatic memories, but rather it's that the act of forgiveness as the act of "allowing" makes us to be okay even amidst the arising of uncomfortable experiences. This is what mental resilience is – to be calm amidst the chaos, to be free of conflict even amidst the outer conflicts of society, culture and the collective humanity.

Forgiveness in the realm of philosophies such as Buddhism and Hinduism can be seen as a non- reactive way of interpreting the behaviors of seeming person who hurt us. In Buddhism, particularly in Zen Buddhism, there is a sort of non-duality or non-separation that permeates it, so one who has a realization of the non-dual understanding that at the fundamental level there is a sense of not-twoness then the reaction we have towards the other person can decrease. In Hinduism, also as the law of karma operates, so any type of experiences that we have to face in life is seen as a result of all our past actions done in the previous lives or the actions which are done in this life itself [4]. But these two concepts should not blind us to the difference between the internal realization and the life of practical activity. Even after the realization of the dependence of the experiences on the law of karma and the conception of nom-duality, a person would still not merely succumb to wrong doings and keep forgiving the wrong doer. The outer reactions must be appropriate to the situation at hand and aligned with the life of practical necessity and activity, but internally our attitude towards the wrongdoer would be one of deep sense of forgiveness and acceptance, even if in the external outer-world we have to fight him or her verbally or physically for the constant bullying and wrongdoing that he or she may be inflicting on us even after being warned for multiple times. Sankara also mentions that at the absolute level there is no distinction, but he also claims at the same time that in the practical world we have to act according to the practical world and not considering that everything is not-two or only look at things from a transcendental perspective of no-separation. So, a person who is self-realized has already forgiven the wrong doer completely in his view of inner realization, but he or she doesn't just sit idly when unjust things happen in society. He hates without hating, he fights without fighting.

Healing the Nervous System through Parasympathetic Activation

The meditator who focuses on forgiveness engages parasympathetic nervous activity including decreased heart rate, more relaxed breathing, improved immune functioning, and decreased pain perception [4]. The parasympathetic nervous system is activated when our nervous system doesn't sense any sense of danger or harm in the environment and instead is activated when our nervous system is calm and relaxed. On the other hand, the sympathetic nervous system is activated when our mind feels a lot a stress and hatred, is filled with negative emotions like hate, anxiety, depression and anger. Therefore, the nervous system transfers these negative emotions incorrectly into the environment and wrongly starts perceiving the environment as some sort of direct cause of the stress and the negative emotions that is arising. So, to protect the body from these perceived threats, the sympathetic nervous system is activated by the evolutionary survival mode that is installed in our nervous systems to protect us from the perceived danger, resulting in increased blood pressure, heart rate and an increased levels of adrenaline in the body which directly results in bodily tension and stress. So, in a way if we hold onto negative emotion like hatred instead of letting forgiveness wash it, it can not only effects one dimension of our being, but rather affects all the dimensions of our being. Hatred negatively affects us spiritually, emotionally, mentally and bodily as well and forgiveness in turn does the job of washing away these negative emotions and cleaning our psyche from the dark and deep imprints of these negative emotions like hatred and anger.

Negative emotions like hate, resentment, sorrow and regret do not directly affect those who are the targets of these emotions. Instead, they harm the individual harbouring these feelings. If we fail to let go of these emotions, they will manifest repeatedly in different situations, causing ongoing psychological pain. Over time, this leads to long-term mental suffering. Buddhist philosophy offers a profound lesson in this regard through the story of the two arrows [8]. The first arrow represents pain, which is an inevitable part of life. Life will always throw unexpected challenges our way – events we did not foresee or want. This first arrow, the pain is beyond our control. However, the second arrow symbolizes suffering, which is the emotional reaction we have to the pain. While we cannot prevent the first arrow from striking us, we can control how we react to it. If we learn to view these painful events as impersonal occurrences – products of an interconnected web of conditions rather than deliberate actions aimed at us – then the suffering that follows can be alleviated. For instance, if someone dents our car, we can initially feel anger or frustration. But if we take a step back and recognize that the event was not personally directed at

us but rather the result of a complex chain of circumstances, it becomes easier to forgive and move on. In contrast, if we hold onto resentment and personalize the event, we become trapped in a cycle of suffering.

Conclusion

Forgiveness, when viewed through an evolutionary, psychological, and spiritual lens, emerges as a crucial practice for liberating ourselves from cycles of hatred, resentment, and suffering. Shifting our perspective from seeing people as isolated agents to recognizing the broader web of interrelated factors that shape behaviour allows forgiveness to become a natural response. By understanding that no individual acts entirely of their own accord but is influenced by conditioning, genes, and environments, we foster a more compassionate and forgiving attitude. This impersonal viewpoint, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of all things, dissolves the rigid sense of self and personal expectations, leading to improved mental health and overall well-being. In embracing this holistic perspective, we recognize that pain is an inevitable part of life, but the additional layer of psychological suffering-rooted in emotional reactions and cognitive biases-can be mitigated. For example, while initial reactions to events like a car accident may include anger or blame, a broader understanding of life's interconnectedness allows us to move beyond these emotions, fostering an underlying sense of loving-kindness amidst chaos. Forgiveness thus transcends mere moral or ethical considerations, impacting biological and psychological dimensions. It involves reconciling with past traumas, understanding emotional responses, and cultivating acceptance, all of which alleviate stress and enhance life satisfaction. Ultimately, forgiveness is essential for psychological resilience and harmonious human interactions, offering a pathway to greater peace and emotional freedom.

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