



Adapting an evidence-based intervention to REACH Forgiveness for different religions and spiritualities

Everett L. Worthington Jr.^{1,*}, Yin Lin¹, Man Yee Ho²

Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

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ABSTRACT

The REACH Forgiveness intervention has been used in psychoeducational groups, couple and individual counseling and psychotherapy, and workbooks. It has been investigated in over 20 randomized clinical trials (RCTs) worldwide. It has been accommodated to treat Christians and shown to be effective in RCTs. But most research has established it to be effective when not accommodating it to religious or spiritual clientele. In this article, we will claim that it can be accommodated to a variety of religious clients. We describe guidelines about what is essential to the treatment and what might be effectively modified to be acceptable to religious and spiritual clients embracing a variety of beliefs and practices.

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1. Introduction

The REACH Forgiveness model is an intervention to promote forgiveness that has been used in individual, couple, family, and group therapy, couple enrichment, and psychoeducational groups. It is an evidence-based intervention (Worthington, 2003, 2006). Over 20 randomized clinical trial (RCT) studies have shown it to be efficacious, and many other intervention studies are underway at the present. About half of the published studies have come from our lab, but half have been independent of our lab.

2. Method

We consider a selective review of research and theory regarding the REACH Forgiveness model. Our purpose is not an exhaustive scientific review of a body of the literature, but a practice-oriented review of empirical research, theoretical exposition, and application to inform practice. We consulted the corpus of writings regarding the REACH Forgiveness model.

3. Results

3.1. Nine elements of the REACH Forgiveness method

The five-step REACH Forgiveness approach is easy to teach, learn and later recall, and provides a large amount of flexibility to the practitioner. In brief, the REACH Forgiveness intervention (1) defines forgiveness, (2) promotes a decision to forgive, (3)–(7) teaches five steps to REACH emotional forgiveness that are memory-cued for ease of recall, (8) promotes generalization to other aspects of life by inviting repeated use of the REACH Forgiveness model, and (9) teaches other means of dealing with injustice.

Two types of forgiveness are identified. *Decisional forgiveness* is to make a behavioral intention statement to not seek revenge toward an offender and to treat the offender as a valued person. *Emotional forgiveness* is a process of replacing negative emotions with positive other-oriented emotions. Emotional forgiveness typically takes longer than decisional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness is stimulated by walking people through the five steps. R = Recall the Hurt differently than indulging in blame or feelings of victimization. E = Emotionally Replace Negative Unforgiving Emotions (i.e., bitterness, resentment, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear) with positive other-oriented emotions of empathy, sympathy, compassion, and love for the offender. A = Give an Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness. C = Commit to the Forgiveness One Experienced, which aids people to H = Hold onto Forgiveness One Experiences through a series of maintenance – enhancing exercises. The method, once learned, is rehearsed using at least

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 804 828 1150; fax: +1 804 828 2237.

E-mail addresses: eworth@vcu.edu (E.L. Worthington Jr.), liny5@vcu.edu (Y. Lin).

¹ Address: Box 842018, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2018, USA.

² Permanent address: Rm 323, Sino Building, Department of Psychology, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong.

ten identified offenses or hurts that still bother the client; the intent is to generalize forgiveness to become a more forgiving person (i.e., to promote a trait of forgivingness).

3.2. Adapting the REACH Forgiveness model to religion or spirituality

The REACH Model has been frequently tested in secular settings (e.g., see Kiefer et al., 2010; McCullough et al., 1997; Ripley and Worthington, 2002; Sandage and Worthington, 2010) and adapted to Christian clients and tested in controlled trials (Lampton et al., 2005; Stratton et al., 2008; Worthington et al., 2010). Recent reviews (Hook et al., 2010) and meta-analysis (Worthington et al., 2011) of religious and spiritually accommodated psychotherapeutic treatments have shown that strictly accommodated religious or spiritual treatments, when compared to the comparable secular treatment, do not produce differential effectiveness in changing mental health symptoms, but do provide spiritual benefits beyond the secular treatments for religious clientele. Reviewing the research regarding Christian clients, we discern twelve principles for accommodating Worthington's (2006) secular intervention for Christian clients. The principles are to (1) provide a religious context by naming the group Christian and by beginning with meditations about forgiveness taken from Christian Scriptures and writings of Christian writers; (2) use examples of forgiveness throughout that were taken from Christian Scriptures or Christian writers; (3) ascribe permanent change to God and justify the use of the psychological approach by referring to the REACH steps as forms that shape the working of God in the life of people, whereas the real work of forgiveness is produced by the working of God; (4) describe Scriptural mandates in the Christian faith to forgive (Matthew 6:12, 14–15); other faiths value forgiveness and might have strong encouragement to forgive but do not usually have mandates like the Christian Scriptures; (5) invite people to make a decision to forgive by offering the grudge to God as a sacrifice early in the treatment and returning later in the group to offer the unforgiveness to God with more heartfelt intention; (6) refer to the support one might receive by other members of one's faith; (7) justify replacing unforgiving emotions with empathy, sympathy, compassion, and love because those virtues are valued in Christian faith; (8) invite people to identify heroes of forgiveness, drawing on their faith and Christian community to identify examples; (9) invite people to pray for the people who harmed or offended them; (10) imply that people should copy Jesus; (11) suggest that people forgive because they have been forgiven by God (as a result of Jesus' redemptive work) and also because they have been forgiven by others; (12) draw on the idea that one can have a Christian mission by promoting forgiveness in the world through being a model and also explicitly teaching forgiveness to others.

Practitioners from other religions besides Christianity could also adapt the REACH Forgiveness model to their own religious clientele by following these twelve principles for adaptation but substituting other religious content for the Christian content. In addition, even people who want to promote a more secular spirituality could make similar adaptations.

3.3. Adapting the REACH Forgiveness model to Asian culture

Asian culture is not a monolithic whole but a differentiated network of beliefs and practices. Afghanistan, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Turkey all differ substantially. Even within a country, like China, stark differences in adaptation would be needed in Hong Kong, urban and urbane large cities, and rural Inner Mongolia. Similarly, India is diverse in both religion and culture. Practitioners and

researchers need to be cognizant of adapting the REACH Forgiveness model to fit with precisely the religion and culture of the clients who will be using it.

Let us consider some of the adaptations. If we take as a template, the twelve areas of adaptation for religious or spiritual interventions that we identified above, we can see some of the modifications that could be made. (1) Accommodations could provide a culturally specific context. Name the group something like, "An Urban Chinese Group to REACH Forgiveness". (2) The leader can draw from culturally specific writings for meditations and examples. In Filipino adaptation (Worthington et al., 2010), some uniquely Filipino language was used within the interventions. (3) The leader can characterize forgiveness as being important to the target culture by drawing on historical events (e.g., unforgiveness regarding the Japanese invasion of China and Singapore might be used to provide examples of needed forgiveness within the culture). (4) The target culture could be drawn on to provide a national or ethnic reason to forgive – to promote better physical health or mental health or more orientation to reconciliation for past intranational atrocities (such as in Korea or Vietnam) or for invasions (such as invasions of Afghanistan by the USSR and USA). (5) The leader can draw on culture to justify making a decision to forgive, such as describing people of Cambodia as having suffered much death and torture and yet over the years having been able to forgive much inflicted suffering and move on with life. (6) The leader can encourage people from the same tribe or group to offer mutual support in forgiving. Examples of love, compassion, and sympathy can be adduced to justify replacing unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions. (7) Participants can be invited to identify heroes of forgiveness, drawing on their culture. Models of forgiveness could be identified from the culture. (8) Other ways of dealing with injustice – such as mindfulness meditations, promotion of forbearance to maintain group harmony, and acceptance – could be employed.

4. Discussion

In summary, armed with the secularly and religiously accommodated versions of the REACH Forgiveness model that are available through www.people.vcu.edu/~eworth, and equipped with the principles for adaptation outlined here (including religious, spiritual, and cultural examples), practitioners could adapt this forgiveness intervention to their clientele or patients. Extant research has shown that such adaptations do not affect mental health symptoms differentially from a culturally acceptable but unadapted REACH Forgiveness model but it might produce benefits in terms of acceptability to the clientele or patients and of their spiritual and ethnic lives.

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Contributors

All the authors contributed to the development and writing of the manuscript. Furthermore, all authors read and reviewed the final manuscript prior to its submission.

Conflict of interest

None to declare.

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