When Sorry Doesn't Seem to Be Enough: Steps Into Forgiveness

Step 1: Begin and continue in prayer.

Times to talk about hurts must always be spoken and heard in an attitude of prayer. It is an advantage to begin with prayer to reinforce this fact, and then maintain an attitude of prayer throughout the steps that follow. God is present, bidden or unbidden.

Step 2: Statement of the responsibility.

The offense must be stated clearly and explicitly. If the hurt person initiates this process, the responsible person is asked to state the offense in his/her own words. The following is a clear statement: "I am seeking forgiveness for all the times I insulted you in front of others." An unclear and even inappropriate statement would be: "I am seeking forgiveness for speaking out the truth about your faults in front of others."

Step 3: Responsible partner provides explanation.

Seldom after an offense is committed does the responsible person have an opportunity to explain in a non-defensive situation the reason behind the behavior. Before moving on, it is important for the hurt person to listen and attempt to put in his/her own words the responsible person's explanation for the behavior.

Step 4: Questions and answers about hurtful situation.

Family and marital tensions and misunderstandings escalate in the aftermath of an offense. The objective is to create the conditions of safety for questions to be asked and answered. The possibility of forgiving improves when the hurt person has more knowledge and the responsible person feels heard. It helps avoid operating on the basis of assumptions or biases.

Step 5: Hurt partner gives emotional reaction and gains restatement.

Offenses produce an array of emotional reactions. The emotions of the hurt person need to be explained in full detail. Feelings of hurt, anger, or shame cannot be denied. It is important for the responsible person to listen and attempt to put in his/her own words the hurt person's emotional account of the experience. When the responsible person demonstrates understanding of the hurt for the hurt person, it facilitates the forgiveness process. Hurt persons often have an ardent desire to be understood in their hurt.

Step 6: Responsible partner develops plan to stop/prevent behavior.

Any intervention that facilitates forgiveness needs to have a precise plan that will eliminate the hurtful behavior. A request for forgiveness becomes insignificant when it is not backed by a commitment to end or prevent the behavior. An effective plan includes a specific behavior change objective and a method of accountability.

Step 7: Hurt partner identifies with responsible partner's hurt.

If the above stages have gone well, a hurt person will experience the conditions to empathize with the responsible person. Seldom is a hurt person completely faultless in family discord. The realization and humility that he or she is human and have made mistakes can contribute to an ability to forgive. In any event a hurt person will need to formulate a rationale for forgiveness that is based on intrinsic motivations, not dismissing, condoning, expedience (forgiving in order to get something), or obligation/expectation (forgiving because one is compelled to do so by expectations of others or God).

Step 8: Emphasis on choice and commitment to forgive.

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process that begins with an altruistic choice. This step is the time for a choice to be made (or not) by the hurt person. Choosing to forgive does not mean that the memory is gone or the pain has subsided. Recalling the hurt will generate emotions, but these are transient unless the hurt person dwells on the hurt and thinks continual unforgiving thoughts. Unforgiving thoughts often will intrude into our life for protective purposes. The hurt person will need to be reminded to resist fighting them. It is always better to use other activities to distract from the pull of unforgiveness.

Step 9: Create a ceremonial act.

The ceremonial act is a symbolic expression that the offense has been formally forgiven. It is often a combination of celebration and commitment. The responsible person and the hurt person are in a very real sense making their wedding vows again but with new specificity. Give a certificate. Write a letter. Create a poem or symbol. Exchange new rings. Renew vows. Confess to a spiritual mentor. Ceremonial acts serve as a tangible marker that can be remembered and referred to in the future when doubts might arise or accountability is needed.

Adapted from Frederick DiBlasio's *Scripture and forgiveness: Interventions with Christian couples and families* (1999, **Marriage and Family: A Christian Journal**, 247-258), Robert Enright in Scott Heller's *Emerging field of forgiveness studies explores how we let go of grudges* (1998, **Chronicle of Higher Education**), and Everett Worthington's *Promoting forgiveness in clinical practice* (1997, AACC PreConference Workshop).