I have a unique request from your patient. He has an adult son, serving time in a prison that is in another state. Your patient wants to travel out of state to visit his son, look him in the eye, and apologize. He wants to be able to shake his son’s hand when his son forgives him, forgives him for everything,” said the patient care coordinator.

This patient had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had chosen to receive comfort care. There was recently a frank discussion with the hospice team of his limited time. The patient intuitively knew his mental capacity would soon limit his ability to interact and travel. In response he requested arrangements to be made for an out of state trip. My patient and his son felt the magnitude of this event required a face to face meeting. For this meeting to happen, several preparations needed to be made.

My initial role was something a doctor does routinely. I wrote orders and dictated notes. He required morphine, an antiemetic, oxygen, a wheelchair, and other medications for his multiple chronic conditions. As routine as these orders seemed at the time, I would later realize they were exceptional, at first for my patient and his son but later and unexpectedly for me. It would teach me about forgiveness and reconciliation, concepts that have changed my life. My role had started to transform from doctor to learner.

Until that time I had never thought about the concept or application of forgiveness in depth. I quickly realized it is a key concept in the world. It not only heals people, relationships, and families, it can unite nations and can stop war. For hundreds of years, religions of different denominations have understood the spiritual healing power of forgiveness. Most major religions recommend forgiveness as a productive response to transgressions. Even though the concept is known and many people will agree it is powerful, it is seldom applied or publicly suggested.

My patient applied forgiveness before requesting the arrangements be made. He forgave himself first. He accepted responsibility for his past conduct and realized he had hurt people. He told his son he was sorry, and his son accepted but requested to do it in person. The son wanted to shake his father’s hand and look him in the eye when he accepted his apology. The actual handshake between father and son was significant and necessary. By extending a hand to someone who has hurt them there is not only verbal expression of forgiveness, but the physical contact allowed the experience of forgiveness to be shared. The physical contact allows the process of reconciliation to begin. In this sequence of events both father and son began to heal. Feelings of hate, resentment, and revenge were replaced by love, understanding, and empathy. I was told by family members that the patient’s son was deeply touched by the experience, and they feel it will help him turn his life around.

While I was impressed with subjective and anecdotal evidence of the power of forgiveness, curiosity about the healing force led me to search the medical literature. My question was “Is there evidence to support physiological correlations with forgiveness?” My search resulted in a multitude of studies that revealed that forgiveness does in fact affect our physiology. For example, it has been shown that when people think a thought of forgiveness it activates specific regions of the brain. Functional MRI studies show that forgiving thoughts activated the left superior frontal gyrus, orbitofrontal gyrus, and the precuneus. Further, chronic stressful situations such as guilt and revenge involve stress hormone secretion, neuronal loss, and a decrease in brain function and structure.

The cardiovascular system is also affected by forgiveness. Studies found that people who have forgiven others for past transgressions had lower blood pressure levels, heart rate, and rate pressure product when compared to those who had not forgiven a major transgression. In fact, being unable to forgive specific offenders was related to increased levels of cardiovascular and sympathetic tone.

From Mercy Services Iowa City, Iowa City, IA.
Sleep quality, which can affect every system, has been shown to be increased by forgiveness. Lawler et al. studied the effects of forgiveness on health among community adults and found that sleep quality was positively correlated with forgiveness and negatively correlated with motivation for revenge. Victims of interpersonal transgressions often ruminate or frequently think about the offense. A variety of empirical studies have confirmed that individuals with poorer sleep quality exhibit frequent rumination. Insomnia can lead to physical complaints such as headaches or gastrointestinal disturbances and can increase the risk of developing depression. Rumination about an interpersonal offense can also directly affect the physiological stress response through increased secretion of salivary cortisol.

My role went from a physician to a learner and now an advocate for forgiveness as a way to increase emotional and physical health. As a family physician, chief complaints of depression, insomnia, hypertension, and substance abuse are seen routinely. From my literature search I speculate on how much emotional stress due to unresolved emotional pain contributes to these ailments. All the sleep aids in the world cannot help the insomnia caused by childhood neglect or abuse. A patient can go through every SSRI, TCA, and even electroconvulsive therapy for depression but not feel better if the real issue stems from emotional pain. Medicine, recreational drugs, surgery, cigarettes, and alcohol alone cannot cure emotional pain. However, forgiveness can help enormously if done in earnest. I feel confident telling my patients the medical literature supports this. Further, I will recommend sources such as books, counseling, and support groups to aid them in their path to healing themselves through forgiveness of themselves and others.

The orders I wrote for that patient were some of the best medicine I have ever delivered. It resulted in forgiveness and reconciliation for my patient, his son, and family. It also opened a new door for me to use in my professional life and personal life. I will now tell my patients, colleagues, friends, and family that forgiveness is a great healing tool, although it may take time and support, it can help. Research backs it up.

My favorite quote about forgiveness comes from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “… forgiveness is an absolute necessity for continued human existence.”

References

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