

conflict: not too much, not too little **the importance of assertiveness**

this handout with links to all research studies was posted to www.stressedtozest.com on 4.06.11

I've recently written a couple of posts on conflict – *"Conflict: not too much, not too little – some research suggestions"* and *"Conflict: not too much, not too little – how to make it constructive"*. Today I'd like to look at a series of papers from James McNulty's lab at the University of Tennessee. This research highlights the importance of appropriate assertiveness to balance the potentially over-sugary effects of excessive optimism and forgiveness. McNulty argues that kindness, hopefulness & turning the other cheek may well be excellent advice in basically well-functioning relationships, but when there are real problems that need to be addressed a good dose of direct and persistent assertiveness comes in very handy (although assertiveness itself comes in a variety of different "flavours" as I'll discuss later). I've come across four fascinating papers on the mixed benefits of forgiveness, three on mixed benefits of optimism, one on the mixed benefits of self-compassion, and one on problem solving.

The papers on forgiveness are *"Forgiveness in marriage: putting the benefits into context"*, *"The doormat effect: when forgiving erodes self-respect and self-concept clarity"*, *"Forgiveness increases the likelihood of subsequent partner transgressions in marriage"* and *"The dark side of forgiveness: the tendency to forgive predicts continued psychological and physical aggression in marriage"*. The first of these – *"Forgiveness in marriage"* – found that *"... spouses married to partners who rarely behaved negatively tended to remain more satisfied over time to the extent that they were more forgiving, spouses married to partners who frequently behaved negatively tended to experience steeper declines in satisfaction to the extent that they were more forgiving. Similar patterns emerged for changes in the severity of husbands' problems, such that husbands married to wives who frequently behaved negatively reported sharper increases in problem severity to the extent that they were more forgiving but reported more stable problem severity to the extent that they were less forgiving"*.

The second paper – *"The doormat effect"* – links nicely to the assertiveness diagram in the first of this series of posts on conflict. This *"Doormat effect"* research paper is currently freely downloadable from the web as a full text PDF. The abstract comments *"We build on principles from interdependence theory and evolutionary psychology to propose that forgiving bolsters one's self-respect and self-concept clarity if the perpetrator has acted in a manner that signals that the victim will be safe and valued in a continued relationship with the perpetrator but that forgiving diminishes one's self-respect and self-concept clarity if the perpetrator has not. Study 1 employed a longitudinal design to demonstrate that the association of marital forgiveness with trajectories of self-respect over the first 5 years of marriage depends on the spouse's dispositional tendency to indicate that the partner will be safe and valued (i.e., agreeableness). Studies 2 and 3 employed experimental procedures to demonstrate that the effects of forgiveness on self-respect and self-concept clarity depend on the perpetrator's event-specific indication that the victim will be safe and valued (i.e., amends). Study 4 employed a longitudinal design to demonstrate that the association of forgiveness with subsequent self-respect and self-concept clarity similarly depends on the extent to which the perpetrator has made amends. These studies reveal that, under some circumstances, forgiveness negatively impacts the self."*

The third paper on the potentially negative effects of forgiveness in the wrong kind of situation – *"Forgiveness increases the likelihood of subsequent partner transgressions"* – reads *"Despite a growing literature on the positive implications of forgiveness and recent efforts to promote forgiveness in marriage, there is reason to believe forgiveness could have yet-unknown **[Cont.]**"*

negative implications. In particular, forgiveness may increase the likelihood that offenders will offend again by removing unwanted outcomes for those offenders (e.g., criticism, guilt, loneliness) that would otherwise discourage them from reoffending. Consistent with this possibility, the current 7-day-diary study revealed that newlywed spouses were more likely to report that their partners had engaged in a negative behavior on days after they had forgiven those partners for a negative behavior than on days after they had not forgiven those partners for a negative behavior. Interpersonal theories and interventions designed to treat and prevent relationship distress may benefit by acknowledging this potential cost of forgiveness".

And the last of the McNulty et al forgiveness papers – *"The dark side of forgiveness"* – comments *"Despite a burgeoning literature that documents numerous positive implications of forgiveness, scholars know very little about the potential negative implications of forgiveness. In particular, the tendency to express forgiveness may lead offenders to feel free to offend again by removing unwanted consequences for their behavior (e.g., anger, criticism, rejection, loneliness) that would otherwise discourage reoffending. Consistent with this possibility, the current longitudinal study of newlywed couples revealed a positive association between spouses' reports of their tendencies to express forgiveness to their partners and those partners' reports of psychological and physical aggression. Specifically, although spouses who reported being relatively more forgiving experienced psychological and physical aggression that remained stable over the first 4 years of marriage, spouses who reported being relatively less forgiving experienced declines in both forms of aggression over time. These findings join just a few others in demonstrating that forgiveness is not a panacea."*

Fascinating. To give these findings more context, there's plenty of research to show that forgiveness, in general, can often have very positive benefits – see, for example, the *"Campaign for forgiveness research"* and *"Forgiveness web"*. The very valid point though that McNulty & colleagues seem to be making is that forgiveness needs to be balanced with other issues like past & probable future patterns of behaviour, fairness and justice. This is where courage, authenticity, assertiveness & problem-solving come into their own. Note however that authenticity & challenge can come in different "flavours" – see, for example, the handouts *"Honesty, transparency & confrontation"* and *"Conflict: insights from game theory"*.
