Guilt and Forgiveness
(with a sidebar on Shame)

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Objectives: Participants will be able to...

- Distinguish guilt from shame
- Distinguish normal/existential guilt from that which is pathological
- Identify issues in the pastoral/spiritual treatment of guilt.
- Articulate what forgiveness is/is not
- Explain a forgiveness process
- Access appropriate pastoral/spiritual resources relative to guilt, shame and forgiveness.
Shame

- Painful feeling of being exposed, uncovered, unprotected, vulnerable.
- Etymologically, means “to cover.”
- Three forms
  - Shame anxiety—affective state about something that is anticipated. Evoked by sudden exposure. Signals the threat of contemptuous rejection.
  - Being ashamed—affective and cognitive pattern in reaction to something that has already happened. “Disgrace-shame,” or “shame about.”
  - Sense of shame – a character attitude that restrains my behavior. Modesty, reticence, tact.
Guilt

- Objectively, *acts or behaviors* which *violate laws, codes, or moral values* held by *community* to which the individual is linked.

- Subjectively, guilt feeling is the *emotion* accompanying *self judgment or knowledge* that one has *transgressed values* in some way *important to the self*. 
Guilt and Shame

- Discrete/\textit{specific}
- About something I did/did not do
- Can \textit{use words} to talk about
- Limits the expansion of \textit{power}

- Involves \textit{whole self}; global
- Revelation of something which I \textit{am}
- More \textit{difficult} to put into \textit{words}
- Guards the boundary of \textit{privacy/intimacy}
Normal Existential Guilt

- *Man* [sic] *is the being who is capable of becoming guilty and is capable of illuminating his guilt.* -- Buber, 1971.

- Occurs when *someone injures an order of the human world whose foundations he knows and recognizes as those of his own existence and of all common human existence.* (Buber)
Pathological Guilt

- Too intense guilt.
  - Ego functions and defenses may become too stylized, rigid, and symptomatic; e.g., scrupulosity

- Absence or confusion of guilt, characterized by terms such as “character disorder.”
  - Value vacuum or distortion
Issues in the Treatment of Guilt

- To treat all guilt (existential and pathological) as the same or to interweave the two may only compound the pathology.
- It has become possible to differentiate to some degree the varying tasks of psychotherapy and religious forgiveness.
- Situations are compounded because many of them are complex mixtures of pathological and normal existential guilt.
Forgiveness

- Is NOT the same as condoning, excusing, or forgetting
- Is NOT denying or pretending that we are not really hurt
- Is NOT the same as reconciliation
- Is one person’s response to another’s injustice
- Has a social context; e.g., God and humanity, two or more persons, two or more “selves” within one person
What sustains unforgiveness?

- The hurt may be too raw.
- Not enough time has passed.
- We can’t believe the horrendous.
- We fear being overwhelmed by the pain of awareness.
- We gain acceptance as victims and don’t want to lose the way we are known to the world.
What sustains unforgiveness?

- We fear the offense may repeat itself if we forgive.
- Anger works. It makes us feel empowered, gives us an illusion of control over the event or the offender.

BUT

With unforgiveness we give up our personal power.
Acts that reduce unforgiveness (thus usually contributing to positive health outcomes) but are not true forgiveness

- Successful vengeance
- Seeing justice done
- Letting go and moving on
- Excusing
- Justifying or condoning an offense
- Turning the issue over to God because I don’t believe myself capable of judging
- Turning the issue over to God in hopes of divine retribution
Forgiveness and Health

- *See* Enright, 1998
- *See* Hover and Ehman, 2007 – both article summary and “related items of interest.”
- *See* Worthington, 2007
Interpersonal Forgiving: A Model
(International Forgiveness Institute)

- Uncovering Phase (pre-contemplation and contemplation)
  - Become aware of the emotional pain that has resulted from a deep, unjust injury

- Decision Phase (preparation)
  - A change must occur in order to go on with the healing process

- Work Phase (action)
  - Active work of forgiving the injurer

- Outcome/Deepening Phase (maintenance)
Forgiveness interventions: where might they be employed?

- Medical family therapy
- Cardiovascular health
- Chronic pain
- Substance use
- Traumatic brain injuries
- Cancer
- Medical errors

Worthington, 2007
Resources for use in spiritual care

- “About Shame,” www.helpyourselftherapy.com
- “Forgiveness and the Freedom of Letting Go,” four-minute video. Youtube.com
The Forgiveness Project. UK-based charitable organization that uses people’s stories in prisons, schools, faith communities, to explore forgiveness, reconciliation and conflict resolution through real-life human experience. www.theforgivenessproject.com


International Forgiveness Institute at University of Wisconsin, Madison. www.forgiveness-institute.org


Miller, Marc, Ph.D. “Shame and Psychotherapy,” www.columbiapsych.com/shame
Resources for use in spiritual care cont.

- “Spiritual Practice: Forgiveness” on www.spiritualityandpractice.com. Quotations, books, fiction, teaching stories, films, music, art, daily cue, prayer/mantra, imagery exercise, practice of the day—all on forgiveness.