Forgiveness and the Post-Abortive Woman: Achieving Self-Forgiveness

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Forgiveness and the Post-Abortive Woman
Achieving Self-Forgiveness

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Achieving Self-forgiveness

Abstract

Concepts of forgiveness explore the sum of the parts of any individual within any context or belief system an individual is a part of. The sum of these parts involve forgiveness within the context of an entire person, empathy being at the heart of forgiveness, forgiveness as a relationship and forgiveness being that of a personal commitment. Forgiveness is an art within the process toward emotional maturity and is a part of any aspect of the human experience toward achieving self-acceptance.

Applications of forgiveness are therapeutic and can be a way in which personal healing can take place. In addition, therapeutic benefits of forgiveness counseling can allow a person to move forward from the past and become able to look toward to a better future. A focus group was conducted in order to explore a post-abortive woman's reasons for seeking forgiveness counseling, various definitions of forgiveness and whether or not a woman can achieve self-forgiveness through completing the forgiveness process.

Conclusions of this study will help to increase awareness of the physical, emotional and spiritual needs within this special population of women and help in better defining and developing therapeutic interventions of forgiveness for the post-abortive woman toward achieving self-forgiveness and self-acceptance following an abortion.
Many thanks to my thesis committee of Thomas M. Moore, MS, MA, Lynn Braybrook-Roelofs and Jerry Johnson Ph.D. Especially George Grant Ph.D. for being a supportive guide and mentor through my research process and making it a professional and personal growing experience.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Forgiveness is accepted as profitable in promoting personal and relationship healing. For the purpose of this study, forgiveness will be discussed as related to the post-abortive woman. Post-abortive women are recognized as those who have identified themselves as being hurt by their decision to have had an abortion. This study will explore forgiveness as an effective therapeutic tool toward healing wounds associated to the abortion experience and determine whether forgiveness counseling is helpful toward achieving self-forgiveness.

Much of my motivation for researching concepts of forgiveness is of a personal component. It has always been my goal as a person and professional to seek out alternative ways in which people can promote change and healing in their lives from a reframe based framework of thinking. The acceptance and development of alternative therapies as effective therapeutic tools, such as applications of forgiveness, can sometimes be neglected within the field of social work. In summary, “modeling forgiveness fits into our moral and interpersonal lives. How forgiveness is encouraged and what forgiveness might mean for people’s lives as individuals, members of families and participants in communities or cultural group is important.” (McCullough, 1997, p.13). I have always wondered what “it” is that will help people to move forward from the past and be able to look forward to a better future. Through this study, I intend to explore the therapeutic capacity forgiveness has for the post-abortive woman in achieving self-forgiveness.
Chapter Two

Definitions of Forgiveness

My intentions toward exploring forgiveness will be reflected by providing definitions of forgiveness in the following manner. First, I will accomplish this by explaining what forgiveness is not. Then, I will explain what forgiveness is. Throughout the discussion of various definitions of forgiveness, I hope to provide clarity to this concept we call forgiveness and an interactive reading experience for the reader that will leave room for their own exploration within their already existing thoughts, perspectives and definitions of forgiveness. Concepts of forgiveness are reflective of the values, beliefs and the ethical framework of advanced generalist social work practice. Forgiveness will not be defined the same or be experienced in the same manner for everyone. The following definitions of forgiveness must be considered only as a subjective representation of the many definitions of forgiveness.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Forgiveness is not forgetting – By performing an act of forgiveness toward the Self or the other who hurt us a person is not erasing past experiences. “We cannot forget, nor should we not. Those experiences, and even the pain they caused, have a great deal to teach us” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 16).

Forgiveness is not condoning – When an act of forgiveness is performed, the impact of past events can be lessened. The idea is not to find what the injury was to the Self or to the other. The most important element here is that “true forgiveness cannot occur while we are in any way denying, minimizing, justifying, or condoning the reactions that harmed us or harmed another” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 16).

Forgiveness is not absolution – Many people may feel they have been called to “wipe the slate clean, confess, do penance, or associate forgiveness with a sort of absolution deriving from religious beliefs and values. “For healing to occur, that is not necessarily the case because in general, people are of their own actions, and responsibility lies more toward making peace with the past” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 16).
Forgiveness is not a form of self-sacrifice – Forgiveness is not denying the event(s) causing pain or hurt. It is also not denying that as a human being you have feelings about the event and that those feelings are neither right nor wrong. Your feelings simply are. “You may or may not be ready to forgive or pretend to forgive. This can be alleviated by moving out of the denial around the hurt and explore feelings associated to the event” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 16).

Forgiveness is not a clear-cut, one-time decision – “We cannot expect to wake up one morning and magically expect to think that today is THE day I am going to forgive somebody or myself” (Simon and Simon, 1997, p. 17). Without acknowledging the past, it is difficult to move toward the future. “Forgiveness is a way of reaching out from a bad past and heading out to a more positive future” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 17).

Forgiveness is not a moral obligation – “Forgiveness is a moral right and a right towards stopping the hurt caused by events. Forgiveness in this context becomes a possibility rather than an obligation” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 18).

What Forgiveness Is

Forgiveness is a by-product of an ongoing healing process – “Forgiveness is the gift at the end of the healing process. We reach a point where we stop expecting the other, or the Self to pay for what was done or make up for it up in some way” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 18).

Forgiveness is an internal process - It is something that happens within the person who has been emotionally hurt in some way. “It is a feeling of wellness, freedom and acceptance. Those feelings can be ours at any time, as long as we want to heal and are willing to try” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 18).

Forgiveness is a sign of positive self-esteem – “It is no longer building your identity around something that happened to you in the past. Realize there is more to you. The past is put into its proper perspective, and it is realized that the injuries and injustices are just a part of life and a part of a person’s humanness” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 18).

Forgiveness is letting go of the intense emotions attached to incidents from the past – “A person can still remember what happened but forgiveness becomes an option once pain from the past stops dictating how a person lives their life” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 19).

Forgiveness is recognizing that we no longer need to hold onto the resentments, anger and vulnerability toward the hurt – “Instead of using the hurt as an excuse to get less out of life, forgiveness can reclaim that which was perceived to be taken as a result of the hurt” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 19).
Forgiveness is realizing that a person cannot “even” the score - The objective is to “cancel the debt” with a person’s Self of the other who caused the hurt. Having a willingness to integrate this realization can restore and/or renew a person’s sense of inner peace” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 19).

Forgiveness is accepting that nothing we do to punish the other or the Self will heal us - A person becomes aware of how these attitudes and behaviors have in turn hurt them. A person simply says enough is enough” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 19).

Forgiveness is freeing - “It can help put to better use the energy once consumed by holding harboring emotions to healing wounds” (Simon and Simon, 1977, p. 19).

**Literature Review**

**Benefits of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness can be helpful toward emotional healing. To forgive can allow a person to release held resentment and provide a sense of freedom. Why should we forgive? "We forgive, if we are wise, not for the other person, but for ourselves. We forgive, not to erase a wrong, but to relieve the residue of the wrong that is alive within us" (Dayton, 1992, p. 367). The process of forgiving can be less painful than holding onto resentment and hurt without condemning ourselves by repeating the very trauma, situation or event that was hurtful. Yet, forgiveness should not be confused with reconciliation. Forgiveness is a state that reflects an intrapersonal process. Reconciliation is a process that occurs within an interpersonal transaction with another person(s).

Theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich wrote, "Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer implied in our existence." (Casarjian, 1992, p. 10). A person’s beliefs of forgiveness can either hinder and/or limit a person from achieving forgiveness. A person’s beliefs of forgiveness can also hinder and/or limit a person’s capacity to release the past and live for the future with peace and happiness.
The Psychological Framework of Forgiveness

There are concepts relevant to perceptions of forgiveness within a psychological framework. The psychological framework for understanding forgiveness is usually associated with unconscious beliefs that a person holds about themselves, others and events. It is a person's human nature that becomes influenced and can determine a person's ability and willingness to risk, to trust and to forgive. Psychological frameworks of understanding forgiveness are represented through various models of forgiveness. These models are derived from transpersonal psychology, the study of human nature and development and spiritual dimensions of the human experience. The psychological framework for understanding forgiveness is based on an acknowledgment and awareness that within everyone there is awareness and free will. This awareness can allow a person to have the ability to see clearly, without defensiveness and without distortion.

Looking further into the psychology of forgiveness, sub-personalities of the Self become important within a person's personality toward achieving forgiveness. Some sub-personalities are described as the following: perfectionistic, critical, angry, manipulative and guilty. "If there is an overidentification with any of them, they will inevitably inhibit well-being and the ability to be forgiving" (Casarejian, 1992, p. 32). As a person learns the process of forgiveness, well-being can be achieved. If a person practices acts of forgiveness on the Self, others may naturally be more likely to be forgiven as a result of having already achieved self-forgiveness.

There has been speculation by theorists that common survival mechanisms can keep a person's negative feelings below their consciousness and negatively influence the forgiveness process. These were first defined by Freud and presently, Casarejian (1992) suggests that negative feelings kept in the unconscious may in turn influence a person's capacity to perform acts
of forgiveness or accept forgiveness from another person. These survival mechanisms are identified as the following:

1. Denial - refusal to accept things as they are.
2. Repression - an unconscious blocking or an unacceptable feeling or desire from our awareness.
3. Suppression – Excluding painful or unacceptable feelings, desires, or urges.
4. Projection - Process of disowning your feelings and desires and attributing them to others.
5. Rationalization - Inventing stories, excuses, and alibis that serve as a rationale for unacceptable behaviors and motivations.

Forgiveness and Forgiving the Self

Forgiving the Self can be a process of learning to accept your unique humanness. In the forgiveness process a person may experience internal resistance toward achieving self-forgiveness. At this point, it is important to clarify what the purpose of self-forgiveness encompasses. "The purpose of self-forgiveness is to shine light on the illusions, fears, and self-judgments that have held those captive. Self-forgiveness requires you to (re)examine beliefs about the nature of your very being." (Casarejian, 1992, p. 136). On a personal and cultural level, self-forgiveness will vary according to a person’s environment, values, beliefs and norms. Self-forgiveness requires a person to examine beliefs about their Self and others that were established long ago and understand the nature of their Self based on this examination. Then, self-forgiveness can be sought within present experiences that naturally reflect the (re)examined beliefs about the person’s own goodness, respectability, and worthiness. "The ability to have self-forgiveness has roots from childhood and can have to do with healing unhealthy guilt and shame" (Casarejian, 1992, p. 138). Yet, the process of achieving self-forgiveness will not be the same for everyone and will be dependent upon a person’s ability to (re)examine personal beliefs based on their own cultural influences. Therefore, the process of self-forgiveness will vary from person to person.
Self-forgiveness also requires honesty within ourselves in order to achieve true self-forgiveness. It is important in the forgiveness process to stay aware of the potential to produce false forgiveness or pseudoforgiveness. Casarejian (1992) identified six areas required within the forgiveness process that would ensure a person’s achievement in true self-forgiveness. These are represented as the following:

1. Acknowledging the truth.
2. Taking responsibility for what you have done.
3. Learning from the experience by acknowledging the deeper feelings that motivated the behaviors and thought for which you now feel guilty and hold yourself in judgment.
4. Opening your heart to yourself and compassionately listening to the fears and calls for help and acknowledgment that are within.
5. Healing emotional wounds by heeding these calls in healthy, loving, and responsible ways.
6. Aligning with your Self and affirming your fundamental innocence. You may be guilty of a particular behavior, yet your essential Self is always guiltless and lovable. (Casarejian, 1992, P. 142)

Aside from psychological perspectives on forgiveness, Lewis Smedes (1996) looked at some possible misunderstandings of forgiveness. He identified that an ability to achieve forgiveness can be represented as a gift from God that has been given to a person for healing the Self. “Forgiveness is the art of healing inner wounds inflicted by other people's wrongs” (Smedes, 1996, p. 1). Furthermore, he suggested that self-forgiveness must occur before a person can be ready to forgive anyone else. "Forgiving, when you come down to it, is an art, a practical art, maybe the most neglected of all the healing arts. Smedes (1996) further suggested that to perform the art of forgiveness well, we need to know the answers to the following statements.
1. What makes it work.
2. Why we do it.
3. What we are suppose to forgive and what we are not to forgive.
4. How to know when the time is right.
5. Whether or not to resume a relationship again after forgiving.
6. Whether or not to tell the person we have been able to forgive and that we have truly done it.
7. How to know whether we have actually forgave (Smedes, 1996, p. 1).

Forgiveness of Others

Smedes, 1996, contended that forgiving may foundationally be similar for everyone. He generalized forgiveness as a basic transformation of the inner Self. Although some may argue this generalization by saying that people may not experience forgiveness in the same way after being hurt or wronged, the fundamentals of forgiveness are the same. These fundamentals of forgiveness are identified as three stages that everybody must pass through to become forgiving of others. These three stages are identified as the following:

1. We rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.
2. We surrender our right to get even.
3. And we revise our feelings toward the person we forgive (Smedes, 1996, p. 5-6).

By completing these three stages the humanity of the person who wronged us can be restored, the person doing the forgiving has reframed intentions of wanting to get even and may even help in developing a sense of compassion toward the person that wronged us. These three stages can be applied to self-forgiveness as well. Smedes (1996) explained that "when you give up vengeance, you are not giving up justice" (Smedes, 1996, p.6). Instead, a person is functioning more from a solution focused view and breaks the cycle of unfair pain. “By forgiving the other person or Self, we are allowing the truest human impulse to emerge. To heal the wounded memory is as natural to the human spirit as it is for the cells of the human body to heal
themselves. Forgiveness dances to the melody of our true humanity" (Smedes, 1996, p. 63). In addition, forgiveness can become freeing from persistent pain and/or resentment. "It is a way for the victim to be fair and nurturing to themselves" (Smedes, 1996, p. 63). Thus, forgiveness is most possible when we own the painful truth of what happened to us and get to a point where it can be put in a place of acceptance. Acceptance is achieved when a person is able to look outside of the painful truth rather then remaining trapped in the cycle of persistent and unfair pain. No one else has that empowering option to break the cycle of unfair pain than the person experiencing the pain. Through completing the forgiveness process, a person can no longer be held emotionally hostage by the pain.

Foundations of Forgiveness and Religious Implications

Foundations of forgiveness can be related within the historical context of religion and varying contexts in which forgiveness is derived. The Bible is a contextual framework in which forgiveness is practiced. “Within the context of the Bible, forgiveness is addressed through Scripture” (Masse and Phillips, 1998 p. 68-69). The following is an example of Scripture that addresses forgiveness within the context of the Bible:

"You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you (Ps. 86:5). Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion (Ps. 103:2-4).

The foundation of a woman’s religious beliefs may make it difficult in some incidences to tell certain people about the abortion. For example, there may be some instances where a mother may display her disappointment toward her daughter when finding out about her daughter’s abortion. There may be a look of betrayal on a husband’s face which a woman cannot
bear to see. A woman may also experience instances where she becomes afraid of possible reactions from friends if they were to find out about the abortion.

Forgiveness has a history throughout various religious practices. Much of that history derives from Hebrew roots and Scriptures. In Christianity, "the concept of forgiveness is mediated through humans and is one form of love that should characterize a full life in the community and beyond" (Worthington, 1998, p. 12). Within Lutheranism, forgiveness is central as a guiding principle in a person's life. Jewish perspectives of forgiveness are derived from a section of the Amidah, which, together with the Shema and its attached blessings constitutes the focus of morning synagogues services. "The Amidah is built on nineteen blessings of God. In the sixth blessing forgiveness from God is asked. This is done because God is not only the One who wants our return, but also the One who is known to be compassionate and forgiving when we take steps to return" (Worthington, 1998, p. 31).

Women who actively practice a religion may reflect on stories from their past and turn toward forgiveness for comfort and resolution from an abortion. "Within a religious context forgiveness is a system of acts, each modifying what has been and brings it into harmony with what ought to be" (Worthington, 1998, p. 14). In any regard, participating in the forgiveness process becomes an individual choice and is culturally based. Future studies of forgiveness and religion can continue to provide clarity in unifying practices of forgiveness by looking at how forgiveness is universally practiced, exploring forgiveness in specific religious experiences and finding its potential toward healing past experiences that have affected many. "Forgiveness and religion can provide a central way toward healing the numerous arrests within the human experience" (Worthington, 1998, p. 15).
Traditional religious views of forgiveness are practiced more in the form of repentance and reconciliation in that repentance and reconciliation are an essential component within any act of forgiveness. This perspective suggests that when repentance and reconciliation are not present, forgiveness itself is said to have been diminished or unable to take place at all. Forgiveness becomes more of a transaction between the victim and the event causing injury. "Modern religious practices encourages forgiveness for the sake of the injured's own well being and inner peace rather than just adhering to the practice of repentance and reconciliation" (Forgiveness Forum, Dr. Douglas K. Showalter, 1997).

Religious implications of forgiveness suggest that the question is not whether to forgive, but how to forgive without forgetting. For example, "how does a community speak to post-Holocaust and non-Jewish children about the events that transpired in such a horrific event in history?" (Worthington, 1998, p. 15). Forgiveness does not go without forgetting and may become necessary for the sake of the overall well being of our civilization. For the post-abortive woman forgiving without forgetting is relevant here as well. Many doctors have lost their lives performing abortions, women have been called "baby killers and sinners" as they are walking into the clinic doors and explicit pictures are displayed for young people to see without them having all of the information about such a controversial and sensitive issue. Meanwhile, women will continue to have options toward abortion. Religious implications of forgiveness are significant in promoting the well being of individuals, families and communities. It can also be helpful in bridging the gap between opposing viewpoints and support the needs of post-abortive women.
Forgiveness, Health and Science

Health professionals have completed research that supports the benefits from being willing to forgive or completing a forgiving process. "Professionals say that the body manufacturers high voltage chemical like adrenaline and cortisone when you do not forgive" (www.montana.edu/wwwpb/home/10897fam.html Forgiveness is Healthy). The release of these chemicals can cause tension which in turn create headaches and abdominal pains. This can result in more serious problems such as "ulcers, gastritis or irritable bowel syndrome" (www.montana.edu/wwwpb/home/10897fam.html Forgiveness is Healthy). Through forgiveness, anger and resentment can dissolve over time and the body decreases its tendency to produce these high voltage chemicals.

Scientists have studied forgiveness as having additional benefits. "It reduces hostility and people that are able to let go of hostility tend to have fewer cardiovascular problems, fewer heart attacks, and feel less stress" (Worthington, 1998, pp. 30-31). Reducing chronic stress leads to better immune system functioning and stabilization in mood. "Being unforgiving is a pattern of life and is related to negative health consequences such as cardiovascular dysfunction due to chronic anger, immune system deficiencies or stress related disorders" (Worthington, 1998, p. 325). Forgiveness or forgivingness might help to decrease these symptoms or even prevent the symptoms from occurring. Having the disposition of forgiveness could promote long term health and well being. "This dispositional tendency would indirectly affect chronic bodily states that are associated with positive long term health outcomes" (Worthington, 1998, p. 325).
Forgiveness as Related to the Post-abortive Woman

Some woman whatever age, background or sexuality may have had the experience of having an abortion. A woman's vulnerability to such an experience can be physically, emotionally and spiritually wounding and become an event ingrained into parts of her life experiences. Some women may think that by destroying a pregnancy, she risks destroying herself. "It is beside the point whether you think a life is there. You may not be able to deny that something is being created and that this creation is physically happening" (Jackson, 1994, p.8.) In addition, women who are struggling with feelings following an abortion may say that God or anyone would not want to forgive them. Forgiveness presents the idea of releasing, sending away and letting go of that which had been hurtful about the abortion experience. For a post-abortive woman forgiveness can be a way to achieve hope and healing from her abortion experience.

Forgiveness and Denial

Some women might have believed that abortion was immoral and yet felt so desperate in the crisis pregnancy that they chose a solution that inevitably conflicted with her conscience and maternal instincts. “This can cause a crisis of the heart and soul” (Jackson, 1994, p. 8). As a result, some post-abortive women may experience denial. The denial becomes a short-term way in which they try to manage their feelings following the abortion. “Immediately following an abortion, denial may help a woman absorb the initial shock of her abortion experience. Without the defense of denial, the pain may become unbearable” (Jackson, 1994, p.10). Inevitably, denial may later cease to be effective. For example, a woman may demonstrate “dissatisfaction and regrets over the abortion and it may only grow over time following the abortion experience” (Jackson, 1994, p.10). For the post-abortive woman, denial becomes a common way in which a woman protects herself from her feelings. Once the denial is acknowledged, more
feelings begin to surface around her abortion experience and the process of forgiveness may begin.

**Self-forgiveness and Post-abortion Syndrome**

A woman's denial over her abortion is common and may be accompanied by other emotional and physical symptoms. These symptoms are recognized as post-abortion syndrome (PAS) and can become manifested by a woman's inability to reconcile with herself and her abortion experience. Many symptoms of PAS become defenses in order to manage feelings attached to the event. While the events of a woman's abortion are unique, a number of common symptoms may be experienced. According to Jackson, 1994, these common symptoms are of the following:

- anger
- anxiety
- betrayal
- bitterness
- depression
- distrust
- grief
- helplessness
- guilt
- remorse
- resentment
- shame
- problems bonding with other children
- avoidance of babies, small children
- avoidance of anything to do with pregnancy or abortion
- broken or abusive relationships
- a desire to replace the baby
- eating disorders
- flashbacks
- fear of future pregnancies
- lowered self-esteem
- nightmares or sleep disturbances
- sexual dysfunction
- self-destructive behaviors
- substance abuse
- suicidal thoughts or tendencies
- uncontrollable crying

If a woman has had an abortion and identifies with five or more of these symptoms, then it is recommended that she seek help to work through her feelings and related symptoms of PAS.

There is a strong similarity of symptoms of PAS to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some post-abortive women may experience additional symptoms that are characteristic of PTSD. These are identified as the following symptoms:
1. Re-experiencing the event through vivid memories or flashbacks.
2. Feeling emotionally numb.
3. Feeling overwhelmed by or diminished interest in performing normal tasks.
4. Developing unusual interests.
5. Crying uncontrollably.
6. Isolating oneself from family and friends, avoiding social situations.
7. Relying increasingly on alcohol or drugs to get through the day.
8. Being extremely moody, irritable, angry, suspicious, or frightened.
9. Experiencing disturbance in sleep, either too much or too little; nightmares.
10. Feeling afraid and a sense of doom about the future.

(Jackson, 1994, p.8)

"In addition to the symptoms of PAS and/or PTSD, the post-abortive woman may devalue herself and have an inability to forgive herself for her decision to abort the pregnancy" (www.ohiolif.org/aborted/abortedhtm.). Forgiveness can become a way in which to begin the process toward self-forgiveness following the abortion.

How voluntary the abortion decision was perceived to be by a woman can also determine what symptoms of PAS she will experience. There are four different variables that determine the degree in which these symptoms are experienced. The first variable is the degree to which the abortion was perceived to be a violation or a physical intrusion. “After going through the formalities of requesting an abortion, a woman can be whisked through a superficial counseling process, asked to enter the procedure room, told to undress, given a hospital gown, instructed to lie on her back, and advised to lift both feet into the stirrups” (Brende, 1995, p. 3). A second variable is the absence of support. A woman’s future sense of well being can depend on the degree of support she perceived to have had through the course of her abortion experience. Without ample support, the degree at which a woman experiences symptoms of PAS following an abortion may be higher. For example, “if the father is informed of the pregnancy, his disappointment may become apparent and cause him to pull away or ignore the issue”
The third variable is in regards to rejection, self-blame and shame. If a woman feels rejected and shamed about disclosing a pregnancy, it can leave a woman feeling isolated, fragmented and with an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. “Post-abortion survivors can become victims of family members and individuals in society who had not been of support to them” (Brende, 1995, p. 5). A fourth variable related to experienced symptoms of PAS is having a sense of a lost innocence, lost ideals and self-esteem. For the post-abortive woman, the degree at which she experienced a sense of lost innocence, lost ideals and self-esteem can make her more susceptible to symptoms of PAS following her abortion experience. Participating in the forgiveness process can help a woman inevitably come to accept her abortion experience and her humanness.

Related Emotional Barriers for the Post-Abortive Woman

Emotional barriers as a result of the abortion experience can inhibit the process of achieving self-forgiveness. For some women, the abortion may become a way in which she continues to punish herself. Spiritual wounds following the abortion may also become apparent because “some women may fear that God will punish them” (www.Marquette.Edu/rachesl/post.html). For others, abortion may be an occasional depressing thought and then be quickly buried. Achieving self-forgiveness can free a woman of emotional barriers of shame, anger, grief, depression and guilt about the abortion. Furthermore, completing the forgiveness process can help to restore individual lives, personal and family relationships and a woman’s personal relationship with God.

Some emotional effects a woman may experience following an abortion consist of a loss of faith in God and a loss in their capacity to believe that other human beings are capable of compassion and goodness. According to Brown (1993) emotional effects following an abortion
can be further exacerbated by a woman's interactions among her community. Although further research is needed in this area, any stress experienced by a post-abortive woman within her community should not be discounted. The potential for emotional injury for a post-abortive woman is significant and should continually be assessed from the individual experience following her abortion. Participation in forgiveness counseling can help to provide a way in which emotional barriers can be alleviated and self-forgiveness can be achieved.

Forgiveness and the Family System

According to Hadley (1996) interactions a post-abortive woman experiences within their family system may become a barrier in achieving self-forgiveness. A woman's internal emotional struggle toward self-forgiveness may be more dependent on reactions her family might have had about the abortion. While post-abortion syndrome is commonly thought of as the abortive mother's problem, it can impact extended members of the family as well. Many post-abortive women keep their abortion a secret from those closest to them and may not seek help because of internal emotional struggles that arise from unresolved feelings about the abortion. These unresolved feelings may have a negative impact on the relationships a post-abortive woman has with specific family members. For example, a daughter might be angry with her mother for not being able to confide in her. There may be emotions stemming from a parent's wish or demands for her to have an abortion. There is also the possibility where a woman may become resentful in having never told her parents, boyfriend, or friends that she was pregnant. Family members can play an important role in a woman's spiritual and emotional healing following an abortion and ability to achieve self-forgiveness.
Historical Implications and The Post-Abortive Woman

Clinical findings have suggested that there is a high percentage of women suffering from post-abortion syndrome who present with histories of physical and emotional abuse and/or neglect. In these cases, the abortion "may be a metaphor for a re-creation of conflict of an already internalized and damaged shameful sense of Self and sexuality induced through the abuse and/or neglect" (Burice & Cullen, 1995, p. 9). Some women who have experienced various forms of abuse can be more at risk to have an abortion and to have higher incidences of symptoms of PAS. According to Burke & Cullen (1995) various forms of abuse include childhood sexual abuse or incest, parental alcoholism, emotional neglect, bad relationships with mother and/or father, rejecting fathers and a lack of support and nurturing within the family system.

Sexual Abuse

There are clinical findings that suggest "a high proportion of women suffering from post-abortion syndrome have histories of molestation, sexual abuse or incest" (Burke & Cullen, 1995, p. 9). If an abused woman becomes pregnant, some of these women may turn to abortion because they have internalized the shame of the prior abuse. Consequently, the abortion becomes an unconscious response in continuing this cycle of abuse.

Absent Fathers

"Women with an absent or deceased fathers may choose an abortion because she does not want her child growing up in a home without a father like she did" (Burke & Cullen, 1995, p.9). There appears to be a correlation with the choice to have an abortion and an attempt to resolve the loss of an absent father. "In her mind she is redeeming her child from the losses and pain that she experienced as a child without a father" (Burke & Cullen, 1995, p.9). A decision to have an
abortion and symptoms following the abortion may be influenced by unresolved past experiences that have gone unresolved.

Developmental Arrest

It is considered that pregnancy can be a normal phase in a woman’s life. “Some women may view the pregnancy as a way to test their sexual identity and capacity to procreate. When abortion enters the picture, the next stages in the developmental process are arrested because internal parental objects will not give permission for the woman to become a mother herself” (Burke & Cullen, 1995, p. 10). In a woman’s development two critical phases of emotional identification in pregnancy become arrested. These are “identification with her own mother and identification with the child as an acceptable part of herself” (Burke & Cullen, 1995, p. 10). Some women may then experience a loss and conflict following the abortion as her identification as being a mother is rejected by her own Self.

Sense of Rejection

Some woman may experience intense fear due to past experiences of abandonment. This fear can become heightened, for example, if she has become involved with an uncommitted man. Therefore, an unexpected pregnancy and the potential of being left by her partner if he is to find out about the pregnancy can reinforce a woman’s already existing fear. Ultimately she feels rejection. “It may be similar to a woman being involved with an alcoholic partner. If she becomes pregnant, the desire to abort may be motivated by external factors. These may be her intense desire to change the partner, make the relationship better, or continue in the familiar lifestyle of denigration and instability” (Burke & Cullen, 1995, p. 15). The abortion may also be a way for her to free her child from potential pain from her own powerlessness and instability within the relationship.
Anger

In a study done by Lee Ellen Gsellman found that of 344 post-abortal women "the inability to forgive Self was reported by 46% of the women who experienced physical and psychological injury within their abortion experience" (Gsellman, 1993, p. 4). This is one of the most significant findings that identifies self-forgiveness as one of the most difficult for the women to resolve following an abortion. Many women say they know they have forgiveness from God, but more often women say, "I know God has forgiven me, but I will never, ever forgive myself." The inability to achieve self-forgiveness may then manifest itself in the form of anger, low self-esteem and self-acceptance. Within the same study, anger was reported by 36% of the women and lower self-esteem was reported by 38% of the women" (Gsellman, 1993, p. 4).

In some instances, an abortion can become a reason for a woman to express anger and to gain control.

"Oftentimes a woman is hoping to prove her independence or deny her need for others who have let her down. A woman may also express her anger by often disavowing her need for significant others because others in her past have disappointed or emotionally abandoned her. Attempts to compensate for this loss may be shown by outward displays of anger and forced independence following the abortion. Unfortunately, the relentless drive toward false independence, perfection and success may only mask feelings of anger, inadequacy and loss around the abortion" (Burke and Cullen, 1996, p. 15).

Anger can also become prominent if a woman regrets her decision to have had the abortion. This anger will inevitably become a portion of her post-abortion experience. "A woman may be angry with herself, with God and with those she loved and trusted the most during the time of her decision" (Cochrane, 1996, p. 51). Some women may also become angry at society
for making them feel alone following the abortion. The expression of anger has the potential to result in forms of high risk behavior and become destructive to herself and in other relationships. Understanding where the anger stems from and learning ways in which to better cope with feelings of anger can be explored within the forgiveness process.

Self-esteem, Shame and Depression

Self-esteem, shame and depression appeared to be a result of repressed anger. For some women considering abortion, it is a double bind. "It is personally questioned whether women believe more in the reality of not having any choice verses believing in the unborn life" (Gsellman, 1993, p. 7). Abortion is a legal option and through the course of making this choice, other issues may go unresolved. "One client reported she had gone so far as to apologize to her unborn child pictured on the ultrasound for what she was about to do. Later, she became guilt ridden and unable to forgive herself following her decision to have the abortion" (Gsellman, 1993, p. 7). A supportive and nurturing environment can allow a woman to freely express her feelings of conflict and struggle with her choice to abort a pregnancy. In other circumstances, if a woman already presents with low-self esteem she may have been subjected to being coerced into having an abortion. "The sense of powerlessness is indicative of a lack of assertiveness, but the pain of that diminished sense of Self is what is grieved after an abortion" (Burke & Cullen, 1995, p. 16).

Additional emotional difficulties can be experienced that further diminish a sense of Self. The process that is required in making a choice to abort a pregnancy can reinforce an inability to be self-forgiving.

Furthermore, guilt and shame can arise from many aspects of the abortion experience. A woman may feel they betrayed God and his expectations of her. "She may reject herself for having had an abortion and may fear others will reject her as well. In the effort to protect herself"
from this rejection, she may hide her decision from those around her” (Cochrane, 1996, p. 76). If she does have the courage to tell someone, she may also have the need to ask the person they are confiding if they will still care about her unconditionally despite her decision to have had an abortion.

**Depression**

Depression can be an emotion commonly experienced when a woman inwardly directs feelings of anger, guilt and shame around her abortion experience. “Depression may also be a result from feelings of sorrow and grief that go unrelieved because there is no place within society to mourn the loss of an aborted child” (Cochrane, 1996, p. 73). If the depression becomes prominent, the forgiveness process is helpful in addressing a woman’s feelings of loss and has a positive affect on her sense of self-worth.

**Summary**

This study will work toward having a better understanding of concepts of forgiveness and to better determine whether post-abortive women will experience improvements in self-acceptance and achievement of self-forgiveness as a result of working through the forgiveness process. Religion and spirituality is a topic that continues to be considered one that is difficult to talk about within the social work profession. This study will hopefully facilitate ongoing dialogue within the field as to what importance forgiveness will have in helping post-abortive women. Because forgiveness universally fits into people’s moral and interpersonal lives, this study will holistically determine whether forgiveness can assist post-abortive women in moving forward from the past and begin to look forward to a better future.
Chapter Three

Focus Group Procedure

A focus group procedure was implemented toward having a better understanding of a woman’s acceptance of self following a twelve-week involvement in group therapy focusing on forgiveness. Group participants were asked to discuss their experiences and feelings in relationship to whether or not they had been able to utilize aspects of forgiveness toward their own emotional healing and achievement in self-forgiveness. It should be specified that this focus group was not to prove whether or not the tools used in the therapeutic group process were effective. Instead, the intention was to begin to explore themes of the post-abortive woman’s experience so that the social worker can become more familiar with the needs associated to this population of women. The following questions were asked in the process of the focus group:

1. What made you decide to participate in forgiveness counseling?
2. What does forgiveness mean to you?
3. What barriers were there for you in achieving forgiveness?

Study Method

A focus group method was selected to explore and describe aspects of forgiveness as an effective therapeutic intervention for post-abortive women. This was chosen for its advantages within explorative research. First, it is a socially oriented way in which to do research. “People are social creatures who interact with others. They are influenced by the comments of others and make decisions after listening to the advice and counsel of people around them” (Krueger, 1994, p. 34). Second, discussions become the format that allows the facilitator to be explorative in gathering data. “The flexibility to explore unanticipated issues is not possible within the more
structured questioning sequences typical of mail out surveys” (Krueger, 1994, p. 35). Third, focus group discussions have high face validity. “Focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry. Validity depends not only on the procedures used but also on context” (Krueger, 1994, p. 31). Fourth, the actual focus group discussion is not expensive to implement. Fifth, focus group can provide accurate in depth results in a short period of time. Sixth, by using a focus group the researcher is able to increase the sample size within the focus group population. Focus groups are advantageous for being low in cost and a flexible way of learning about forgiveness and the post-abortive woman.

Weaknesses of the focus group method were also considered. Research carried out within a focus group methodology must be concerned with whether the focus group results are valid.

In using the methodology of a focus group, the researcher must be extremely careful in deciding whether the focus group is suitable for a problem or inquiry and if the researcher deviated from the established procedure of the focus group. Validity can become a concern as the validity of the research is dependent on both the procedure used and in what context the procedure was implemented (Krueger, 1994, p. 31).

Furthermore, in determining the measured outcome of the research, it must be determined whether the procedure really measures what it proposed to measure. “Measurement of the human condition can become distorted intentionally or unintentionally within the procedure of the focus group” (Krueger, 1994, p. 31). A focus group facilitator must skillfully and objectively lead a focus group into a consensus reflective of what the focus of the research is intended to be. The group facilitator must also be aware whether people are being truthful in their responses and are giving answers that are free from any peer or social pressure existing within the focus group.
Furthermore, the focus group facilitator must be prepared to manage the unpredictable nature of the focus group process.

**Participant Recruitment**

Ten post-abortive women were selected who were over the age of eighteen and had sought forgiveness counseling following an abortion. The Director of Mourning Joy Ministries appropriately identified focus group participants who met the criteria. The criteria for selection were having two to five years lapse since their abortion, participated in forgiveness counseling and were willing to participate in the focus group discussion. A random numbers chart was used in order to select focus group participants from a sample size of thirty one post-abortive women who had sought forgiveness counseling. Each selected participant was contacted by phone and given a description of the purpose of the focus group and geographical information as to where the focus group would be conducted. A follow up letter was sent three weeks prior to the date of the focus group to confirm the details of the focus group (Appendix A). The focus group took place at Mourning Joy Ministries, a non-profit post-abortive counseling agency. The participants selected had already been historically familiar with the agency and had a level of comfort with where the focus group was to be conducted.

**Analysis**

All of the focus group participants’ comments were audiotaped, transcribed and interpreted into narrative form. Comments were appropriately categorized and corresponded to each of the three questions. Comments that did not relate to the proposed questions were placed in a separate category. Analysis was also used in identifying additional themes that would provide insight into further areas of research needed within this population. The focus group audiotapes were
destroyed to ensure confidentiality of the participant’s names and disclosed statements. The focus
group participant’s names were not identified in this study.

**Participant Characteristics**

The characteristics of the researched population included women who have had an abortion, had symptoms of post-abortion syndrome and had sought counseling following the abortion. In describing post-abortion syndrome, it should be relevant to this study that the American Psychiatric Association recognizes PAS as a clinical concern. PAS may result immediately following an abortion or it may be delayed and can be debilitating for the woman who has endured the abortion experience. This can be accompanied whether a decision to have an abortion was made within a supportive or non-supportive environment and/or circumstance. These accompanied symptoms for some participants provided further insight into areas within a woman’s abortion experience that will need further future exploration.

Prior to the focus group all focus group participants had completed a ten week forgiveness and recovery support group program. There was no particular identified age of the subjects with the exception that all participants were over the age of eighteen. In addition, there was no exclusion of any subjects according to age, sex, race or religious affiliation. All participants were married except for one focus group participant who had been previously married but divorced at the time of this research study. From the time they had abortions to pursuing recovery, seven to fifteen years had lapsed. The length of time between recovery and focus group participation ranged between two to five years. In addition, they all had stayed involved with Mourning Joy Ministries as speakers, and/or group facilitators in other post abortion recovery groups.
Chapter Four

Results

First, focus group participants were asked why they decided to participate in forgiveness counseling. Focus group participants described that recalling the events of the abortion experience became paralyzing emotionally, physically and spiritually in their personal lives. Participation in forgiveness counseling helped toward healing feelings that there was a void in their life following the abortion.

For the focus group participants, as time lapsed from the original date of the abortion, continued feelings of void and something lost from the abortion continued, and the degree to which these feelings were perceived became of a greater magnitude. Memories of the abortion became more vivid and more frequent in their daily lives. One focus group participant commented on how her memories of her abortion experience had affected her life and her capacity toward successfully moving into other stages of her life.

"It was an everyday thing. I can remember standing at the altar on my wedding day and having it run through my head."

A second focus group participant explained her feelings of loss following her abortion experience.

"I think unconsciously I felt I was missing something and wanted to replace what I had done. I got pregnant again at seventeen and then four children later I was still struggling with something lost. It was that strong."
One focus group participant explained her feelings around immorality and her choice to have an abortion.

"I recognized that I had done something that was wrong and that it was imperfect. I was kind of a perfectionist. I also recognized that I was so hard on myself and not forgiving myself for what I had done."

For some of the focus group participants, forgiveness counseling was sought from information presented to them from the clinic where the abortion had been performed. Surveys had been distributed by the abortion clinic to assess the services provided. The survey had provided information for recovery services for those who had elected to have an abortion. This referral information mentioned the agency that provided hope and healing for women who were post-abortive. This agency was identified as Mourning Joy Ministries.

"When I called Mourning Joy Ministries I was truly hurting. They sent me a letter telling me that there was hope and healing for me."

Focus group participants acknowledged that prior to being introduced to Mourning Joy Ministries they had no knowledge of any recovery services or a safe place that provided services specific to the needs of post-abortive women. One participant had even sought indirect ways to pursue recovery services. She had volunteered her professional accounting services to Mourning Joy Ministries free as "penance" for her abortion. After becoming familiar with the services provided at Mourning Joy Ministries and feeling safe enough to independently disclose her own abortion experience, she pursued her own recovery.

"I came to MJM initially to say to the Director of Services that I was offering my services as an accountant. She looked at me and said, so are you post-abortive? I hadn’t
told anybody but I said yes, that I was post-abortive. We talked for awhile and she wrote
some things out for me. I said to myself I didn’t want to go to a group, by I did it
anyway because I needed to be supported.”

Some participants reported seeking forgiveness counseling to help alleviate the emotional
and psychological consequences following the abortion experience. Although some reported
turning to their faith and asking God for forgiveness, some still had not been able to forgive
themselves or believe that they had truly been forgiven by God.

“My abortion changed my life. I was never the same after that. My depression was of great
magnitude. It is not totally gone, but a lot of it is gone.”

**Depression**

One focus group participant described her depression as being a reason toward participating
in forgiveness counseling.

“I started suffering from depression. I recognized that I was hard on myself and not
forgiving myself for what I had done. It was constantly in my mind. I was having trouble
forgiving myself for what I had done and for how the abortion providers treated me.

Nobody knew except my husband, nobody!”

Another focus group participant described her experience with depression.

“I would not talk about it to anybody, my parents did not know, you just didn’t talk about
it with anybody. Participation in forgiveness counseling helped me to open up and talk
about it with other women. It helped me talk to people who knew, and be able
to look someone in the eye. I could not look someone in the eye before. My participation
in forgiveness counseling helped me to be able to look someone in the eye again.”
Desire to Forgive Self

One focus group participant commented on her desire to reconcile with herself and the abortion.

"I know that forgiveness needs to start where you recognize it, you realize that it is there for you, you have it in your head, you analyze it, actualize it, and then it has to go from the head to the heart. That is where being in a support group helps. You do not have to fear judgment and condemnation. The freedom and hope for forgiveness gives you your joy again."

For some post-abortive woman, participation in forgiveness counseling may also be sought out of feeling pressured into having the abortion or feeling uncertainty or ambivalences about the choice to have had the abortion. Aspects that may contribute to a woman not participating in forgiveness counseling may also include a lack of emotional support to keep a pregnancy and "pressure from adverse circumstances, such as financial problems, being unmarried, social problems, or health problems" (abortionfacts.com/reason/who/is/at/risk/or/pas.asp). Thus, participation in forgiveness counseling may become based on personal feelings about the absence of support and not being able to provide for herself.

Denial

Some focus group members participated in forgiveness counseling to address their own denial within their abortion experience as they related to their morals, values and beliefs.

"For me it was even harder to think that God could forgive me because I knew better. I knew right from wrong, but the forgiveness issue for me was hard. I know that it was wrong for me to do, but I did it anyway."
Some focus group participants reported that they knew in their heart that the abortion was not the best choice for them, and today are impacted by the consequences of that decision.

“I remember becoming so angry. This was before I had gone through forgiveness counseling. I remember my husband doing something trivial that ticked me off. I gave him a verbal tongue lashing. I realized I never gave myself permission to be angry.

My husband asked, you are really angry aren’t you? I then started to cry and recognized that the reason why I was so angry was because I had so much self-hatred toward myself. I had recognized what I had done.”

For this participant, her abortion experience was contradictory to her morals, values and beliefs. Yet, the likelihood of inner conflicts of morals, values and beliefs around a choice to have an abortion may not be true for all post-abortive women.

Anger

Seeking relief from anger as a result of the abortion experience encouraged one of the focus group participants to participate in forgiveness counseling.

“It is like what any self-esteem I did have it died that day and the depression and anger that I was experiencing got a lot worse. I became more suicidal and my life style got worse. I lost all self respect and couldn’t run from it anymore.”

A second focus group member commented on her feelings of anger because of the way that clinical staff treated her at the abortion clinic.

“The abortion itself was very traumatic and I cried through the entire procedure hysterically. In fact, the doctor stopped a couple of times basically telling me to shut up.”

Some participants described that the hostility that became expressed was usually toward men. This anger was triggered because it came from having felt dehumanized when recalling their
sexual experience with their partner and/or the experience with that partner in relationship to the abortion experience.

"I was seventeen when I decided to have an abortion. I tried to block it out and shove it down but I got pregnant again three months after I had my abortion. I ended up getting married to the father of the aborted child. As a result, my marriage was very rocky."

Group participants also reported that participation in forgiveness counseling could address symptoms of PAS and how the abortion had affected their level of self-esteem and self-worth.

"I couldn't believe God or anyone could forgive me and I just could not receive the forgiveness. I felt so unworthy because of my decision and my life style after that. My self esteem became non existent."

Another participant stated the following:

"Seeking forgiveness counseling could help to address and restore self esteem, self worth and the feeling of never being the same again after the abortion experience. I was basically a pretty happy go lucky kid before that and when I left that abortion clinic I was just not the same person."

**Perspectives on Participation in Forgiveness Counseling**

From the perspective of the focus group participants, reasons for participating in forgiveness counseling was staged based. This was by first becoming aware of some opportunity to seek forgiveness from God and from themselves. Although these findings cannot be generalized to all women, it does suggest stages of conscious awareness of emotions, losses and psychological symptoms being a precipitator to the acknowledgement of wanting to participate in forgiveness counseling.
Furthermore, reasons for focus group participants seeking forgiveness counseling reflected their religious, morals, values and beliefs. Forgiveness counseling meant forgiveness from God and restoration in their relationship with God. One participant explained that her decision to have the abortion felt as if it was going against her natural maternal instinct and religious upbringing.

"I knew abortion was wrong, but yet I grew up in a very performance oriented home, you just do not end up pregnant."

For one woman who participated in the focus group, she reported participating in forgiveness counseling in order to successfully rebuild a relationship with God and achieve self-forgiveness.

"I got really angry with my dad and mom thinking this was their fault. If they only had loved me I wouldn't have been looking everywhere else for love. I was angry at my parents for their lack of love for me. I had sex with men because I lacked love from my father as a young girl."

Group participants pursued forgiveness counseling out of a need for community belonging and a safe place to talk about their experience with other post-abortive women.

"The minute I walked into the group I felt so safe. I could talk to everyone because they had been where I had been and they would not judge me."

Forgiveness counseling gave permission for one focus group participant to get in touch with her emotions and have an opportunity to openly express feelings within the context of her own experience.
“After my abortion, my lips were sealed from that point forward. I think so many women suffer in silence. The post-abortive woman may know it was wrong, but they dare not say a word because it is something they ask to have done. Now, looking back I know that it is definitely wrong and that the Lord will take care of you. You are so focused on the negative event and problems following it that it is hard to get out of that.”

In addition, focus group participants reported not having talked to anybody who was post-abortive prior to their pursuing and completing forgiveness counseling. Some post-abortive woman had a strong need to talk to other people who would be accepting and understanding of their experience without having to feel ashamed of themselves.

“I was finally allowed to grieve and find forgiveness. All of a sudden there is a room full of post-abortive women like I was. I had never talked to anyone who was post abortive all those years and it was an incredible experience for all of us to start out with our heads down shedding a lot of tears. By the end of the group we were all up smiling, still some tears, but I can forgive myself, grieve for the baby and my choice and find closure among other women.”

Summary

Within our communities forgiveness counseling can become a guiding principle in the post-abortive woman’s healing process. Forgiveness counseling could facilitate an exchange of possibilities based on individual experiences that lead to the forgiveness of others and forgiveness toward the Self. With post-abortion women, it is necessary that forgiveness counseling be given great consideration and propose opportunities to be further explored in relationship to its benefits toward healing and recovery from an abortion experience.
Post-abortive women may pursue forgiveness counseling for various reasons. Forgiveness counseling could be a diverse way in which to explore the abortion issue by placing emphasis not so much on the right or wrong of abortion, but through understanding a woman’s struggles through her abortion experience and life history. Through exploring forgiveness, there is a great possibility for a new world view in determining what is most helpful for a woman to openly pursue forgiveness counseling following an abortion.
Secondly, focus group participants were asked to comment on what forgiveness meant to them. In searching for an objective definition, the meaning of forgiveness fell within a continuum of definitions. Group participants were able to explain what forgiveness felt like interpersonally when they felt it was achieved. In their acknowledgement of forgiveness, forgiveness meant knowing that healing was possible within a spiritual and moral context. Through forgiveness interventions within their counseling experience, an opportunity to move toward becoming more accepting of their decision and their total abortion experience was possible. One group participant described her meaning of forgiveness.

"Truly finding forgiveness, the kind without a shadow of a doubt that you have been forgiven, is so incredibly amazing because you know you have seen the depth of your sin and how black your heart is. It is like your heart is a sewer and God comes along and changes you. He forgives you. It is like he puts this river of pure sweet mountain water on you and it comes rushing over your heart. You are cleansed and completely changed."

One member of the focus group further described forgiveness as not being considered a second class Christian within her community and society at large. For all of the focus group participants, forgiveness meant that which was given to them by God. Forgiveness became the bridge toward restoring faith, trust and a relationship between her and God. The following is a statement made by one focus group participant.

"I found true forgiveness by acknowledging that there is a God and that there is sin. If I did not do this, I could not receive forgiveness. I could feel forgiveness and be able to receive it by acknowledging the abortion experience. God finally brought me to a place where he restored my broken heart, I could receive forgiveness and my spirit was restored."
She went on to say: “It is where your heart is so broken that God can take it and mold it back to the way that he wants it. He wants it filled with forgiveness.”

One focus group participant further defined forgiveness as freedom. She described that through forgiveness, feelings connected to the abortion experience were lifted.

“Forgetfulness is freedom and by receiving it no one can take it away from you. Freedom in forgiveness gives you the joy and it lifts your head. It was not so much a feeling in the inside, it was a load off me, but it was the acceptance. The forgiveness was there and I just finally needed to accept it.”

One focus group participant described forgiveness as the restoration of her self and strength that had became outwardly apparent to other people.

“I heard from other people that I had this glow about me for the first time in my life, it was because of my inner change, I had let go and accepted something from God because my outward appearance actually changed.”

Within the experiences of these focus group participants, forgiveness was described as the acknowledgment of the abortion experience itself and any suppressed thoughts and feelings associated to the abortion. One participant explained her initial feelings once she had been able to openly share her abortion experience.

“When I could finally talk about whether it was a boy or girl, how old the baby would have been, that was a release for me and the turning point for me that I could lay that baby to rest and free and forgive myself. I then knew I would be okay and I felt forgiveness.”
For focus group participants, forgiveness meant talking about the abortion experience. This provided a sense of relief for some of the focus group participants. One participant reported that through the acknowledgement of the event, she knew God forgave her and that she could talk about her feelings openly. By doing so, she felt relief in expressing her thoughts and feelings to others around the aborted pregnancy and the experience as a whole.
Thirdly, focus group participants were asked what barriers there were in achieving forgiveness. For all of the focus group members, not feeling deserving of forgiveness was one of the most difficult barriers to work past. All of the focus group members were faith based and believed in God. This became another barrier in achieving forgiveness because of fearing judgment or condemnation from family members and their church community.

"The hardest settings to share that I had an abortion was with my family and my church because I feared judgment or condemnation. That was a barrier."

One focus group participant stated that she could always recognize when some people were posing judgement upon her. Negative or dismissing comments would be made whenever she sought opportunity to tell a family member her feelings around the abortion experience. Family members may have varying views and beliefs about the abortion issue itself. In this participant’s experiences of conversation with other family members, some were uncompassionate and displayed difficulty in listening about her abortion experience.

Another focus group member described a time when she had sat in a room where people had said to her "how can anyone do that, what kind of monster would have an abortion." Focus group participants discussed that despite initial barriers within the family system, over time, family members became more willing to generate conversation about the abortion experience.

Another barrier identified by focus group members was shame.

"Shame is what keeps you hiding, you are so ashamed of what you did, especially within the church, you hide, hide what you have done."

A focus group participant discussed her shame is relationship to her abortion experience.

"The shame is reinforced when you are driving down the highway and you see a bumper sticker on the car in front of you that says abortion is murder and billboards that really
hammer about that aspect of the baby. For example, abortion stops a beating heart and so many babies are killed by abortion.”

Another participant reflected how negative social experiences was also a barrier in achieving forgiveness.

“Society does not realize how many post-abortive women are hearing this message and being pushed farther into their shell of shame because it is re-traumatizing. Abortion may be murder, but it has to be told in a way where people are educated about what the abortion procedure actually does to that little baby. It also has to be balanced with the message that there are all kinds of women that have been through this.”

One focus group participant commented on some negative societal experiences that a post-abortive woman might confront.

“I have overheard women talk about abortion and all women who have had an abortion monsters. I could never go up and talk to those women. Whether abortion is murder or not, you still can send a message that includes that there is hope and healing for those who are post-abortive and are seeking emotional and spiritual healing.”

Spousal relationships and/or family can be a barrier in achieving forgiveness. For one of the post-abortive focus group participants, her husband was the father of the baby that was aborted. This participant acknowledged that her and her husband’s decision to have an abortion was difficult to share with their families. Yet, when it was kept a secret, it effected their ability to communicate to one another and achieve reconciliation with the abortion experience.

“Still, even for my husband and since we have so much family in this area, he doesn’t really want me to go public. It is more my husband having a hard time with family
understanding the entire experience and he does not want that hurt to go onto the children we already have.”

For the focus group participants who grew up in a Christian or religious based family, additional barriers existed in achieving forgiveness. It is paradoxical in explanations given from all of the participants that because they had families that were Christian, they would be the first to be the most understanding and ready to forgive them for the abortion. In reality, it was explained that this was not always the case.

“There are so many Christian women who have gone through abortion and they are so fearful. That barrier is so strong to not tell your family and that you are somehow going to be a second class Christian.”

Another focus group participant stated:

“My parents were Christians. I felt that I was going to be condemned for being pregnant than for having the abortion. I know that they thought abortion was wrong, but statistics show that a lot of women who go into abortion clinics are Christian.”

Focus group participants further discussed attempting to hide the sin of the abortion and feared to what degree the church was going to be judgmental. This prevented many of these focus group participants from going forward and seeking healing through forgiveness. One participant identified a barrier to forgiveness as having thoughts of the future and/or current children in the family potentially becoming exposed and educated about her abortion. Or, that they may come to know about the abortion experienced by one or both of their parent(s). For some group participants, situations arose where they felt it would or would not be appropriate to share this information with their children. One member explained her experience when telling her mother of her abortion and finding that her own mother had also had an abortion.
"I told my mother that I had an abortion. I told her that I never wanted to tell her because she would not accept me. When telling her, my mom told me she had had an abortion too."

It was explained that when her own mother, who was post-abortive, thought of telling her about her own abortion, the mother feared her daughter would never think about her the same and would not want to be a part of her life.

One focus group participant discussed reactions when she publicly spoke about her abortion experience.

"I remember speaking one time at a church, and there was a lady sitting reading a bulletin of someone coming to speak on their abortion experience and search for God, acceptance and forgiveness. She did not know it was me who was speaking and I was sitting right behind her. The self-righteous thing came out right away. She said, looking right at me, how could anyone do that kind of thing. I hope she is suffering."

Another focus group participant stated:

"The more someone says something about abortion and has not experienced it themselves hinders women from being able to come out and to receive forgiveness."

Summary

Focus group participants clearly discussed barriers toward achieving self-forgiveness within their own abortion experience. They had come to acknowledge and accept a better way for themselves despite the many barriers that confronted them in achieving forgiveness. It can be summarized that by accepting a better way, they had already achieved forgiveness.
Conclusion

Forgiveness is hypothesized to yield cognitive and interpersonal benefits to those individuals who seek healing through forgiveness. For the post-abortive woman applications of forgiveness can become a bridge toward achieving self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others and interpersonal forgiveness toward significant offenses drawn by hurtful events. It is common that religious counselors and individuals value forgiveness and its implementation in the counseling experience. Yet, conceptual therapeutic frameworks of forgiveness have received little attention, have often been misunderstood from many professionals and remains to be investigated critically. Forgiveness encompasses therapeutic benefits for the individual, family and community systems that continue to struggle in acceptance of ones humanness, the imperfections of others and the human experience within today’s world. There is a growing need to seek out alternative ways in which people can promote change and healing in their lives. Forgiveness can be referenced within a continuum of beliefs and concepts of spirituality.

My intention was to not address forgiveness within Christian theology. Instead, I am suggesting that forgiveness is harmonized with traditional Christian theory as well as with other religious contexts and general belief systems. Today, a person’s religion or innate spiritual nature often becomes neglected within the therapeutic setting and has become “taboo” in the process. This can keep a person from reaching their full potential in life. Concepts of forgiveness are universal and can become a natural and diverse way in which to empower a person to move forward from the past and be able to look forward to a better future.

In exploring forgiveness and the post-abortive woman, the reason’s for pursuing forgiveness counseling was reflective of the unique nature of each woman’s abortion experience. Seeking forgiveness counseling became instrumental in addressing feelings following the abortion
experience. Reasons expressed by focus group participants in seeking forgiveness counseling included being free to address feelings of loss following the abortion, internal conflicts of moral, values and beliefs in the decision to abort a pregnancy, becoming aware of recovery services, experienced depression, anger and other experienced symptoms of post-abortive syndrome, the desire to achieve self-forgiveness and address their own denial of the events of the abortion that have had emotional and psychological consequences. Although focus group participants did not comment on whether or not they did or did not believe in their decision to have an abortion, forgiveness was a way in which to put closure to the events encompassed in the abortion experience.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

There are not particulars about the use of forgiveness techniques and its long-term effectiveness in counseling post-abortive women. Greater indications and specificity are needed within this special population of women toward identifying specific interventions that will help in facilitating a woman’s own healing and the achievement of self-forgiveness following an abortion. For some women, the abortion experience can have long-term emotional, physical and spiritual consequences despite the fact that she may or may not regret her decision to have aborted a pregnancy. Because the issue of abortion in this study was neither pro life or pro choice based, it is important to recognize that this special population of woman are left more vulnerable due to the lack of compassion and unconditional regard the post-abortion women may receive. She does not always become embraced within our helping profession and communities at large. Practitioners must be willing to familiarize themselves with the special needs of post-abortive women and begin to further explore women’s abortion experiences. The opportunity is needed for dialogue to occur in this area from which a post-abortive woman can unconditionally be understood accepted.
The social work profession must be willing to explore his or her own biases related to the abortion issues. For some practitioners, treating a post-abortive woman may present personal limitations and affect the professional's capacity to help. Developing a better understanding of the experiences a post-abortive woman has may force practitioners to reach outside of their comfort zones and beyond what is limited to a pro-life or pro-choice perspective of abortion. The needs of this special population of women continue to be prevalent and misunderstood. By becoming invited into a woman's experience and becoming a safe advocate toward healing from that experience, existing barriers that are preventing self-disclosure about a woman's abortion can better be identified and appropriately addressed.

Barriers are constructed within our social systems. Without further identifying barriers post-abortive women experience in their society, they will not be appropriately served. Women continue to be very much oppressed and in hiding around their abortion experience. Future exploration of forgiveness should reflect both the issue of abortion and gender oppression as related to the abortion issue. This will involve identifying the way in which society views women who have abortions. From this perspective, forgiveness can be explored through the process of reconciliation or interpersonal forgiveness and not just through the process of intrapersonal forgiveness that occurs on an internal and individual basis. Abortion is a choice, but a choice that can come with self-sacrifice of the Self based on societies perception of the abortion issue. Acknowledging opposing viewpoints around this issue will be important and forgiveness can help toward bridging the gap between what is keeping our communities separated rather than intact.

Further social work implications will need to be pursued within the area of a woman's moral development. Carol Gilligan has presented many perspectives on the moral
development of women and has concluded that "women think about uncertain moral issues in a different way than men" (Hadley, 1996, p. 85). Forgiveness can be explored within the context of a woman's moral thinking and how it is based on what women are traditionally identified in our various cultures. This area of moral development will be significant. Forgiveness incorporates both the interpersonal and intrapersonal components of achieving forgiveness. The forgiveness process could be studied specifically toward a post-abortive woman's moral thinking process and how it occurs within individual interpersonal relationships and a sense of responsibility towards themselves and others. Exploring Lawrence Kohlberg's stage based model of moral development of preconventional, conventional and postconventional stages of judgment will provide other implications (Hadley, 1996, p. 85). Those who consider the models of moral development like Gilligan, Kohlberg and other must take into consideration the treatment of women and the developmental experiences of women. This will provide insight into future forgiveness interventions for post-abortive women and what the role of the social worker should be.

Summary

Integrating forgiveness concepts and interventions within this population will define a new area in social work practice that has yet to be defined. The potential benefits associated with forgiveness counseling toward achieving forgiveness are endless. Researchers and practitioners must consider forgiveness not only as a universal concept but as a diverse therapeutic technique. By better identifying the special needs of post-abortive women, the therapeutic benefits of forgiveness can be related within the areas of forgiveness and self-esteem, forgiveness and self-acceptance, forgiveness and the enhancement of relationships and forgiveness used to increase emotional maturity within an experience of a person's life cycle. For some post-abortive women, there may come a point in her life where the abortion experience results in a
need to seek forgiveness counseling. It is important for the post-abortive woman to be aware that through the forgiveness process, the lost perspectives on her own emotional, physical and spiritual well being can be regained through healing from the abortion experience.

Perhaps the most difficult things to bear as a human being is the feeling of loneliness and not feeling connected to people because of barriers exacerbated in our society. This special population of women should not be isolated and alone in their attempt to achieve forgiveness and self-acceptance of their humanness around their abortion experience. The issues a post-abortive woman may face embraces the micro, macro and mezzo systems that inevitably are touched by abortion. The circumstances that lead a woman to choose abortion are not indicative of the intensity of her emotional, physical and spiritual reactions. “Women who chose abortion for what they consider all the right reasons at the time are not exempt from having feelings following the abortion” (Cochrane, 1996, p. 9). It is time that we address the needs of the post-abortive woman with sincerity and discuss a woman’s reactions following her abortion. By doing so, women will not isolate themselves from others and society, thinking that there is something wrong with them or that they are innately a bad human being. There is nothing wrong with a woman for not coping well with her reactions following an abortion. Instead, we must embrace this special population of women so that they may grasp their own understanding of their abortion experience and through counseling begin the journey of forgiveness.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Forgiveness counseling was hypothesized to yield cognitive and interpersonal benefits to women who have experienced an abortion. The social work profession must continue to explore the many issues and embrace this special population of women. Concepts of forgiveness, particularly within the context of post-abortion women, need to be further explored.
Through further exploration, the therapeutic advantage forgiveness offers on an emotional, physical and spiritual level will become clearer and more available for social work practitioners. From a clinical perspective, longitudinal research and quantitative research is needed to determine the specific advantage forgiveness interventions offers following a woman's post-abortion experience. The advantages of forgiveness interventions will need to be measured from this longitudinal perspective relieving the current vagueness of current research on forgiveness and the post-abortive woman.

One area that presents limitations within this area of research is determining the effectiveness of forgiveness techniques toward meeting the needs among the diverse experiences a woman has in her society following an abortion. Longitudinal research is necessary to determine the relationship between the experience of an abortion, post-abortion syndrome, the degree to which a woman perceives herself as shameful rather than deserving of healing and how this shameful cycle is associated with the abortion contributes to chronic emotional, physical and spiritual impairments. In addition, it must be determined how the social worker can play an integral part in determining from a systems perspective how all of the above are influenced by a woman's past experiences and present interaction within the woman's immediate social environment.
References


Forgiveness is Healthy. www.montana.edu/wwwpb/home/10897fam.htm.


Reardon, D. Abortion facts (1999) abortionfacts.com/reason/who/is/at/risk/or/pas.asp.


Dear (participants name):

I am writing to confirm the focus group discussion time on Forgiveness and the Post-Abortive Woman on (date) from 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Again, we will be meeting at:

Mourning Joy Ministries
4415 Bryon Center Ave. SW
Wyoming MI 49509.

If you have any questions between now and the time we meet, please feel free to contact me at home (phone number) or at work (phone number). I will be glad to answer any additional questions you may have.

I will be looking forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

Amy Peck, MSW Candidate