Attachment, Marriage, and the Process of Forgiveness

A Literature Review

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

By

Stephen Matthew Salchert

Chair: Rachelle Reinisch, DMFT

Member: Ruth Buelow, DMFT

December, 2016
Abstract

Through the lens of attachment theory and emotionally focused couple therapy, literature is reviewed regarding the process of forgiveness within a marital relationship. With an understanding that it is necessary for humans to have intimate emotional attachment to security figures during infancy and throughout adult life, this review explores adult attachment needs to understand how and why significant breaches of trust damage marital attachment. Alternative methods of forgiveness are compared and contrasted to demonstrate the universal factors important in the understanding of the process of forgiveness. Lasting forgiveness after a significant breach of trust, is difficult, takes time, and in many instances, requires significant relationship changes. Individual circumstances are investigated to explore the situational impact on an individual’s personal forgiveness journey. Finally, therapeutic tools are reviewed to assist therapists attempting to facilitate increased individual and couple self-awareness and guide clients through the process of forgiveness.
Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Rachelle Reinisch of the Adler Graduate School. Dr. Reinisch was an invaluable resource for me as worked my way through the conception of my project to the final draft. Though geographical distance made meeting in person difficult, her kind guidance and advice helped me find my voice and challenged me to appreciate the nuance of writing on a subject of which I have great passion.

I would like to thank Dr. Ruth Buelow of the Adler Graduate School for agreeing to be the reader of this project. I am grateful that she made the time to be a part of the completion of my master’s project. She also taught me most of what I know about how to critically read research and that continued learning is vital to my success as a therapist.

I would also like to thank Phil and Michelle Carlson whose gentle caring of couples in crisis inspired my interest in understanding forgiveness. The Carlson’s passion project for helping couples stirred my interest in pursuing my masters in marriage and family therapy. The amount of good they have done in their community cannot be overstated.

Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to thank my wife. She has been my constant supporter. Her kindness, tenderness, love, and grace have inspired me to grow, change, and learn to love well.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 2  
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 3  
Attachment Theory ................................................................................................................. 7  
  Strange Situation Experiment ................................................................................................. 8  
Attachment Styles .................................................................................................................. 10  
  Secure Attachment .............................................................................................................. 10  
  Avoidant Attachment Pattern .............................................................................................. 11  
  Ambivalent Attachment Pattern .......................................................................................... 11  
  Disorganized Attachment Pattern ....................................................................................... 11  
Adult Attachment Patterns ..................................................................................................... 12  
  Secure Adult Attachment .................................................................................................... 12  
  Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment ..................................................................................... 12  
  Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment ....................................................................................... 13  
  Fearful-Avoidant Attachment ............................................................................................. 13  
Attachment Theory and Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy ............................................ 14  
Demon Dialogues ................................................................................................................... 15  
  Finding the Bad Guy .......................................................................................................... 15  
  Protest Polka ...................................................................................................................... 16  
  Freeze and Flee .................................................................................................................. 16  
Relationship Skills ............................................................................................................... 16  
Breaches of Trust in Long Term Relationships ...................................................................... 18  
  Infidelity ............................................................................................................................. 18  
  Long Term Ambivalence ..................................................................................................... 19  
  Financial Mismanagement ................................................................................................. 20  
Initial Steps of Forgiveness ..................................................................................................... 21  
Beyond Initial Forgiveness ...................................................................................................... 23  
  Religiosity and Forgiveness ................................................................................................. 23  
  Secular Views on Forgiveness ............................................................................................. 25  
  Classifications of Change ................................................................................................. 27  
  Individual Psychology ........................................................................................................ 29  
  Lifestyle Analysis ................................................................................................................ 30  
PREPARE/ENRICH .............................................................................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
Attachment, Marriage, and the Process of Forgiveness

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the existing research regarding forgiveness in married heterosexual couples. Additionally, in the population studied, neither partner is dependent on the other for basic needs, safety, or security. Specifically, the goal of this research is to discuss how couples and therapists can understand forgiveness as a process and re-establish trust after a significant breach of trust has occurred. Throughout much of the literature reviewed, communication, conflict resolution, and empathic listening skills are identified as important to the forgiveness process (Johnson 2008; Rosenberg 2003). This is not to say that marriage satisfaction can be, or should be, defined by a couple’s skill set; however, these skills appear to make it possible for couples to have the more complicated and emotionally vulnerable conversations needed for authentic forgiveness.

In general, married couples usually agree and expect to be there for each other in good times and bad times. From day one, couples intend to keep promises and love each other for the rest of their lives. The couple’s intentions resemble Kahneman’s (2011) optimism bias, which is common in many couples, especially early in the relationship. For instance, optimism bias would be when an individual might have an overly optimistic outlook for the future due to personal involvement in a situation. In a marriage setting, this translates to a couple’s personal belief that they will be more successful than the average couple throughout their marriage. For example, in the PREPARE/ENRICH pre-marriage questionnaire (Olson & Larson, 2009) many couples reported that they did not believe the marriage would encounter a significant problem. Couples operating from an optimism bias are then surprised and unprepared when intimate trust is broken, when the relationship becomes difficult, or when the relationship requires additional work.
When trust is broken in a relationship, it is likely that the involved partners will feel intense insecurity and separateness (Johnson, 2008, 2010). Many individuals struggling through a breach of trust in a marital relationship react much like the infant in need of the mother’s security. Several of these reactions were observed by John Bowlby and are defined in his theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1958, 1959, 1962). Forgiveness can be examined through the lens of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958, 1959, 1962; Bretherton, 1992; Crowell & Waters, 2002) and emotionally focused couple therapy (Johnson, 2008). It is important to understand how couples and therapists interpret the meaning of forgiveness. Based on the concepts found in Bowlby’s (1958) and Johnson’s (2008, 2010) research, the goal of this literature review is to understand what relationship skills are needed to transition from broken trust to enduring trust.

**Attachment Theory**

John Bowlby graduated from the University of Cambridge in 1928 where he studied developmental psychology (Bretherton, 1992). During his studies and afterward, he worked with children and adolescents. His work with children and adolescents helped to shape the research Bowlby would continue for the remainder of his life. Bowlby would eventually transition from developmental psychology and train at the British Psychoanalytic Institute. Later, Bowlby was trained by two social workers, Joan Riviere and Melanie Klein, at the London Child Guidance Clinic. By the end of the World War II, Bowlby’s clinical observations of children led him to sharply question the predominantly psychoanalytic views of his colleagues. In contrast to his peers, Bowlby believed that the quality of infant and child family relationships had a greater impact on human development than the Freudian psychic drives (Bretherton, 1992).

Bowlby’s (1958, 1959, 1962) work centered around mother and infant interactions. Bowlby (1958) believed that the mental well-being of both the mother and the child were
dependent on the success of the mother-child partnership. Bowlby argued that a mother’s ability to be attentive and care for her child (even when other important distractions divided her attention) contributed to the child’s psychological and social success later in life.

Bowlby’s assertions (1958, 1959, 1962, 1969) continued to differ from the predominately Freudian theories supported by his peers. In fact, Klein (1932), Bowlby’s psychoanalytic supervisor and trainer, had concluded that a child’s mental health problems occurred because of fantasies derived from an internal conflict between aggressive and libidinal drives. Furthermore, Klein did not believe these mental health difficulties were related to the child’s experiences with others in the outside world.

Bowlby (1940) rejected the Freudian conclusion that a child’s attraction to his or her mother was primarily because of libidinal ties. Instead, Bowlby focused on the quality of the attachment between mother and child. He noted that the quality of the connection, and the mother’s ability to care for and nurture the child, had a dramatic impact on the psychological development of the infant. When researcher, Mary Ainsworth, joined Bowlby’s research team, Bowlby was able to supply the needed evidence to support his conclusions (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

**Strange Situation Experiment**

Ainsworth (1983) studied *security theory* in her graduate work at the University of Toronto. Security theory, like attachment theory, differed from psychoanalysis in understanding the motivations of infant children. Ainsworth postulated that a child needed to develop secure dependence on a caregiver prior to becoming comfortable with strange or challenging situations. Furthermore, it was only when secure dependence was achieved that children were free to master new skills and develop a long and healthy psychological trajectory.
One of Ainsworth’s (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) key contributions to attachment theory came in the form of the *strange situation experiment*. In this experiment, infants and their mothers were observed closely by researchers in a laboratory. Later, an unknown woman would join the mother and child. The mother, infant, and stranger would begin to play together in the laboratory. While the stranger was playing with the infant, the mother would leave for a pre-determined time and then return. Finally, after the reunion and the reactions from the infant were recorded, both the mother and the stranger left the laboratory. Once again, all infant reactions were recorded (Van Rosmalen, Van Der Veer, & Van Der Horst, 2015).

The strange situation experiment allowed Bowlby and Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971) to continue the development of attachment theory. Ainsworth measured how the infant responded when the mother left the room, if and how the infant attempted to self-sooth, and how long it took the infant to reattach to the mother.

Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) were interested in many aspects of child attachment behaviors. This interest included an attempt to understand the child’s response to a stranger, if separation anxiety occurred when the infant’s mother left the room, and the child’s *social referencing*, (i.e., when the child looked to his or her mother and observed how she was responding to a situation). Social referencing would help a child develop appropriate responses to fearful and non-threatening situations. While Ainsworth was collecting her data for the strange situation experiment, her observations and record keeping focused on qualitative observations. Rather than focusing on the number of specific observed behaviors, she would record a personal narrative of the experiment (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969).

After the observation periods of the strange situation experiment and subsequent research in the following decades, Bowlby and Ainsworth noticed discrete patterns in the style of
attachment (Tracy, Lamb, & Ainsworth, 1976). These styles were then classified according to specific behaviors and qualitative observations of the relationship between an infant and a mother.

**Attachment Styles**

During the strange situation experiment, the child’s mother was the *secure base* (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and from that base, the child was free to master his or her environment when the child felt safe. Ideally, mothers would provide a *safe haven* when the child was stressed or perceived danger. Other attachment behavior patterns occurred when a mother was either ambivalent or unable to be the secure base. Non-secure attachment occurred when mothers were unable or unwilling to be the safe haven for a distressed child. When an insecurely attached infant experienced the strange situation experiment, the infant reacted. How the infant reacted informed the researchers of the child’s style of attachment.

**Secure Attachment**

In the strange situation experiment (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) the most frequent form of attachment was the secure attachment. In this style of attachment, the infant was observed using the caregiver as the secure base from which to explore the lab and interact with what was in the lab. The infant also utilized the caregiver as a mirror to assess the level of threat from the stranger. When the caregiver showed no concern, the infant was confident in the relative safety of the stranger. When the caregiver left the room, observers noticed that the infant demonstrated distress. When the caregiver returned, the infant showed signs of relief or comfort. Additionally, when an infant demonstrated secure attachment style, the stranger in the room could comfort him or her; however, the child clearly preferred the primary caregiver.
Avoidant Attachment Pattern

The remaining attachment styles were strikingly different than the secure attachment style (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). When a child had an avoidant style of attachment, the child showed little emotional response when the caregiver left or returned to the room. Additionally, the infant demonstrated a lack of interest in being comforted by the stranger. In this style, Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) posited that the infant treated the caregiver and strangers the same because subconsciously the child believed that attachment needs would not be met by anyone.

Ambivalent Attachment Pattern

The ambivalent style of attachment (Ainsworth & Witting, 1969) demonstrated an inconsistent level of caring by the caregiver. In this style, the infant did not feel safe enough to explore the lab because he or she did not have a secure base. The child protested when the caregiver left; however, re-connecting to the caregiver was a slower process than that of the securely attached infants. Also, in this style of attachment, the stranger could not calm the infant. With an ambivalent attachment pattern (Ainsworth & Witting, 1969), the caregiver was unable to consistently react to the child’s needs. The child exhibited anxious behaviors because he or she never knew for sure if, or when, the caregiver would meet attachment needs.

Disorganized Attachment Pattern

In 1990, Main identified a fourth attachment pattern. Disorganized attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990) was characterized by a total lack of attachment. In disorganized attachment, the caregivers also tended to be erratic, extremely anxious, or frightening to the child. The child tended to be passive and emotionally unresponsive (or even fearful) of attachment figures.
Adult Attachment Patterns

Attachment theorists and clinical practitioners continued to apply Bowlby and Ainsworth’s attachment ideas to a broader population. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) designed an adult attachment questionnaire to increase understanding of adult attachment styles. Bartholomew and Horowitz found that adults had particular attachment needs. Adults, like the infants that Bowlby and Ainsworth studied (1991), fell into particular patterns of behavior to attempt to have attachment needs met. According to Bartholomew and Horowitz, the four adult attachment styles were: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant.

Secure Adult Attachment

A secure pattern of attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) is characterized by warm and approachable personalities. For example, adults with this pattern of attachment reported that they felt comfortable drawing close to others and relying on them. Secure adults were comfortable with appropriate emotional disclosure, intimacy, and independence. In addition, securely attached adults sought relationships that offered a high level of autonomy and emotional closeness.

Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment

Adults with an anxious-preoccupied pattern of attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) desired close emotionally intimate relationships and tended to be highly emotionally expressive. Additionally, anxious-preoccupied adults reported that they needed approval and a high level of responsiveness from relationships. Adults with this style of attachment were concerned that they were more emotionally committed and engaged in relationships than their partners. An anxious-preoccupied adult addressed issues of worthiness by working diligently to earn their partner’s love or affection. As a result, these individuals often asked their partners to
prove their emotional connectivity. If partners were unable to prove emotional connectedness, adults with anxious-preoccupied patterns of attachment frequently blamed themselves for being unworthy of the relationship.

**Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment**

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found that adults with dismissive-avoidant patterns of attachment were often seen as strong and self-sufficient people. Dismissive-avoidant adults valued independence and viewed it as strength. Conversely, dismissive-avoidant adults felt that close and emotionally intimate relationships were uncomfortable, taxing, and unnecessary. Dismissive-avoidant adults distanced themselves from their own emotional experiences and the emotional needs or experiences of others. These adults had a tendency to be insensitive to the emotional needs of others and viewed them as needy or unable to care for themselves. In addition, dismissive-avoidant adults were often leery of any criticism and frequently felt they were superior to others.

**Fearful-Avoidant Attachment**

Frequently, adults with a fearful-avoidant style of attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) were adults who had endured some level of trauma or loss earlier in life. This attachment pattern was characterized by a desire for emotional intimacy in conjunction with a fear of close emotional connections. Fearful-avoidant adults pursued close connections with their attachment figures; however, they were anxious about whether or not they were worthy of the connection. Also, these adults tended to be leery of another person’s motivation for seeking closeness. This increased skepticism was especially evident with those that endured childhood physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
In addition to Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) adult attachment findings, other researchers (Crowell & Waters, 2002; Zuccarini, Johnson, Dalgleish, & Makinen, 2013) have applied Bowlby’s findings to adult love relationships. For example, Johnson (2008) developed a therapy modality based on attachment theory and adult attachment needs in adult love relationships.

**Attachment Theory and Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy**

Sue Johnson, a practitioner and researcher, applied Bowlby’s (1958, 1959, 1962) attachment theory to adult love relationships. Johnson (2008) reported that couples in crisis responded much like Bowlby’s infants when they reacted to stressful situations. Even as adults, Johnson found that people looked for stable attachment and proof that they could depend on their loved ones for support, nurturing, and security. Johnson called her approach to couples’ therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy or EFT. Unfortunately, according to Johnson, many times when couples were in crisis, neither person was willing, or able, to become a secure base for their partner. Frequently, both partners felt vulnerable and unable to find a safe haven in each other.

Johnson (2008) understood that communication skills, conflict resolution skills, forgiveness, and trust building skills were helpful for long term relationship satisfaction, but had limited ability to help couples heal after a crisis. Johnson did not believe that marital satisfaction was linked to how well each person in the marriage utilized relationship skills. She did, however, notice that there were predictable patterns of communication and interaction that occurred with couples in therapy.
Demon Dialogues

Johnson (2008) suggested that an important initial step in EFT couple counseling would be the recognition of disruptive or destructive patterns in the relationship. Johnson identified the disruptive or destructive patterns as the *demon dialogues*. The three demon dialogues include:

- Finding the Bad Guy (Attack-Attack)
- Protest Polka (Demand-Withdraw)
- Freeze and Flee (Withdraw-Withdraw)

Johnson (2008) identified these common dialogues in couples who did not have the level of attachment or connection they hoped for in their relationships. In addition, both partners felt uncared for and vulnerable.

Finding the Bad Guy

According to Johnson (2008), many couples engaged in the *Finding the Bad Guy* or *Attack-Attack* demon dialogue. Finding the Bad Guy occurred when each person in the relationship blamed the other for the problems they experienced. Energy focused outward and highlighted the faults of the other person. When this demon dialogue took control of the relationship, there was little room for understanding, empathy, or personal responsibility.

Through an attachment theory lens, both people in the relationship reacted out of fear that their partner was not emotionally available and they did not feel safe in the relationship. Unfortunately, the longer this dialogue was allowed to linger, the less each person felt that the relationship was safe. This lack of safety led to additional problems as well as different and more complex demon dialogues.
Protest Polka

Johnson (2008) considered the Protest Polka, or Demand-Withdraw demon dialogue more complex than Finding the Bad Guy. When couples engaged in the Protest Polka, both people were anxious about whether or not their partner could be, or would be, emotionally available; however, in this case, one partner aggressively pursued, or demanded, emotional attachment from their partner. In response to this demand, and because it appeared to be aggressive and unsafe, the other partner withdrew. The more the withdrawing partner appeared reclusive, the more the pursuing partner would demand, which decreased the withdrawing partner’s level of safety. This self-perpetuating cycle could lead to serious disconnection in a relationship and if it persisted for an extended period of time, it could become what Johnson called the Freeze and Flee, or Withdraw-Withdraw demon dialogue.

Freeze and Flee

According to Johnson (2008), the demon dialogue Freeze and Flee, or Withdraw-Withdraw, appeared deceivingly peaceful. Eventually, the arguing and blaming of Finding the Bad Guy became quiet and cooperative. The Protest Polka continued to dissolve into increased emotional distance. Without the necessary safety to risk emotional intimacy, the Freeze and Flee demon dialogue developed in the relationship. Although the Freeze and Flee appeared to be the least conflicted of the demon dialogue types, Johnson considered the Freeze and Flee the most dangerous demon dialogue for couples hoping to salvage their relationship.

Relationship Skills

In contrast to Johnson’s work with couples (2008), Halford, Sanders and Behrens (2001) found that in order to de-escalate conflict in a marriage relationship, couples must first learn to identify their communication and conflict patterns. Johnson (2008) acknowledged that some
relationship skill training was necessary; however, she was reluctant to spend time teaching couples these skills. Rather, Johnson (2008) framed skill level as self-awareness and recognition of attachment needs. Johnson believed that as people became more self-aware of attachment needs they could choose to have these needs met through nurturing instead of engaging in the demon dialogues.

Halford, Sanders and Behrens (2001) found that specific relationship skills training could be helpful for couples (e.g., when couples found that their communication and conflict resolution skills were minimal or when the relationship itself was considered high risk). Working within the EFT framework, Epstein, Warfel, Johnson, Smith and McKinney (2013) posited that teaching reflective listening, empathic understanding, and foundational communication skills helped couples de-escalate the conflict in their marriage. With the decreased conflict and tension in the relationship, couples were more likely to feel safe sharing their attachment needs with their partners. Additionally, with increased skill, couples were better equipped to handle constructive criticism from their partner or therapist. As a result, couples were less likely to demonstrate defensive or evasive behaviors and became more capable of responding in a positive manner. Also, couples were able to disassemble their past communication patterns and de-escalate their own demon dialogues which led to healthy and safe attachment.

When couples were able to de-escalate their demon dialogues and began to understand how, where, and why the demon dialogues were so damaging to the relationship, Johnson (2008) suggested that the couple could initiate the process of reestablishing connection and risk emotional intimacy. Johnson (2008) recognized that before individuals would risk emotional intimacy, they needed to understand what made them feel emotionally safe. Thus, Johnson encouraged couples to test the reliability and emotional safety of their partner in the therapeutic
session. During these conversations, couples could also watch for the reactions of their spouses when they attempted to connect at a deeper and emotionally vulnerable state.

In the final stage of EFT, couples become armed with an understanding of their past and present conflict styles and effective communication skills (Johnson 2008). At this point, couples begin the process of consolidation and move forward together in a repaired relationship. Armed with an understanding of each other’s attachment needs, couples are able to respond to their partner when he or she reaches out for reassurance, comfort, and love.

**Breaches of Trust in Long Term Relationships**

Hawkins, Willoughby, and Doherty (2012) found that the longer a couple had been together the more likely it was that people in the relationship would profoundly disappoint one another. These profound disappointments included affairs, financial mismanagement, addictions, and long-term perceived ambivalence about the relationship. When profound disappointments happen within the context of a marriage, there is a breach of trust. When this breach of trust occurs, and if the relationship is going to re-establish emotional closeness, connection must be restored, trust must be re-earned and finally, long lasting and sincere forgiveness must be granted.

**Infidelity**

When couples get married, often there is an implied, if not explicit, agreement between the couple that they will maintain emotional and sexual fidelity to each other (Carder & Jaenicke 2008). This commitment to each other allows healthy dependency to develop, which EFT characterizes as a healthy, secure marriage (or attachment); however, if one or both partners engage in extra-marital affairs, either emotional, sexual, or both, the safety of the attachment bond between the couple is compromised. Carder and Jaenicke’s (2008) affair recovery book
Torn Asunder may sound dramatic, but the title could accurately define the state of attachment in many couples in which an affair has been recently discovered.

Coop Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2005) identified extramarital affairs as the second most difficult situation to treat in therapy (physical abuse as the most difficult). Coop Gordon et al. found that during instances of extramarital affairs, the secure base of attachment was no longer there and the individuals within the relationship often became self-protecting and blaming of one another. It could be difficult in these situations for the couple to de-escalate and identify their attachment needs.

Long Term Ambivalence

Frequently, long-term ambivalence does not carry with it as much emotional intensity as the aforementioned scenario. According to Johnson (2008), the couple’s communication pattern often assumed the Withdraw-Withdraw dynamic. Couples decided that their partner was not safe for emotional intimacy. The lack of safety and the emotional fallout led couples to the conclusion that it was safer to withdraw than to reach out emotionally. These couples are often characterized as people that “stay together for the kids” and other social reasons, but minimal attachment or connection exists within the coupleship.

Johnson (2008) found that while there are many things that can lead to long-term ambivalence in a marriage, the lack of emotional intimacy was a common theme for many couples. It is true that when a relationship has endured difficulty it can find relative peace in the lack of argument or conflict and good-willed cooperation; however, good-willed cooperation would not describe a thriving marriage. When a relationship struggles with a lack of emotional intimacy, there is a lack of trust and attachment to the other person. Rather, trust is placed in the
mutually agreed upon and co-managed system. In many ways, these relationships could feel more like a business partnership.

**Financial Mismanagement**

According to Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson (1997), financial mismanagement could be another situation that is difficult to overcome in a relationship. Typically, this is not the misuse of minor amounts of money or spending too much on a night out. Usually, it is the intentional misuse of the couple’s financial situation that puts the couple in real or perceived risk. Financial mismanagement can pose a threat not only to the safety and security of the marriage relationship, but to the safety and security of a lifestyle, and the ability to care for children and loved ones. It can also jeopardize retirement, educational, and home ownership plans. In these cases, not only has one person abused the trust of the relationship, but they put safety and security in danger.

In cases of financial mismanagement by one partner in a relationship, repairing the relationship may come faster than repairing the damage created by the misuse. The difficulty in repairing the damage incurred from financial mismanagement is due to the consequences of the financial mismanagement. That is, financial consequences can linger longer than it takes for the couple to work through their forgiveness process.

Each of the aforementioned scenarios, and there are others that can be just as difficult for a marriage to endure, fracture the trust and positive attachment in a relationship. Johnson (2008) prefers to work the problem by helping couples identify their demon dialogues and understand each other’s attachment needs. However, Halford et al. (2001) found that depersonalizing attachment needs and relationship skills, and discussing them more abstractly, can help couples become more skillful. When couples are able to identify and use these relationship skills in the abstract they can, when it is safe to do so, apply them to their own relationship. It may be
possible that when a couple identifies and processes their demon dialogues, attachment needs, and how they have been hurt by a breach of trust, the work of forgiveness and the rebuilding of trust can begin.

**Initial Steps of Forgiveness**

Demon dialogs, and other relationship dynamics, are behaviors within a relationship that become patterns over time (Johnson, 2008). Often, demon dialogs and other negative relationship patterns undermine emotional intimacy. Diminished emotional intimacy may have a negative impact on marital satisfaction and should be minimized whenever possible. Beyond significant breaches of trust, Johnson also identified moments in a couple’s relationship that required forgiveness and a time when trust needed to be restored. In some cases, the initial steps of forgiveness must be taken before individuals in the relationship will risk seeking deep emotional attachment.

There are many different philosophies, definitions, and ideas, about forgiveness. One definition could not cover the definition of forgiveness for everyone in all situations.

“*Never does the human soul appear so strong as when it foregoes revenge and dares to forgive an injury*”

– Confucius

“Forgetfulness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it”

– Mark Twain

“Forgetfulness is not an occasional act, it’s a constant attitude”

– Martin Luther King Jr.

For the purpose of this literature review, forgiveness is understood as a process, which can, and will, look different depending on the situation. Johnson (2008, 2010) identified the steps that she used to guide couples through a breach of trust. In order to begin, couples must
understand their demon dialogs and reach a point of de-escalation in their relationship before forgiveness can be initiated. The steps Johnson (2008, 2010) identified are as follows:

- Injured party identifies the injury and its impact.
- Other party acknowledges the injury and shows concern.
- Injured party shares deeper feelings and risks vulnerability.
- Other party takes ownership of their role in the injury and demonstrates regret or remorse.
- Injured party shares fears of reconnection and emotional needs that were left unmet because of the injury.
- Other party remains emotionally present and offers safe emotional haven.
- Together the couple creates a new healing story.

Whether the breach of trust is emotional callousness, financial mismanagement, or infidelity, Johnson and other EFT practitioners (Crowell & Waters, 2002; Johnson, 2008, 2010; Zuccarini et al., 2013) use these steps as a guide to help their clients heal their relationships.

Johnson, and other EFT practitioners, demonstrated the efficacy of this forgiveness process and continued to publish, refine, and add to EFT (Zuccarini et al., 2013). The refined process, called the Attachment Injury Resolution Model (AIRM), included many of the same steps Johnson (2008) outlined in her work. While Johnson demonstrated her forgiveness process through one conversation, AIRM slowed the process into three phases. Phase one is de-escalation related to the injury. Phase two encourages new patterns of emotional engagement related to the injury. During phase two, forgiveness is granted and reconciliation begins. Finally, phase three of AIRM is re-consolidation of the broken emotional bond (Zuccarini et al., 2013).
The key differentiator to this three-phase process is the understanding and acknowledgement that forgiveness can take time (Zuccarini et al., 2013). For instance, some injuries may be disclosed, understood, and forgiven in one conversation. Large breaches in trust may require more time to de-escalate, heal, and be forgiven.

**Beyond Initial Forgiveness**

There are many factors that determine how successful a couple could be at offering forgiveness. Johnson and other EFT researchers (Zuccarini et al., 2013) developed succinct processes for forgiveness that, hypothetically, anyone could follow. Johnson (2008, 2010) stated that forgiveness was a path to greater emotional connection. Johnson also believed that if couples honestly and openly followed her procedure for forgiveness they could find higher levels of satisfaction in their marriage. Although forgiveness can be extremely positive, and the process so approachable, people continue to divorce or live in under-satisfied marriages. It appears there could be factors, not included in the EFT or AIRM process, that contribute to the couple’s ability to achieve long-term forgiveness.

**Religiosity and Forgiveness**

Johnson (2008) along with other researchers (Harris, Marshall, & Schvaneveldt, 2008; Zuccarini et al., 2013) view forgiveness as a process. For example, Worthington, Mazzeo, and Canter (2005) developed the *Forgiveness-Promoting Approach*. In contrast to Johnson’s focus on attachment, Worthington et al., (2005) acknowledged that much of the previous research on forgiveness had been rooted in religion. Worthington et al. stated that the foundational understanding of forgiveness was that Christians should work to forgive others just as God had forgiven them. Worthington et al. sought to leverage the culture of forgiveness in religious communities and applied that approach to marriage and family therapy. In this model, clients
were encouraged to confess their transgressions to each other. Couples would then take turns empathetically responding to the other’s confession. Worthington et al. identified the “pain of un-forgiveness” as a motivating factor in an individual’s decision to forgive. They further stated that unresolved painful emotions about how and why spouses hurt each other in their relationship could reinforce marital dissatisfaction. Worthington et al. concluded that through confession and empathy sessions, couples reported feeling forgiven and emotionally closer to their spouses.

DiBlasio (2000), another forgiveness researcher, based his practices on the Judeo-Christian philosophies about forgiveness. DiBlasio, like many other researchers, outlined a process for couples to follow but added an important and clarifying point. He identified forgiveness as an active and ongoing choice. DiBlasio continued to state that forgiveness was a choice that may need to be made frequently, even hourly, in the early stages of rebuilding the relationship.

The concept of repeatedly choosing forgiveness set DiBlasio apart from many of the other researchers who portrayed confidence in being able to facilitate forgiveness in one to four therapist-led sessions (Johnson, 2008; Worthington et al., 2005). Perhaps for smaller attachment wounds, one to four conversations may be sufficient for grievances to be aired, empathically understood, and forgiveness granted. The question remains: How much time do couples need to forgive highly painful relationship wounds (e.g., an affair, gross financial mismanagement, and long term relationship ambivalence)?

Carder and Jaenicke (2008), stated forgiveness often took months or years. For reference, they stated it usually took as long for a spouse to recover from an affair as it did for the unfaithful partner to initiate, and finally end, the affair. Compared to other researchers, Carder and Jaenicke explained that de-escalation from initial discovery of broken trust could take
a great deal of energy and effort. In addition, Carder and Jaenicke found that complete healing was difficult to achieve and the process of forgiveness itself may not be complete for a long time.

Johnson’s (2008, 2010) process, as well as the other brief forgiveness protocols (Worthington et. al., 2016; Zuccarini et al., 2013), are offense specific models of forgiveness (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham 2009). All models demonstrated efficacy and are utilized by many therapists hoping to guide couples through the difficult journey of forgiveness and reconciliation after a significant breach of trust (Johnson, 2008; Zuccarini et al., 2013). In reality, a longitudinal study suggested that less than 50% of couples achieved long term change in their relationships (Cordova, Caultilli, Simon, & Sabag, 2006).

Cordova et al. (2006) took a critical look at couples that struggled through a significant breach of trust and found forgiveness. Unfortunately, two years later, more than half of the couples reported that the problematic behaviors that led to their relational breakdown were still present in the relationship. There appears to be additional work needed, beyond Johnson’s EFT (2008) and AIRM (Zuccarini et al., 2013) forgiveness models, for enduring change and reconciliation in a marriage.

By comparison, Carder and Jaenicke (2008) openly advised couples that it takes a large amount of time to recover from significant breaches of trust. Carder and Jaenicke advised couples that they needed to experience different stages of the forgiveness process rather than complete a checklist. Carder and Jaenicke encouraged couples to rely on their faith during difficult times in the recovery process.

**Secular Views on Forgiveness**

Generally, the United States is thought of as a religious country. According to a Pew Research Center study, over 70% of American people reported that they identified as Christian.
An additional 10% of people reported they were Jewish, Muslim, or of other faiths. It is important to note that the report also stated that more than 20% of Americans have no religious affiliation and up to 6% reported they are agnostic or atheist (Lipka, 2016).

Much of the available research on forgiveness either directly stated, or implied a connection between, faith and forgiveness. A possible conclusion from this research would be that without faith, one cannot have true forgiveness. Potentially complicating the situation further, it could mean that someone’s faith could be used to coerce an individual into offering insincere forgiveness. That complication aside, how non-religious people and couples experience forgiveness may appear to be very different than those in the religious communities. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides a secular definition for forgiveness (Forgive, n.d.):

1. To give up resentment of or claim to requital for an offense.
2. To cease to feel resentment against an offender.

Schnarch (2009), expanded on this dictionary definition and described forgiveness as an act of self-caring. In his book, Passionate Marriage, Schnarch described marriage as the best possible tool for personal development. In this sense, forgiveness became an opportunity to learn more about the self, one’s spouse, and the relationship. Finally, it became an opportunity for all involved to work through temporary pain, to grow and expand understanding of who each person was within the context of the relationship, and to develop as secure individuals.

Schnarch (2009) believed that couples should strive for a strong sense of differentiation and he defined differentiation as follows:

Differentiation involves balancing two basic life forces: the drive for individuality and the drive for togetherness. Individuality propels us to follow our own directive, to be on our own, to create a unique identity. Togetherness pushes us to follow the directives of
others, to be part of the group. When these two life forces for individuality and togetherness are expressed in balanced, healthy ways, the result is a meaningful relationship that doesn’t deteriorate into emotional fusion (p. 55).

This definition is in stark contrast to Johnson’s (2008) healthy dependence. This difference in opinion about ideal relationship dynamics is demonstrated by the disparity in the researcher’s discussion of forgiveness. Johnson focused on emotional intimacy and connection. In contrast, Schnarch (2009) focused on a transition towards self-soothing and decreased reliance on a spouse for emotional support. Schnarch suggested that through the painful growing process of forgiveness and change, couples may find strength in a constant choice to be with each other. In this process, couples may have the opportunity to be more emotionally intimate, hold fewer secrets, create more openness, develop less dependence, and achieve greater differentiation.

Classifications of Change

Change may be a critical part of the forgiveness process. Cordova et al. (2006) found that after forgiveness was granted, 50% of couples failed to make lasting changes in the relationship. Martin, Gonzalez and Fuster (2011) found that the need for ongoing forgiveness could become a chronic condition of the relationship. When couples are in need of ongoing forgiveness, they may enter into a cycle in which they are constantly alternating between re-offense and re-forgiveness.

The EFT (Johnson, 2008, 2010), AIRM (Zuccarini et al., 2013) and Worthington et al., (2005) forgiveness models, all required the offender to empathically understand how their partner was injured. Additionally, sincere regret needed to be demonstrated for the process to progress. None of these models, however, advised couples that their relationship may require change. Or, as mentioned by Carder and Jaenicke (2008), couples may need to grieve the loss of
their previous relationship and decide together to build a new relationship with new systems and rules. Without this change, according to Davey, Duncan, Kissil, Davey, and Stone Fish (2011), the marriage system may continue to produce similar outcomes and problematic behaviors in the future although sincere regret was present during the initial forgiveness process.

According to Davey et al., (2011), the practice of marriage and family therapy is uniquely focused on relationship systems. In marital systems, forgiveness and change could be viewed as two separate change types. First order change is usually focused on symptom reduction. First order change, when applied to couple relationships includes the initial de-escalation portion of the EFT (Johnson, 2008, 2010) and AIRM (Zuccarini et al., 2013) forgiveness processes. First order change does not affect the rules or the structure of the relationship system and therefore, is unlikely to have a lasting change effect within the relationship (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Second order change is a change in the rules and structure of the relationship. For example, rather than focusing on reducing the frequency of arguments (first order change), second order change would be a change in the couple’s communication and conflict resolution strategies. In this scenario, the couple may argue less frequently, but the impact of second order change is evident in how the couple communicates and resolves disagreements.

If the forgiveness process included second order change, after a breach of trust (e.g., an affair), an individual could follow the EFT (Johnson, 2008, 2010) or AIRM process (Zuccarini et al., 2013) of forgiveness. If the relationship rules and structure did not change, the potential for future affairs continues to be a possible outcome for the relationship system. Conversely, if the individual decided to uncover why he or she pursued the interest and validation of someone other than the partner, then the couple could work to change the structure and rules of the relationship.
Together, the couple could work to build a relationship that could meet validation needs within the marriage.

Schnarch (2009) stated that personal growth within a marriage was just as important as the growth of the relationship. For instance, to grow and change a relationship system, it may be required for individuals to increase self-awareness and understanding of personal needs. Then, with a greater understanding of what both partners want and need out of a relationship, a couple can build a more mutually fulfilling relationship.

Alfred Adler’s *Individual Psychology* may be an effective therapeutic framework for therapists to use to help clients better understand themselves, their conscious and unconscious drives and feelings, and how they understand themselves in social connection with others (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Armed with new knowledge about themselves and their social needs, it may be possible for individuals to build more successful relationships during the forgiveness process.

**Individual Psychology**

Alfred Adler is perhaps one of the first researchers in the psychology of forgiveness. The focus of Adler’s Individual Psychology was that people were social beings and needed to be viewed through their social context (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Additionally, Adler believed that a person’s level of social interest was proportionate to the person’s psychological health. Watts (1998) quoted Adler’s definition of social interest:

> We are not in a position to define it unequivocally, but we have found in an English author a phrase which clearly expresses what we could contribute to an explanation: "To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another” (Watts, 1998, p. 5).
Higher levels of social interest allow for empathy. According to McBrien (2004), social interest is an act of empathy (e.g., seeing, hearing, and feeling as another person might see, hear, and feel). McBrien believed that empathy was the common theme throughout all forgiveness research and without empathy genuine forgiveness does not exist.

The importance of empathy cannot be overstated when discussing forgiveness (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002); however, Adler identified many aspects of personality and social interaction that could have an impact on an individual’s ability to offer forgiveness. Many of these aspects could be uncovered with the therapeutic use of an Individual Psychology lifestyle analysis (Watkins, 1992).

**Lifestyle Analysis**

According to Watkins (1992) an Adlerian lifestyle analysis can be a helpful way for therapists and clients to gain insight. A lifestyle analysis is a lengthy assessment with questions that focus on the early childhood of the client (Mosak & di Pietro, 2006). Specifically, how early childhood informed thoughts, feelings, and instincts about the client and the continued impact of those thoughts, feelings, and instincts in the client’s adult world. Once the lifestyle assessment is complete, both the therapist, and in many cases the client, gain new insight into the client’s self-perception and worldview.

Watkins (1992) suggested that the lifestyle analysis should be separated into five distinct areas. The first section would be the presenting problem and the client’s history of that problem. This section is an important step for the therapist and the client because the therapist could determine the chronic or acute nature of the client’s identified problem. For example, if the client’s presenting problem existed for many years, raising awareness may help a therapist understand the client’s goals of therapy and how to structure a successful treatment plan.
The second section, according to Watkins (1992), is a family history and an exploration breakdown of the client’s relationship with all members of the client’s family of origin. Specifically, the therapist obtains information regarding the client’s interactions with their father, mother, and siblings. In this section, the therapist collects static information such as the client’s birth order, the years of separation between siblings, if family members are still living, or if they have passed away (and if so, when they passed away).

The third part of the lifestyle analysis is a review of what Adler called the three life tasks. Adler’s life tasks included work, social (friendships), and romantic love (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Alder believed that if a person reported struggles in any of the life tasks, those struggles may support or confirm other findings within the analysis in regards to the initial presenting problem (Watkins, 1992). For example, difficulties with a spouse may stem from inaccurate assumptions about gender role expectations within a relationship. In this section, the therapist is able to expand on social interaction beyond the client’s family of origin. Moving beyond the client’s family of origin is important because it allows the therapist to begin to identify patterns in social interactions and the client’s level of social interest.

The forth section of the lifestyle analysis is consists of incomplete association sentences and early recollections. In this section, according to Watkins (1992), clients may be asked to complete sentences such as: Men are…, Women are…, Society is…, etc. A client may be asked to use three adjectives to describe childhood relationships with his or her father, mother, and siblings. In addition, clients may be asked to identify some of their earliest recollections. Therapists record the early memories verbatim and are listening for both literal and abstract information (Watkins, 1992). Early recollection information could then be used to compare the memory to the other collected information.
In an attempt to find connections and themes regarding the client’s style of life, the fifth section of the lifestyle analysis is used to synthesize all of the information gathered from the previous four sections (Watkins, 1992). For example, the therapist is interested in how the client might view men, women, responsibilities at work, and the successfulness of social and love relationships. Many times, themes begin to emerge (Watkins, 1992). From these themes, therapists may be able to infer the origins of the client’s problem and predict the impact of the presenting problem.

**PREPARE/ENRICH**

In addition to the lifestyle analysis, therapists may use the PREPARE/ENRICH program to gain insight into the couple’s relationship. In the last 30 years, over three million couples have used PREPARE/ENRICH as a pre-marriage mentorship program (Olson & Larson, 2009). The PREPARE/ENRICH program is a combination of online assessments and meetings between a couple and their PREPARE/ENRICH mentor. The intended goal of the program is to provide the couple with baseline marital and communication skills to prepare them for future relationship difficulties. The results of the PREPARE/ENRICH assessment have been normed and validated many times and the program is now considered an effective tool for working with coupled relationships (Olson & Larson, 2009). PREPARE/ENRICH consists of eight sessions, each covering different topics, and should be completed with a mentor. The mentor has been trained and certified by a PREPARE/ENRICH trainer prior to working with couples.

The PREPARE/ENRICH program covers eight areas of a relationship: communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, leisure activities, sexual expectations, family and friends, relationship roles, and spiritual beliefs (Olson & Larson, 2009). Within each of these eight sections, individual and couple satisfaction is measured. Additionally, similarities and
discrepancies within the responses of both partners are evaluated. For example, both partners could rate their relationships with family and friends low in satisfaction. While the satisfaction score is low, the couple would receive a high positive couple agreement score from the assessment. The PREPARE/ENRICH rating highlights two things: a couple’s satisfaction in their relationship across several different areas, and how aligned the couple is in their expectations of each other in each of those measured areas (Olson & Larson, 2009).

PREPARE/ENRICH protocol clearly states that the couple assessment, and subsequent meetings with a mentor, are not therapy and should not be confused with couple’s therapy (Olson & Larson, 2009). Instead, the program focuses on raising awareness of discrepancies in expectations and assumptions that lead to potential long-term concerns. The creators of PREPARE/ENRICH understand that many of the couples that complete the assessment are couples about to be married. In these cases, the developers of the assessment understand that couples are likely to be looking at each other with rose colored glasses and may not see or appreciate potential areas of concern highlighted within their relationship. The role of the mentor would be to encourage conversations that may be uncomfortable for an excited couple (Olson & Larson, 2009). The mentor identifies and addresses areas of potential struggle. Frequently, these conversations are more direct than many couples have previously dared to be about the relationship topic. The purpose of difficult discussions is to encourage couples to be more informed about themselves as individuals and as a couple. When used correctly, PREPARE/ENRICH can help couples engage in difficult conversations they may have been avoiding and better prepare a couple for a lifelong relationship.
Connected Marriage

Similar to PREPARE/ENRICH (Olson & Larson, 2009), connected marriage is a program designed to help a couple and a mentor navigate crucial conversations and develop relationship skills. Though it has yet to be peer reviewed, normed for a target audience, or validated, many of the topics covered by the program are inspired by the work and research of Sue Johnson, John Gottman, Dave Carder and other relationship experts (Carder & Jaenicke, 2008; Crowell & Waters, 2002; Gubbins, Perosa, & Bartle-Haring, 2010; Johnson, 2008). Phil and Michelle Carlson developed the connected marriage program. Together, they have dedicated years to volunteer work with couples in need of rebuilding trust and forgiveness.

The program creators describe the program as faith-based, but do not require active participation in faith-based churches or programs. Similar to PREPARE/ENRICH, this program has separate modules. In contrast to PREPARE/ENRICH, the connected marriage program focuses on couples who are already married and in a current relationship crisis.

Based on the work of several researchers (Carder & Jaenicke, 2008; Crowell & Waters, 2002; Gubbins et al., 2010; Johnson, 2008), the modules in the connected marriage materials are: building your bond, learning to validate, impact of family, managing conflict, forgiveness and trust, and building intimacy. In each module, as in PREPARE/ENRICH, couples complete an online assessment. The assessment generates a report, and the mentor assigned to the couple uses the report findings to facilitate a conversation.

The first four sessions of the connected marriage program resemble the EFT (Johnson 2008, 2010) and AIRM forgiveness model (Zuccarini et al., 2013) and are designed to move couples towards de-escalation. Connected marriage then departs from EFT and AIRM forgiveness and defines forgiveness differently. In many ways, connected marriage spans the
distance between Johnson’s (2008) goal of forgiveness and Schnarch’s (2009) goal for differentiated couples. Similar to Carder and Jaenicke (2008), connected marriage described forgiveness as a personal choice that could take a significant amount of time. Another differentiating factor of the connected marriage program is the focus on the person offering forgiveness. Within the connected marriage curriculum, there is an understanding that the offering of forgiveness is a difficult and deeply personal journey. Connected marriage also suggests that through forgiveness, couples may be able to re-establish healthy emotional intimacy and secure attachment.

Discussion

The forgiveness models referenced in this literature review identified the importance of relationship skills and de-escalation of conflict before a forgiveness process can be initiated (Johnson, 2008, 2010; Schnarch, 2009). Johnson (2008, 2010) stated that couples needed self-awareness in order to identify their own emotional and relationship needs. Johnson used the metaphor of an elevator going down, deeper into emotional vulnerability. Going deeper emotionally requires some degree of self-awareness and a willingness to be emotionally vulnerable with your spouse. Schnarch (2009) indicated that the individuals in a relationship are responsible for themselves. That is, it would be the individual’s responsibility to understand, and meet, most of their own needs, wants, and perceived responsibilities within the relationship.

Johnson (2008, 2010) and Schnarch (2009) discussed the need to understand and work on relationship skills and improve self-awareness within marriage relationships. Several tools have been developed to improve self-awareness and increase insight into a couple’s understanding of their relationship skills. While no assessment or tool is completely comprehensive, each offers couples and individuals an opportunity to learn about themselves and their relationship.
Implications for Practice

Therapists hoping to help a couple through the difficult process of forgiveness are constantly balancing competing priorities, improving positive interactions, increasing self-awareness, supporting emotional vulnerability, facilitating change, empathizing with a painful situation, and focusing on long-term goals (Reibstein, 2013; Woldarsky, Meneses, & Greenberg, 2011). Each of these therapeutic priorities require time and attention from everyone involved. There are times when specific tools or assessments such as the lifestyle analysis (Watkins, 1992) and PREPARE/ENRICH (Olson & Larson, 2009), may help a therapist and a couple gain insight into relationship issues.

For example, once the lifestyle analysis has been completed, the therapist and the client may be able to discuss the impact of the client’s early life and how early influences shaped important relationship assumptions and the client’s forgiveness process. Some of the possible relationship factors discovered in this analysis may be: relationship role expectations, conflict resolution strategies, communication styles, gender role expectations, beliefs about how children should be raised, the priority of faith or religion, educational and professional success expectations, the tendency toward perfectionism, and how the individual safeguards against potential failures. All of these factors could have a potential impact in a forgiveness process for a client (Johnson, 2008; Woldarsky et al., 2011).

Similarly, after completing the PREPARE/ENRICH program (Olson & Larson, 2009) with a mentor, individuals increase self-awareness of relationship expectations (as individuals and as couples). In addition, couples throughout the PREPARE/ENRICH process, are encouraged to participate in conversations that hopefully reduce the likelihood of significant breaches of trust. Couples may find that in situations where there has been a significant breach
of trust, the process of de-escalation could be accomplished quickly because couples are already aware of their communication and conflict resolution style. Couples may be able to draw on the knowledge obtained throughout PREPARE/ENRICH to improve the way they proceed through their own forgiveness process.

**Forgiveness as a Process**

Fife, Weeks, and Stellberg-Filbert (2013) carefully stated that they identified forgiveness as a process. Furthermore, it is a process that may be more successful with the support of an engaged and supportive therapist who is able to empathize with the pain of broken trust. Fincham and Beach (2002) recognized that in times of emotional instability, couples may benefit from the initial therapeutic goal of reducing the level of psychological aggression in the relationship. The reduction of psychological aggression could be considered the de-escalation process of the EFT model of forgiveness (Johnson, 2008).

The aforementioned models of forgiveness indicate that the first step toward forgiveness is de-escalation. No forgiveness model can begin until the couple is able to calmly discuss the problem (Fincham & Beach, 2002). It is within this discussion that a therapist can be helpful. During couples counseling, a therapist can model empathy by displaying a genuine understanding of each person in the relationship. The hope is that the couple begins to empathize with each other, which promotes a decrease in psychological aggression and a movement toward forgiveness (Fife, et al., 2013).

Based on the research completed by Davey et al. (2011), relationship change is an important part of enduring forgiveness. As Carder and Jaenicke (2008) stated, the forgiveness process can take a considerable amount of time. The therapist’s ability to grieve with the couple would be an important therapeutic role in the facilitation of the forgiveness process. It is
impossible to overstate how steeply and sharply a couple in crisis may vacillate between hope and forgiveness, and grief and despair (Carder & Jaenicke, 2008). A therapist, in tune with the couple, may act as a ballast, reduce volatility, and create a space of relative emotional safety. In addition, it is important to choose the correct moments to build on the future of a couples’ new relationship, or to pause in reflection of a moment of honest and intimate vulnerability (Fincham & Beach, 2004).

The therapeutic goal would be for couples to feel comfortable with the depth of increased self-awareness. Armed with increased self-awareness, with or without a therapist’s help, a couple may begin to disclose their attachment needs to each other. Taking the “emotional elevator down” as Johnson (2008) stated, a couple can build a new relationship that meets the attachment needs of each person.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There appears to be several factors involved in determining how successful a couple will be at negotiating a forgiveness process. Unfortunately, according to Cordova et al. (2006) over 50% of couples will continue to struggle with the same issues in two years or less if couples do not achieve second order change. For example, if the forgiveness process does not include second order change, are couple’s more likely to live in a chronic state of forgiveness and re-offense? If second order change is a component of the forgiveness process, are couples more likely to have higher levels of satisfaction in two, five, and ten years after the initial process? A longitudinal study with these questions in mind may provide additional information that could help shape the understanding of long-term forgiveness.

Many different relationship dynamics appear to have an impact on a couple’s forgiveness process. Some of the dynamics explored in this literature review are: communication and
conflict resolution skills, the impact of family of origin, the impact of religion and faith on the initial decision to forgive, the willingness to change, and the openness to both relationship change and increased relationship intimacy through greater self-disclosure and self-awareness.

A potential future research question may be, “How do income disparities affect the process of forgiveness?” For example, one person is a significant income earner and the other stays at home with the kids. How would the income difference affect the at-home partner’s desire to engage in a forgiveness process? Could the non-income earner potentially offer superficial forgiveness, be afraid to challenge the relationship, and settle for first order change because it safeguards their basic need for food, shelter, and safety?

There appears to be a gap in forgiveness research regarding a secular view of forgiveness. As mentioned previously, much of the research available on forgiveness is based on a religious impetus and the duty of forgiveness. If forgiveness is viewed as a religious entity, how does that view have an impact a non-religious couple’s willingness to forgive, especially in times of deep emotional pain due to a significant breach of trust? Forgiveness, in the long term, has many benefits, including increased intimacy and trust in the relationship; however, for secular couples, what motivates them through the difficult and painful times of a forgiveness process if they do not feel compelled to do so by their faith?

**Conclusion**

When couples experience a significant breach in trust, forgiveness takes time, change, and self-awareness (Carder & Jaenicke, 2008). Additionally, without these three things, any forgiveness process has at least a 50% fail rating (Cordova et al, 2006). Failure means that the relationship will either exist in a chronic state of forgiveness and re-offense or may never achieve full forgiveness.
Many researchers (Johnson, 2008, 2010; Worthington et. al., 2005; Zuccarini et al., 2013) in the field of marital relationships and forgiveness present a simple, discrete process of forgiveness. In this endeavor, forgiveness researchers look to accomplish two things: assuage the grieving with plausible quick results, and grant swift redemption to those withering under the scrutiny of their regrettable behavior. Unfortunately, based on research reviewed, it appears that forgiveness may be more intricate than an offense specific, brief model could cover.

Other researchers (Carder & Jaenicke, 2008; Schnarch, 2009) may be more inclined to acknowledge the individual, complex, and painful aspects of breaches of trust and forgiveness. In their research and books, Carder, Jaenicke, and Schnarch tend to focus on the experience and painful emotions of broken trust and the hard, determined work that forgiveness demands. Couples must mutually decide to find new ways to be together as less than perfect versions of each other and in a less than perfect relationship.

Schnarch (2009) indicated that the more we allow ourselves to be known by our spouse, the more intimate we can be. Deeper intimacy is the exact opportunity provided within the forgiveness process. Individuals, according to Schnarch (2009), are invested in presenting the best versions of themselves to the outside world, including their spouses. At times, however, when individuals present their best self, they end up hiding undesirable parts of themselves. Frequently, during times of broken trust, the most undesirable aspects of a person are made visible to their spouse. In that time, when a person is left feeling vulnerable and exposed, if they are still embraced and eventually forgiven, a new, deeper, and more intimate relationship may be possible.

Schnarch (2009) stated that frequently people avoid becoming more intimate because the feeling of exposure and vulnerability is too intense. From an attachment theory perspective,
individuals present what they perceive as being their most attractive attributes. That way, people can feel more secure in their partner’s attachment (Johnson, 2008). The fear may be that if too many unattractive or difficult attributes are made visible, a partner may not accept an individual as they are and attachment safety could be jeopardized.

When individuals allow more of themselves to be known by their spouse, it creates an opportunity for change. Change in the relationship appears to be an important aspect in the success of a long-term forgiveness process. Discontinuing the process of forgiveness after first order change has been accomplished, leaves the relationship vulnerable to subsequent difficulties (McNulty, 2008, 2010).

The challenges with change and long-term forgiveness processes are that they take time. Carder and Jaenicke (2008) attempted to be clear with clients in that forgiveness may take months or years to fully accomplish. Carder and Jaenicke acknowledged that this can be daunting when clients are attempting to put the pain behind them as quickly as possible. It may be said that the role of a therapist is to help facilitate the process, to make sure it is not rushed, and to support the couple (as needed) through a complicated, and at times, painful process.
References


239-251.


