

4

Communicating Forgiveness



My sister and I had a party when we were in high school. Our parents were out of town, so we saw it as a prime opportunity. We had been planning it for a couple of weeks. Everyone knew about it. Well, over a hundred people showed up! Anyway, it turned out that a chair caught on fire, someone stole our Dustbuster (don't ask!), and some tile in the family room was broken. Needless to say, when my parents got home the %x#@ hit the fan!

Of course, my sister and I cried and told them it wasn't supposed to be that big. We told them how sorry we were and that it would never happen again. They were really mad at us (understandable), but they forgave us. They said they understood we were young and things are going to happen, but it didn't excuse what we had done. They pointed out all the repercussions that could have come along with our stupidity. Considering what we had done, it was pretty good of

them to forgive us. That was eight years ago. Now we laugh about it. We told them that we actually planned the party—our relationship is still great.

—Jen, age 25

In several ways Jen's story illustrates how forgiveness is negotiated through complex sequences of nonverbal and verbal communication. Jen and her sister cried. Then, they presented a mitigating explanation—the party simply got bigger than expected. Next, the siblings offered an apology and a promise of improved behavior. The parents displayed anger initially but also expressed understanding and offered to forgive the girls. They communicated the reasons for their anger and used the forgiveness episode as a “teachable moment.” It took years, but the sisters finally offered a full confession. The episode is now collectively reconstructed by family members and reinterpreted as a humorous incident. In fact, recollection of the parents' forgiving response seems to reinforce what the girls consider to be “a great relationship.”

For the most part, communication researchers have ignored forgiveness, even as they have developed rich programs of research on other dimensions of relationship repair and maintenance (see the comprehensive volume edited by Canary & Dainton, 2003). Early studies of relationship repair tactics barely mentioned forgiveness (Dindia & Baxter, 1987). A later study indicated that young couples described “forgiveness” as one means of recovering from a negative relational event (Emmers & Canary, 1996). More recently, Metts et al. (2006) contributed a chapter conceptualizing the nature of forgiveness in the workplace. The communication behaviors that enact forgiveness in personal relationships have been the subject of only a handful of empirical studies (Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2005). Ironically, research psychologists and clinicians have been for some time issuing calls for more research on interpersonal dimensions of forgiveness (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Worthington, 2005b). They have argued that “constructive” communication should be central in cultivation of marital forgiveness (Fincham & Beach, 2002).

Stimulating the increased interest in communication is theorizing by psychologists such as Gordon and associates (2000), who posit that forgiveness episodes proceed through several interpersonal processes. First, the emotional impact of the offense is expressed, interpreted, and managed. Second, the partners engage in sense-making, a process of determining the causes, motives, and relational implications of the

offense. Third, having progressed through the first two tasks, partners can plan a revised relational future. We use their work as a starting place for our own communicative approach.

❖ THE FORGIVENESS EPISODE: SIX COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

As we have noted elsewhere (Waldron, Kelley, & Harvey, in press), at least six communication processes are integral to the negotiation of forgiveness: (1) revealing and detecting transgressions, (2) managing emotions, (3) sense-making, (4) seeking forgiveness, (5) granting forgiveness, and (6) negotiating the relationship. Figure 4.1 depicts the six processes of forgiving communication as embedded in the *current episode*. This episode is embedded in the unfolding history of a relationship. It is a process that moves through time, shaped in part by memories of *past* communication practices. For example, communicative reactions to a partner's insult may vary depending on the past history of such transgressions. Repeated past violations may lead to a less forgiving response in the present. As well, the partners construct their communication with reference to the relational *future*. If they imagine a long-term relationship, partners may take steps now to renegotiate communication rules meant to minimize the risk of a stormy or unpleasant future together. The new arrangements will be tested and monitored during what we call the *transitional* period. As indicated in the figure, relational failures during this later period may reactivate the forgiveness episode, launching another cycle of relationship negotiation, emotion management, and so on.

The *initial episode* varies in length, from minutes to years, but it begins with a transgression and ends when forgiveness has been granted (at least tentatively). The current episode is defined by cycles of interaction that repeat until the six processes are satisfactorily completed. Furthermore, communication across all six processes is *multidimensional*. It is verbal and nonverbal, intended and unintended, individual and relational, and/or explicit and implicit. Nonverbal cues include touching, crying, or hugging. Sometimes these displays are spontaneous and unintended (unexpected tears); other times they are mindful (the use of eye contact to communicate sincerity). Forgiveness episode include verbal messages such as "I'm sorry," "You really hurt me," or "Never do that again!" Some communication practices are jointly produced through the interactions of the partners rather than "owned" by any individual. For example, the process of discovering a transgression may evolve through a series of observations ("We haven't been that close

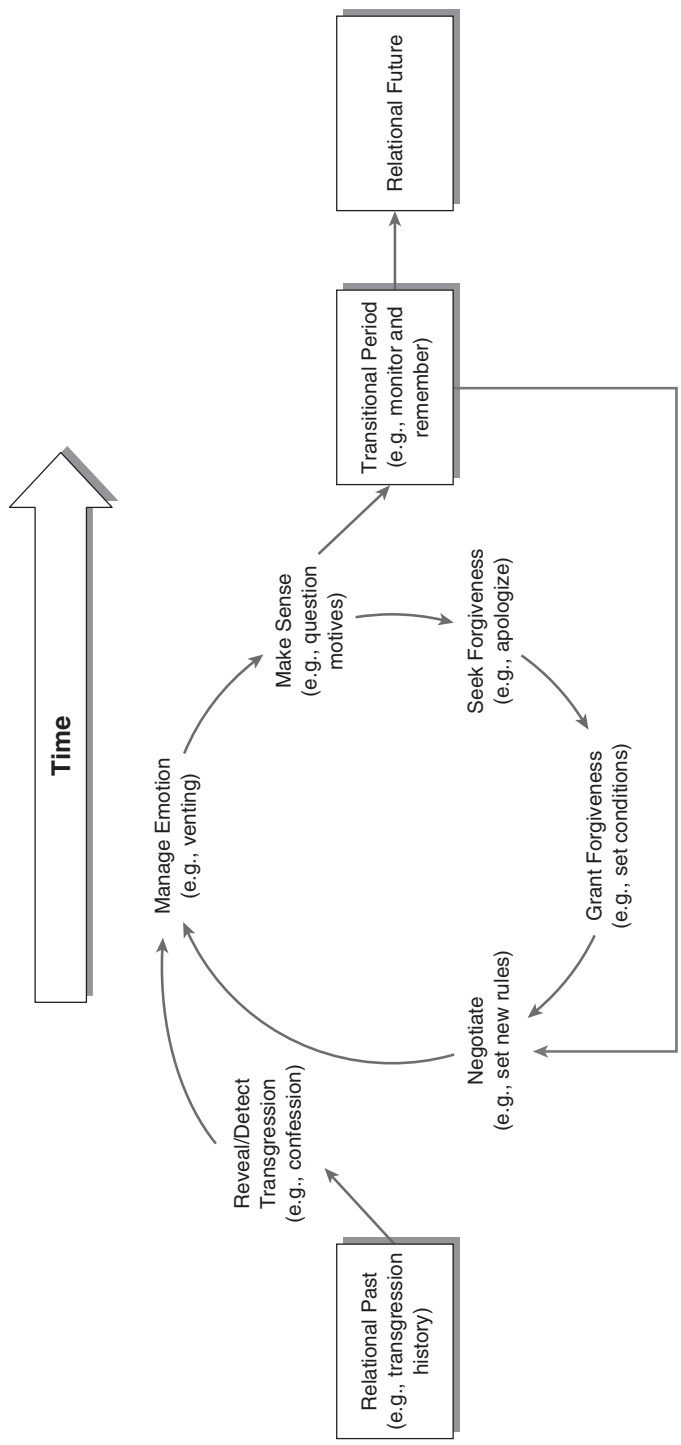


Figure 4.1 The Forgiveness Episode

lately.”), questions (“Has something been bothering you?”), and partial revelations (“I haven’t been completely up-front about something.”). Forgiving communication can be explicit. In Jen’s story, the sisters asked for and the parents granted forgiveness. Of course, some aspects of forgiveness are implicit. For example, the sisters may have displayed their “best behavior” after the incident—an indirect way of showing that they were remorseful and worthy of forgiveness. The simple act of “returning to normal” is often cited as indirect evidence of forgiveness.

Managing relational transition is our label for the period after forgiveness is granted but before the future of the relationship is determined. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, forgiveness sometimes leads to reconciliation, although that is only one of several possibilities. Whatever the ultimate outcome, transitional communication allows the relationship to remain intact as new practices are enacted, practiced, and monitored. Transitional communication may help the partnership “return to normal,” or it may be the period during which pledges of improved communication are incorporated into daily routines. In less fortunate circumstances, transitional periods are characterized by gradual relational deterioration. Partners realize that they have not “truly” forgiven, or despite forgiving, they no longer desire the relationship. On the basis of our interviews with long-term romantic couples, this transitional period can be lengthy, even unending, as partners make adjustments based on new understandings of past episodes.

For us, the communication of forgiveness is a collective process of redressing harm that also can be “invitational” (Foss & Griffin, 1995) in that it creates the conditions for dialogue and change. Forgiving communication is not just another “relationship repair tactic.” It is instead a symbolic process closely linked to issues of relational morality, justice, and meaning. It is a means by which we enact, negotiate, or reinforce the values and rules that define relationships and communities. Serious relational transgressions inevitably cause emotional pain and relational damage. However, we believe that the ultimate meanings and relational consequences of hurtful acts are shaped by the six communication processes we address in this chapter.

❖ REVEALING AND DETECTING TRANSGRESSIONS

At times, transgressions are explicit and obvious. Hurtful words and abusive behaviors speak for themselves. At other times, relational transgressions occur “off-stage,” or outside the awareness of the victimized partner. Wayward partners use communication behaviors to reveal such

transgressions. Alternatively, violations are detected through the inquiries of a suspicious partner or because the hurtful act is “forced to the surface” through abnormal patterns of interaction. Yet another possibility is that the transgression will be presented by a third party. Table 4.1 presents various methods of revealing and detecting transgressions. All of these processes can be intentional, as when guilt drives the offender to offer an explicit confession. But revelations can also be unintentional. An offhand reference or communicative blunder may inadvertently reveal that a deception has been perpetrated. In any case, research suggests that the *method of discovery* shapes a partner’s reactions to hurtful events (Afifi et al., 2001). We would argue that the communication behaviors used to reveal or detect the offense may minimize or exacerbate the relational damage it creates.

Revealing Transgressions

Transgressions are revealed by offenders through confessions, hints, third-party interventions, and communicative blunders.

Table 4.1 Presenting and Detecting Transitions

<i>Category</i>	<i>Variations/Examples</i>
Presenting Transactions	
Confessions	“honest”; guilt-driven; revenge-seeking; preemptive; corrective; written; self-protective
Hints/indirectness	Invoke third-party perspective; nonverbal signs, silence, enlist friends
Third-party reports	Have a friend reveal the transgression; “squealing”
Blunders	“letting it slip”; accidental revelations
Detecting Transgressions	
Probing questions	“So, why do you look so miserable?”
Requesting explanations	“Why did you show up late last night?”
Offering observations	“I noticed you have been avoiding me lately.”
Consulting third parties	“Do you think she is cheating on me?” “Have you noticed anything?”
Self-discovery	“I saw her with another guy.”

Confessions

Confessions are communicative acts of admission. They reveal that a transgression has been committed and typically acknowledge guilt. By itself, a confession is not an explicit request for forgiveness, although confession frequently initiates a forgiveness episode. For many, an *honest confession* is a prerequisite for forgiveness, an act that makes forgiveness a possibility, if not a reality. In the reports we have collected, an honest confession is one that strikes a tone of emotional authenticity. It is initiated by the perpetrator without coercion, and he or she makes no attempt to diffuse his or her responsibility. After many years of marriage, Jan discovered that her husband had participated in an extramarital relationship. Recovery from that unwelcome event has been difficult, but Jan refers to her husband's straightforward confession as a reason for her belief that the relationship could eventually be repaired. "He never justified himself ever when he confessed to me. It wasn't, 'Well if you hadn't been such a horrible person to live with.' He said, 'I was 100% wrong.' And I think that probably helped."

Confessions both express and reinforce a sense of relational morality. They are frequently driven by guilt or sometimes fear. Jasmine told this story:

I was in a long-time relationship in which I began to feel unhappy. I was not in love anymore. I began to hang out with my friends more and go out like my "single" friends did. I really wasn't thinking about my boyfriend and how to end it. I was scared. Instead, I met someone else and had a "moderate" romance. Nothing too drastic. When my feelings of guilt surfaced I confessed to my extracurricular love life. I really didn't expect forgiveness, nor deserve it.

As Jasmine's account indicates, it is quite possible to confess without intending to seek forgiveness. Jasmine was not sure forgiveness was "deserved" in her case. Of course, forgiveness is an act *defined* by a willingness to pardon others even when they don't deserve it. But Jasmine may have felt undeserving because her confession was motivated by a fear of being discovered or a growing sense of guilt rather than concern for her partner. *We would argue that confession and forgiveness are linked by a spirit of concern for the partner and a sense of relational goodwill.* Otherwise, confession is simply a notification of bad behavior.

Confessions take a variety of additional forms, not all of them constructive. The offender may confess as a way to rub "salt into the wound" or even seek revenge. One of our students wrote that she

98 CHAPTER 4

revealed the sexual details of an affair to her boyfriend so he would understand “what he was missing” by ignoring her so much. Confessors sometimes claim that the hurtful act was performed for some “larger cause” more important than the immediate relational needs of the partners. For example, one of the authors was attending a high-school basketball game and overheard the following conversation between two teenage girls:

A: I really haven’t seen you too much lately.

B: No kidding! What’s up with you, girl?

A: I’ve been hanging more with Katie and her crowd. The ones that do the theater stuff, you know? I hate to tell you this, but people think you have gotten kind of mean. Like maybe you’re mad all of the time or somethin’. You’re gonna hear it anyway, but I told ‘em that too. I think you might need to treat your friends better.

Girl A admits to criticizing her friend behind her back, and she knew Girl B would “hear it anyway” through the grapevine. Her admission prepares her friend for hurtful comments. In this sense, her behavior is a *preemptive* confession. This brief interchange reveals the dyadic nature of confession and its complex relationship to forgiveness. At the same time that Girl A is engaging in potential damage control, she is laying the groundwork for Girl B to see the error of her ways. Her final statement was uttered with a sense of both concern and foreboding. Indeed the whole interchange may function as a warning to Girl B to change her ways or face social ostracism from their shared social network. Confessions of the type, “You may hate me for saying this, but . . .” often serve a corrective function in addition to alerting the victim to the violation. In this case, Girl A seems to think that Girl B shares responsibility for the situation. Interestingly, Girl A’s confession prompted Girl B to confess herself. “I guess I *have been* bitchy lately,” she commented. “I said some bad things about you but I didn’t really mean it, you know? It wasn’t really me talking . . . just some bad stuff I have been goin’ through.”

Confessions, then, are a form of *self-disclosure* that can trigger a cycle of forgiving communication. In the example above, the response was a reciprocating confession. However, as Jasmine knew, disclosures also can reveal highly damaging information about the self, information that may have been carefully concealed from the partner. The effects can be devastating because the confession calls into question the assumed identities of the partners and upsets the agreements that form the very foundation of their relationship.

Transgressors sometimes choose *written confessions*. This approach allows for more detailed and thoughtful presentation of the offense and has the added advantage of avoiding immediate confrontation. Judee and Jeff had been dating for about 12 months when he left for a year's study in Europe. During that time, she "hooked up" one night with one of Jeff's former roommates. Judee reported that the encounter was "nothing really sexual" but she felt Jeff needed to know, partly because his friends had observed the situation and were likely to tell him. She chose to write him a letter because she wanted to "get all of the details out." Judee was afraid he would "blow up" and she would "just cry" if they talked on the phone. A written message might prompt a more measured response from Jeff. As was the case with Judee and Jeff, written confessions are often followed by extended discussion of the relational infraction. They are a short-term strategy for managing the emotional fallout and relational uncertainty that stems from a transgression.

Hints and indirectness

In the conversation reported above, a hint was used to start the process of confessing. Girl A, who has been avoiding B after talking behind her back, merely notes, "I haven't seen you too much lately." An alternative would be to comment more directly on the transgression: "You may have heard that I said you were mean." This direct approach unequivocally identifies both the act and the perpetrator. Using the language of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978), hinting and other indirect forms of speech are responsive to the face concerns of conversational partners. Indirect speech has the double advantage of preserving the autonomy of the offended partner while allowing the parties to minimize identity damage. By hinting ("You may have noticed I have been withdrawn lately.") the offender creates an opportunity for the partner to pursue the subject or avoid it. If the decision is to pursue ("I have noticed that. Is something wrong?"), presentation of the transgression is easier ("OK. Well, I thought you might want to know. I wasn't completely honest with you the other day when I told you..."). Politeness theory implies that offended partners should prefer autonomy-enhancing confessions because it allows them more control of their self-presentation. The response to a transgression may be more controlled, less emotional, and less embarrassing if the aggrieved partner "sees it coming" and chooses when and how to hear about it.

Indirect confessions manage hurt or embarrassment. Wagoner and Waldron (1999) examined the communication strategies used by supervisors at United Parcel Service to deliver bad news, including confessions of mistakes and misdeeds. In some cases, the supervisor hinted at

problems as a way to “test the waters.” The employee’s initial reactions were observed, and the supervisor made adjustments in the presentation to soften the blow, minimize self-blame, or make the nature of the offense more explicit. By using indirectness initially, the speaker preserves the option of delaying the confession (“Let’s talk about this at our next meeting”) or denying its importance (“It’s not a big deal”). Indirect approaches may identify the problem while (at least temporarily) leaving the source of the problem open for negotiation. One indirect strategy is to invoke the perspective of third parties, as in the following exchange between married parents:

Father: The kids say I have been kind of cranky lately.

Mother: Oh, the *kids* say that? I am wondering what you think.

Father: Well, I guess they are right. I have been pretty short-tempered and I know you have taken the brunt of it.

Mother: I would have to agree with your analysis.

Confessions can also be initiated indirectly through patterns of nonverbal behavior. Guilty partners may use periods of silence, superficial talk, or facial expressions to elicit inquiries like “What’s wrong?” These inquiries create the conversational conditions that spawn confessions. Finally, indirect confessions are sometimes made through third parties, as when a friend is enlisted to convey the bad news. Still another variation, *self-protective confession*, is described by Risa (see textbox), a 34-year-old woman whose abusive mother admitted her transgressions after years of denial.

Risa’s Mother: A Case Study in Indirect Confession

I was raised in a rigid traditional Italian Catholic household. The men ruled. I have an older sister and younger brother. I was labeled the black sheep and adopted the role of punching bag early on in my life. My mother, frustrated by her low power, hit me often out of sheer frustration, beginning when I was just a toddler. My grandmother threatened to tell her son (my father) of this abuse, but never did. The hair pulling, slapping, shoving, lasted until we moved across the country. My grandmother was 3,000 miles away. My mom came after me one afternoon. I held my ground and forcefully told her if she ever hit me again, I’d hit her back. I don’t remember any physical abuse after that.

My mother never asked for forgiveness [back then] because she denied ever abusing me. It wasn’t called abuse! Just crappy parenting, I guess.

I have always stayed close to my parents. God only knows why. One morning a few years ago, out of the blue my mother turned white as a ghost after attending her ritualistic church service. She said "Oh my God! I never confessed to the priest how I treated you as a child!"

Several times in the past few years she has told me in the presence of mutual friends that she feared I would "get even" for the abuse when she is old and frail! I feel physically ill when she says that to me in the presence of others.

I forgave my mother years ago, realizing she was ill-equipped to be a good parent. She protected us from other evils of the world, child molestation, etc. I believe she did the best she could. She was a frustrated lady and still is.

Risa's mother failed to confess directly to her daughter. Instead she disguised her confession with indirection ("I never confessed to the priest . . .") and expressed a fear of retaliation in the "presence of mutual friends." She may have feared retaliation, but more likely she chose indirect confession because she feared rejection or felt shame over her past behavior.

Third-party reports

Transgressions can be devastating when they are revealed by a third party rather than the offending partner. Afifi and colleagues (2001) studied how reactions to infidelity varied as a function of discovery method, arguing that discovery through a third party should be more face-threatening than being told directly. This claim may extend to other kinds of offenses as well. Third-party reports magnify the hurt because the transgression most assuredly has an audience. Public embarrassment is added to the other negative emotions the victim experiences. As we noted in Chapter 2, the partner's failure to confess the offense calls into question relational assumptions of trust and openness. These themes were revealed in a story told by Evan, who lied to his girlfriend Shana:

The lie was about another girl named Hayley, an ex-girlfriend of mine. One night out of the blue she called me at my home, about a wedding that a mutual friend would soon be having. Even though Hayley called for the first time in two years and we were barely friends, I knew that just my speaking to her would make Shana jealous. A few days later she asked if I had spoken with Hayley. I felt no need to hurt Shana by telling her of Hayley's brief call. She soon found out from the bride-to-be that Hayley was coming to the wedding and had learned the wedding date from

me! Shana confronted me with this and I then told the truth. Shana was very hurt. After this incident, I think she has a harder time trusting me.

Blunders

The communicative work required to manage a relationship is increased when a partner attempts to hide a transgression. In some cases, the offense is revealed by mistake or oversight. Elliot's girlfriend, who eventually became his wife, unintentionally revealed that she was "somewhat seeing" another guy. It took some time for the couple to recover, because Elliot had to forgive not only the secret dating, but also the fact that she had only revealed it to him by mistake:

My wife and I, before we were married, were seeing each other. It was not a serious relationship, but it was developing into one. I found out, by catching her in a lie, that she was also somewhat seeing another guy. I was mad and did not talk to her for six months. Then, one day she called me and asked me to meet her for lunch. She apologized, and told me the other relationship was nothing and she was waiting for the right time to call me. Our relationship is great now, but I do occasionally bring it up to tease her.

Detecting Transgressions

Probing questions

When offenders decline to freely confess transgressions, they may be detected through the communicative efforts of their partners. Suspicious partners may prompt confessions by asking probing questions. Cal was the manager of a retail store when a blunder left him in a difficult spot with his boss:

One morning I was in my store getting ready to open. I was so engulfed in work that I lost track of time. The store opened at 10 a.m. and at about 10:15 the phone rang and it was my District Manager. She asked me why my store wasn't open. In a panic I lied and said it was. But she knew it wasn't because she was at a pay phone across the hall from my store! I was mortified and she was extremely upset.

In this example, Cal's manager questioned him about something about which she already knew the truth. In this way, she allowed him

the opportunity to confess. She may have been testing his fidelity and trustworthiness as well. Baxter and Wilmot (1984) described how individuals create "secret tests" in personal relationships by creating situations where the partner has the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the union. Evidently the manager in this situation was doing something similar. When Cal panicked and lied, he created a double transgression. Needless to say, this behavior put Cal in a difficult situation, one requiring what might be called "industrial strength" forgiveness.

Requesting an explanation is another means of eliciting a confession. In another forgiveness story, Allen admitted feeling guilty because he failed to meet a friend as scheduled for an evening at the races. Allen describes how he was "called on it . . . That evening, when he [Allen's friend] got home from the races, he called and wanted an explanation. He was quite upset. I explained to him what had happened." In this way, explanation is a dyadic, interactive communication practice. Allen confessed his misbehavior because his friend prompted him to do so.

Offering observations

Another detection strategy is to offer relational observations, particularly when the partner's behavior varies from baseline expectations. In the "ex-girlfriend" scenario reported earlier in this section, Shana might have observed to Evan, "I notice you have been spending a lot of time talking with Hayley." Observations of this type might prompt a confession. Or Shana may have *consulted third parties*, by asking a friend something like, "Have you noticed Evan spending a lot of time with Hayley?" All of these approaches are clearly communicative, in that discourse is constructed with the purpose of discovering a transgression. However, transgressions are sometime discovered through simple observation and unmediated firsthand experience. This kind of *self-discovery* can be shocking, as in the case of a young woman who observed her father's relational betrayal:

I had to forgive one of the most significant people in my life. It was my father. I had overheard a conversation on the phone with a woman who was not my mother. It was obvious it was an affair. I had walked into the kitchen and had tears built up in my eyes. He knew I was upset and hung up the phone immediately. I loved my dad but all I thought about was my mother. He kind of broke down and explained what was going on and why this woman was of significance. I pretty much knew my parents didn't have a

traditional healthy marriage. I just couldn't stomach the idea of someone else.

❖ MANAGING EMOTIONS

Only truly hurtful transgressions call for forgiveness. With the hurt comes emotion. In fact, an early and integral part of most forgiveness episodes is the expression of emotion, often in raw form. However, the processes of eliciting, fabricating, masking, listening to, acknowledging, affirming, and deflecting emotions can be equally important in relationships (see Planalp, 1999 for an extended discussion). For many theorists (e.g., McCullough et al., 2000), the lessening of negative emotions toward the offender is a defining feature of forgiveness. Feelings of shock, anger, humiliation, and indignation are often expressed upon the discovery of a transgression. Guilt, regret, grief, and bitterness may be experienced as the episode progresses. For other writers, forgiveness involves more than the simple reduction of negative emotion; they consider positive feelings toward the offender to be the best indicator (e.g., Enright & Coyle, 1998; North, 1987). Positive affective states might include compassion, mercy, or love. Along these lines, Metts (1994) suggested that acknowledging and apologizing for relational hurt can have an emotionally transformative effect, making it more likely that positive feelings of affection can be restored. If such claims are correct, forgiveness episodes should be characterized by communication that elicits, expresses, and legitimizes the emotional experiences of the parties. Of course, extreme emotion may yield avoidant, defensive, or destructive discourse.

The means by which communication is used to manage emotion in relationships have been explored by us elsewhere (Waldron, 1994, 2000). Here we will review only the most prominent themes reported in forgiveness narratives.

Emotional Venting

Communication is a means by which emotions are vented. The offended party typically experiences a profound emotional response, which must be expressed and heard by the listener if forgiveness is to be negotiated. For example, during her teen years, Shalomar developed a pattern of treating her mother disrespectfully, creating nonproductive communication episodes. As she revealed, "We yelled and screamed strongly and I ended up slamming the front door and leaving for the

night." The next day, having gotten it "off our chests," Shalomar and her mother addressed the underlying relational problem.

Venting can be positive as well. In the following example, emotional expression is a collective activity in which partners share mutual feelings of anger, fear, regret, or grief. Riley "cheated" on her boyfriend by going on a date with another man. After she confessed, she remembers "looking at him knowing how hurt he must be. I was hurt also—it was awful." They vented their painful emotions together as they tried to recover their relationship. "We both just cried over the whole thing—it was really very emotional."

Eliciting Emotion

Communication is used to elicit emotion, especially during the early stages of the forgiveness process. For example, an offended partner may want assurance that the offender feels guilty. One student wrote about her mother, "She wanted to make sure I knew it was wrong. She said I should feel guilty for embarrassing my sister in front of her boyfriend." In contrast, Harvey admired his wife of almost 50 years for taking a different approach. "She'll almost always accept part of the responsibility and that helps. She almost never guilted me." Offenders sometimes try to elicit sympathetic responses by sharing the depth of their regret or the reasons for their conduct. After her boyfriend responded coolly to her apology for an affair, one student "cried and told him I deeply missed him. I didn't want my stupidity to ruin things for us." Sometimes an increase in the intensity or seriousness of an emotional response is the goal. One of our students (Jill) described how her boyfriend said he was "sorry" for a drinking incident that upset her. She found his apology to be superficial, so she refused to accept it for several days, until he finally offered a revised, "heartfelt" version.

Emotional Cooling, Calming, and Editing

As in Jill's narrative, requesting or insisting on a "cooling off" period is a common communicative response to serious transgressions. The request may simply "buy time" so emotion can dissipate rather than be expressed in words that might be regretted later. Jill's message to her boyfriend seemed to function differently. She wanted him to ponder the seriousness of the situation and better appreciate the legitimacy of her emotional reaction. "Calming down" is another prominent theme in forgiveness narratives. Of course, the passing of time facilitates calming. But "remaining calm" is an important communicative

act in itself. Calmness, or composure, is particularly prominent in forgiveness stories told about parents or supervisors, at least in those stories with happy endings. Power differences and role expectations make it possible for bosses or parents to “blow up” at employees or children with limited relational consequences. Those who unexpectedly remain calm are described favorably. Matt (age 18) was forgiven by his very disappointed parents after being jailed briefly for underage beer drinking. “I don’t think I was shocked that they forgave me but was more shocked at their initial reaction to it all—very calm!? I felt lucky to have them as parents. Our relationship was more open after that situation.”

Emotional editing is an alternate method for managing “heat of the moment” responses to transgressions. “I wanted to scream at him for embarrassing me in front of my friends,” wrote one student, “but I just shut down and told him I didn’t appreciate what he said.” Emotional editing seemed to be the lesson learned by another couple who survived a nasty argument spurred by jealousy. “We have been doing well since the incident . . . We communicate better now because we are both able to talk about everything and know when to terminate a subject that is minor but might lead to negative emotions.”

❖ MAKING SENSE

I was in a relationship with someone who went on a vacation with some friends. I found out that he wasn’t so loyal to me on this trip. I forgave him but it wasn’t until years later after our relationship was over . . . I wanted to forgive him because we have the same circle of friends . . . and it was ridiculous to still have that incident prevent us from being friends. During our fighting period he was seeking my forgiveness, but I could not give it to him. Years later it was more of an offering by me to finally officially tell him how I felt. I told him I could somewhat understand what happened under the circumstances (he was drunk with his buddies—still no excuse). He thanked me for finally coming to terms with it and again apologized. After I forgave him we could talk with each other again. We became friends all over again and we can be civil with each other.

—Gina, age 26.

Transgressions create uncertainties in relationships. Partners need to know *why* a transgression occurred and what it means for the relationship. Gary was atypically cross with his boss one day. After he expressed his sorrow for being rude, she told him “never to do it again.”

But she also “wondered *why* I did it . . . She is concerned and she told me that I can talk to her if I have problems.” Gary’s boss needed to know if his behavior signaled disrespect for her or her role. Was he just having a bad day or maybe going through hard times outside of work? Was the transgression a harbinger of things to come or just an anomaly?

Exploring Motives and “Real Meanings”

As discussed in Chapter 2, the severity of a transgression varies with the presumed intention of the offending partner. Partners seek and offer evidence about *why* the act was committed, whether it was *intended*, and whether it is likely to repeat itself. Years later Gina can only “somewhat understand” her former boyfriend’s philandering, although she may have been convinced that it wasn’t intended to hurt her. But by initiating a new round of sense-making communication she has developed a more nuanced view of the offender and the reasons for his behavior.

In deciding if and how to forgive, a wounded partner may reevaluate the character of the offender and assess the psychological safety of the relationship. Gina chose to end her romantic relationship rather than risk another occurrence. To help in this evaluation, accounts may be requested and offered, questions asked, and assurances and promises exchanged (Kelley & Waldron, 2005). In the narratives we studied, the objective of this communication was sometimes described as discovering the “real meaning” of the transgression, as indicated in statements such as “I wanted him to know that I didn’t really *mean* to hurt him,” “I told her the other relationship *meant* nothing to me compared to what we had together,” and “when he knew I was *really* feeling sorry, he forgave me.”

Motives are often obvious in forgiveness episodes, but sometimes they must be uncovered through interaction. Kelley’s (1998) study uncovered a variety of motives for seeking forgiveness (see Table 4.2 for types and definitions). One of these was simply to promote *well-being*. The well-being was sometimes personal, to relieve feelings of guilt or let go of burdensome grudges. Other times the motive was more *altruistic*, directed at the partner’s well-being. For example, one of our students was injured in a car accident due to her friend’s driving mistake. She blamed her friend’s carelessness, and the relationship never recovered. Nevertheless, she felt motivated to help remove the burden of her friend’s guilt. “I saw her one day and gave her a hug before she said a word. I told her to forget about it.”

In Kelley’s (1998) narratives, another primary motive for both seekers and grantors of forgiveness was *relationship restoration*, a desire to

Table 4.2 Motives for Forgiveness

<i>Category</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Promote Well-Being	Wanting to release burdens; letting go of guilt or a grudge
Altruistic	"Let him off the hook"; "Help him move on"
Relationship Restoration	"Wanted to be friends again"; "get back to normal"
Love	"He forgave because he loves me"; "We love each other"
Selfish	"He did it so he could feel better"; wanted to look good
Moral Obligation	"It was right to forgive him"; religious reasons
Family Obligation	Keeping peace in the family; "Mom told me to"
Partner Communication	Apologies; expressions of regret; claims of responsibility

reclaim friendship, closeness, or trust. Gina was motivated to ease some of the awkwardness in her friendship network and restore civility to her relationship with her former boyfriend. Given these motives, she was able to recontextualize his drunken behavior and redefine its relational significance. Kelley describes this as a *reframing* process, which motivates forgiveness. In another example, Doris reframed her husband's insulting comments as just an "incident":

He realized he shouldn't have said what he said, and it made me upset, and we just start again. It was just the fact of knowing that we loved each other. It was just an incident. It had nothing to do with our overall relationship.

For Doris, the incident was minor when reconsidered in light of the loving relationship she and her husband have enjoyed for more than 30 years.

Sherry (age 22) may have preferred that her boyfriend forgive her out of *love*. Her boyfriend wanted to restore their relationship after initially deciding to break up with her, but his motives appeared mixed: "I think I was forgiven because he decided that he wants me back for

himself. He could not handle the fact that I was going out to bars." In Kelley's (1998) study, only 10% of narratives described love as the primary motivation for forgiveness. However, forgiveness is frequently motivated by *obligation*. In some cases, religious or moral obligations provide motivation. In other cases, familial obligations are the operative motive as when parents feel compelled to forgive the mistakes of their children. Family members sometimes seek forgiveness out of an obligation to "keep the peace." Louisa corrected a niece's poor manners at a family gathering, which greatly offended her brother-in-law:

I wrote my brother-in-law a letter of apology and then called him a few days later to again say I was sorry for the misunderstanding and would like to put it behind us. He said, "OK" I still don't think I did anything to make such a big deal out of, but I apologized to keep the family peace. My relationship is OK with my brother-in-law now.

Kelley (1998) reported that the most commonly cited motivation (24% of narratives) involved the forgiveness-seeking communication of the offender. Such behaviors as apologizing, expressing remorse, and taking responsibility were often cited. The next section addresses these and other forgiveness-seeking tactics.

❖ SEEKING FORGIVENESS

When we ask participants in our studies why they seek forgiveness, they often write or talk about their moral values. Having made serious relational mistakes, they seek forgiveness because they think it is the "right thing to do," given the moral codes that define their relationships. Forgiveness-seeking communication is a way of enacting this moral code, of *performing moral values*. Forgiveness-seeking can be a kind of *atonement*, a way of signaling a renewed commitment to values shared by a community, family, or relationship. It may involve some form of *reparation*, an offer to compensate those who have been harmed. Together, atonement and reparation may signal a desire to restore *harmony*. The traditional Navajo people of the American Southwest embody this search for harmony (Reid, 2000). Their faith encourages Navajos to conduct their relationships in a manner that keeps them aligned with spiritual forces that shaped their land and their culture (see textbox). When individual behaviors are inconsistent with spiritual values, individual and collective rituals are performed as a means of atonement.

In Search of Harmony

Journalist Betty Reid (2000), a member of the Navajo nation, poignantly describes the search for harmony in a personal essay about the death of her father from Parkinson's disease. She wonders if his death was in part due to her own breaking of the codes of spiritual harmony.

The wind whipped our faces as we left my father's grave on a ridge known to my family as "the place where the dirt roads go uphill." This view belonged to my late father, Willie Reed Sr., for 69 years. He herded sheep, roamed the cliffs, and prayed to the Holy People. Now it cradles his body. He died February 28, 1994. It seemed as if the dust storm erased my dad's life from Bodaway, where he grew up a shepherd, a yei-bi-chei dancer, a migrant worker, a railroad worker, and a construction worker.

Like most Navajos, I straddle two worlds, modern and traditional. I follow the Earth-based traditional faith of Hozho, a state of beauty and harmony. Yet Christianity has seeped into the daily lives of my extended Navajo family.

My father introduced me to the Holy People, their philosophy and religion. He told me my goal is to live in a state of Hozho—a concept that embodied beauty, stability, and order within my life.

Embedded in Navajo philosophy is a laundry list of "don'ts" and taboos to respect. If one adheres to them, Hozho is achieved. Among the Navajo rules are: avoid contact with dead bodies, don't stare straight into a person's eye, never drive away from a coyote that crosses your path without sprinkling corn pollen in his tracks, and never say harsh words because they have the power to kill.

With the power of two religions on my side, how could my father die?

I conjured up reasons:

Maybe I asked too much of the Christian God when I crammed for college finals and escaped with a B instead of an F. I figured the Presbyterian God understood college. How was I to explain English 101 to the Holy People?

Maybe God was punishing me for holding on to my Navajo beliefs.

Or maybe the Holy People were punishing me because I didn't cover my eyes quickly when I went to a bloody shooting scene while on the police beat for The Phoenix Gazette before my father's death. I had the radio reporter describe the scene to me while I blocked the sight with a notebook.

Or maybe it was my chosen profession. I write for newspapers and through the power of written words, have stung plenty of Navajo and non-Indian politicians.

Recriminations and remembrances filled my thoughts as my siblings and I sat at the table in my aunt's hogan and planned my dad's funeral.

After considerable acrimony about whether to practice a traditional Navajo or Christian ceremony, Betty and her family decide on a traditional burial (with some Christian prayers) to achieve harmony for her father's spirit

as well as the family. Her father was buried without a coffin on a rock ledge near his home. For Betty, the ceremony is an enactment of her commitment to her father's values, perhaps a means of atonement for her embracing a nontraditional life, a way for her family to reestablish spiritual harmony.

SOURCE: From Reid, B. The way to harmony. *The Arizona Republic*. July 5, 1998. Reprinted with permission.

Although Betty Reid obviously is not responsible for her father's death, this traumatic event forced her to reflect on strongly held values and take actions that helped her address moral tensions in herself and in her family. Forgiveness-seeking communication can be conceptualized this way, as a practice that involves self-evaluation after a transgression, atonement, and, typically, collective efforts designed to "set things right."

Forgiveness-Seeking Tactics

Kelley (1998) identified more than 20 different tactics used by romantic partners, family members, friends, and coworkers to indicate that they "needed or wanted forgiveness." The main types are presented in Table 4.3, which also presents forgiveness-granting tactics. Offering an apology was one of the more familiar approaches. Other tactics were common. For example, offending partners used humor to help the victim "get over it," ingratiated themselves to get back on the partner's "good side," and promised better behavior (e.g., "overlook this one mistake and I won't ever do it again"). Some simply requested forgiveness, whereas others offered detailed explanations for their poor behavior. Transgressors offered compensation in the form of gifts, initiated familiar rituals ("let me take you out to lunch so we can talk it over"), or simply let time pass until the hurt receded and normal interaction could resume. Nonverbal displays of emotion, such as crying and looks of shame, were also described as forms of forgiveness-seeking communication.

In categorizing these behaviors, Kelley (1998) distinguished between "direct" and "indirect" approaches. Those using the former verbally acknowledged that they had committed a wrongful act. Indirect approaches were either implicit or nonverbal. This two-category system was expanded when Kelley and Waldron (2005) used quantitative techniques to analyze statistical patterns in survey rankings of the original 20 behaviors. In that study, 187 survey respondents indicated the extent to which they had used a given behavior to seek forgiveness in a romantic relationship. However, we know that

Table 4.3 Forgiveness-Seeking and Forgiveness-Granting Behaviors
(adapted from Kelley & Waldron, 2005)

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Forgiveness-seeking strategies	
1. Explicit acknowledgement	Apology; remorse
2. Nonverbal assurance	Eye contact; hugs
3. Compensation	Gifts; repeated efforts
4. Explanation	Reasons; discuss offense
5. Humor	Joking; humoring
Forgiveness-granting strategies	
1. Explicit	"I forgive you"
2. Conditional	"I forgive you, but only if . . ."
3. Nonverbal displays	Facial expressions; touch
4. Discussion	Talking about the offense
5. Minimize	"No big deal"; "don't worry"

complex interactive behavior is not adequately captured in a survey question, and we know it is not limited to romantic pairs. So we also draw on interviews and other qualitative data to present a richer and more nuanced depiction of forgiveness-seeking communication.

Explicit acknowledgment

The most frequently cited type of behavior in the statistical analysis involved explicit acknowledgement of a wrongful act. This category includes apologies, expressions of remorse or sorrow, and direct requests for forgiveness. Some of these behaviors have received attention in the literature. For example, apologies are considered "concessions" in the research on account-making (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990). However, this cluster of behaviors involves more than an individual's decision to confess. In particular, direct requests for forgiveness illustrate the transactional nature of the process (see Fincham & Beach, 2002; Hargrave, 1994). Requests pass control of the interaction to the partner, a move that makes forgiveness a collective activity.

Expressions of regret are embedded in the expectations and interaction patterns of some long-term couples. Ben, who has been married to Sue for some 51 years, told us emphatically:

If you're sorry for something, you say you're sorry. And if you forgive someone, you say, "I forgive you." And then there's a lot of hugging and that kind of stuff. It's kind of a spontaneous thing when we realize that it's necessary.

In work settings, being sorry signals respect for more formal relational expectations and may be necessary to social survival. Gary knew he needed to say he was "really sorry" after being rude to his boss, who, fortunately, was very understanding:

A few months ago, I was on the phone with my boss. At the end of the conversation I was snotty and said, "Thanks for your help," and hung up on her. Of course I realized that I had just put my job in jeopardy. After I got over that, I began to feel guilty because she didn't deserve that. She is also a nice person and my acquaintance—not just a boss. I was mad at myself for possibly upsetting her. I saw her the next day. I approached her and said, "I'm really sorry about being snotty and hanging up on you."

Apology is the most familiar form of explicit acknowledgement and an important element of many forgiveness narratives. Apology requires the offender to put aside pride and admit to wrongful behavior, as in this story told by Joanie, a 37-year-old former New Yorker:

I had agreed to a second date with a gentleman I'd met at a friend's wedding. I got a call that took me out-of-state for three days. Since I didn't have his phone number and didn't think to call my friend (whose wedding we met at), I stood him up. When I returned, he'd left a frustrated note for me which included his phone number. Since I had so little invested in the relationship, I wasn't going to call and explain (pride!). A friend from work convinced me to at least give it a try. I called him at work, explained what happened and apologized for standing him up. He was very kind, made another date with me and never mentioned the incident again. I was thankful he forgave me. It was a part of the foundation our relationship was built on. We've been happily married for eight years.

Joanie's story reveals that requesting forgiveness can be a collective activity, a communicative act emerging from the larger social network. After all, it was a friend who prompted Joanie to "give it a try." It also illustrates that apologizing and other forms of explicit acknowledgment are a kind of relational *truth-telling*. Forgiveness-seeking communication

often involves “coming clean” with an unequivocal display of honesty. Her honesty and her husband’s acceptance of it may be the reason this forgiveness episode is part of the “foundation” that underlies an eight-year marriage. In a different context, a teenager whose outraged parents eventually forgave him for underage drinking emphasized truth telling: “We talked about it and the *only* way I was forgiven was because I told them the truth about what happened. I obviously wanted forgiveness.”

Nonverbal assurance includes behaviors such as eye contact and giving hugs. It was second in frequency of use in the Kelley and Waldron (2005) study. In interviews, people told us they could tell by “the look in his eyes” or “the way she hugged me” that an offender was sorry (and thus deserving of forgiveness). Behaviors such as eye contact and hugs can suggest that the offender is “truly” repentant or honestly committed to making amends. Nonverbal displays of emotion are often taken as signs of repentance. Lauren damaged her father’s car after using it without permission. “I cried because I felt so awfully bad about the whole situation,” she wrote. Her father responded with a hug, telling Lauren that bumpers could be replaced but she could not.

As a group, these nonverbal behaviors may convey emotional authenticity. As linguists E. D. Scobie and G. E. Scobie (1998) have observed, cultural norms dictate that forgiveness be offered only after sincere expressions of apology and remorse. When combined with explicit acknowledgment, nonverbal assurances likely convey an honest concern for the partner’s well-being. Assurances may soothe emotional distress by communicating empathy, increasing confidence in the character of the offender, and creating the impression that the transgression is unlikely to be repeated. They may bring a particularly welcome sense of clarity given that transgressions create relational uncertainty (Emmers & Canary, 1996). In fact, the communication of assurance is one communication tool used by romantics and friends to maintain relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992).

Explanation

Explanation was the third most common approach used by forgiveness seekers in Kelley and Waldron’s (2005) study. The role of communication in explaining social failures has long been studied by communication researchers (e.g., Cody & McLaughlin, 1990). In this “account-making” literature, excuses are often identified as a form of explanation. Excuses deny responsibility, so we exclude them from our discussion of forgiveness-seeking, which starts with the assumption that a wrong has been committed and admitted. However, other forms

of explanation are cited frequently in forgiveness narratives. Offenders invite the partner to "sit down and talk about it" or "discuss the matter" or "hear my side of the story." They detail the circumstances, motives, or reasons surrounding the infraction. This kind of information may be crucial in deciding whether forgiveness is warranted and whether the relationship can be mended (Gordon et al., 2000). Explanation may help the offender save face but it also helps the wounded partner interpret the transgression and assess its seriousness.

Explanatory communication is often interactive, not just one partner offering an account. In fact, one of the items included on Kelley and Waldron's (2005) survey is "we discussed the matter." This kind of communication can be "invitational" in nature, creating the conditions for dialogue and opening up possibilities for new understandings of the situation and the partners (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Even when partners disagree about key issues, forgiveness negotiations may be mutual efforts to elicit constructive argument (see Mallin & Anderson, 2000, on eliciting constructive debate). It may be that explanation and discussion are preliminary moves in forgiveness negotiations. The information generated may help partners decide whether explicit requests for forgiveness are called for and likely to be accepted.

Listening behavior may be important in this process. Diane was shocked when Jeremy described one of her ideas as "stupid" in front of friends over dinner. She stormed out of the restaurant, feeling hurt and angry. When Jeremy initially said he was "sorry," she didn't accept his apology, feeling he didn't truly understand why she was outraged. But as she explained her reactions, "He waited long enough and was caring and listening to what I had to say. I could see he really was sorry."

Compensation

The forgiveness-seeking tactics we labeled "compensation" involve investment of resources by the offender or a willingness to abide by the partner's wishes in exchange for forgiveness. Communication scholars have used equity theory to explain how relationships are preserved (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Compensatory behaviors may function to restore equity. Recognizing that they have damaged the partner and the relationship, offenders may tender gifts, such as flowers, or offer to take the partner out for lunch. After initiating a terrible argument with her sister, Jana offered to "take her out for ice cream" to "make up for" her rudeness. Other offenders describe being "extra nice" or on their "best behavior" as forgiveness-seeking cues. Repeated apologies are offered. In each of these cases, the forgiveness seeker invests "extra" communicative effort.

In fact, a certain amount of groveling may be required of the offender as compensation for pain or embarrassment. In interviews and narratives, offenders frequently describe "*begging for forgiveness*." Begging implies that the offender is unworthy of forgiveness. It elevates the status of the wounded partner. The sacrifice of one's dignity may be symbolic compensation for having degraded the partner and the relationship. In this way, offenders grant their partners considerable autonomy in determining their fate.

Compensation is sometimes part of an if/then bargain ("If you forgive me, then I will never do it again."). Often this involves a promise of improved behavior in the future as compensation for the bad behavior of the past. After her parents expressed worry and disappointment when she returned later than expected from a date, Claire "promised to always remember to call home." Chad was forgiven for a workplace transgression only after "some serious talking and promise making on my part." Audra's boyfriend forgave her for flirting with another boy, "but it took me saying that I would never do this to him again. I would not talk to that guy again." In the ratings reported by Kelley and Waldron (2005), compensation was used relatively infrequently. It also appeared to be less successful in promoting positive relational outcomes.

Humor

Forgiveness-seekers sometimes try to lighten the mood of the wounded partner, hoping that a new emotional perspective will make them more forgiving. This approach is used infrequently, probably because forgiveness episodes are generally so serious (Kelley & Waldron, 2005). Humor is not expected of forgiveness seekers, so its use may surprise the receiver and prompt a redefinition of the situation. Self-deprecating humor in particular may signal that the offender is now willing to take responsibility. Beth used a combination of humor and compensation as she sought forgiveness from her long-time friend and roommate for forgetting a birthday:

After not talking for two days, I came home from work one day with a funny belated birthday card for her and a gift certificate to her favorite restaurant. We were both relieved because we knew that our friendship would go back to the way it was. We went to dinner and in a joking manner, I expressed to her how sorry I was and how selfish I was being since I was so wrapped up in my own life. She realized that was my way of expressing how sorry I was.

In Beth's case, the humorous card was met with "relief." It nudged the pair out of a stalemate and back to familiar patterns of friendship. Beth expressed regret in a joking manner by mocking her own selfishness. Although it worked for Beth, humor can also have less positive relationship outcomes (Kelley & Waldron, 2005). Inappropriate humor conveys a lack of appreciation for the pain experienced by the partner. It can be perceived as an attempt to divert attention away from the transgression. Forgiveness-seekers using humor may be sharply reminded that "this is no joking matter" or their behavior is "not funny."

❖ GRANTING FORGIVENESS

"Like a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders"

This situation is something I'm not very proud of but it fits this study to a T. As a senior in high school I was Mr. Jock and pretty popular at school. I was dating a sweetheart of a girl and she was a junior on the cheer squad. Well, prom rolled around and you know how everyone expects everyone to get "lucky" that night. Without going into too much graphic detail, we did **not** have sex that night. But, me being the immature guy I was, I asked her to *tell* people we had sex if she was asked about it. We ended up breaking up that summer and she was devastated. Every time I thought about her I would think about the horrible situation I put her in just because I was worried about my reputation. This went on for three years. I then ran into her at a high-school basketball game. I took that opportunity to get her new phone number and told her I wanted to talk to her about some things. After I got enough nerve, I called her about a week later and apologized through tears and asked her if she could ever forgive me. She did and after that was over, had a great 2 hour conversation with each other. I am so glad that I did that, it was like a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders.

—Nathan, age 23

Nathan's description illustrates the powerful effects that the act of granting forgiveness can have on both individuals and relationships. His burden is lifted because of his former girlfriend's graceful response. The story also illustrates that forgiveness-granting is ultimately a transactional process, one that requires multiple parties. It took Nathan several years to apologize, but by taking advantage of the opportunity, he made it possible for his former girlfriend to express her forgiveness verbally.

Forgiveness-Granting Tactics

In a survey-based study, we analyzed 20 different behaviors romantic partners use to grant forgiveness (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). The behavioral items were culled from the forgiveness narratives collected by Kelley (1998). We used factor analysis techniques to identify the predominant categories of behavior, ultimately settling on five distinct approaches (see Table 4.3). The quotes presented below are largely drawn from data partially reported by Waldron and Kelley (2005) in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Nonverbal display

This category included nonverbal actions that were interpreted to be forgiving, such as embraces or certain facial expressions. One respondent described a nonverbal approach: "I forgave the other person not necessarily in words but in actions. I did not harbor ill will. I tried to show acceptance and love in my interactions with her." Another forgiver used nonverbal signs of affection rather than words: "I never said 'I forgive you.' I let him know by starting to act affectionate and loving toward him again." Other responses included, "I gave her a hug and comforted her," and, "I didn't act mad anymore. I tried to speak with normalcy."

A young woman wrote this on one of our surveys:

I was dating someone for 2 years and I cheated on him. He forgave me for this. I remember looking at him, knowing how hurt he must be. I was hurt also. It was awful. He took a while to forgive me and understand it all. When you know someone so well, a certain look in the eyes can tell it all. I knew he forgave me when he cracked a smile.

Conditional

Forgiveness is granted conditionally when it is linked to a change in the offender's behavior. One respondent told us, "I said, 'Don't let it happen again and you're forgiven.'" Another participant used the classic conditional term *if*: "I forgave him with conditions of our relationship. I said to him, 'I'll forgive you if you promise to do things differently—to trust me and believe what I say.'" Conditional forgiveness is common, particularly when partners have been badly hurt and want protection. By meeting conditions, offending partners show they are worthy of being trusted again. However, Waldron and Kelley (2005)

found that conditional forgiveness is often related to eventual relationship deterioration. The “strings attached” approach can lead to feelings of manipulation, as Julie reported:

I once made a left hand turn in front of an oncoming motorcycle. The guy rolled over the front of my car and hit the curb. It was my fault. This guy forgave me while he lay stitched up in a hospital bed. At first I was amazed someone could be so forgiving! I thought this guy must be one in a million. He kept worrying about my feelings and saying things like, “Please don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” Before he left the hospital he started saying things like, “I’ll forgive you if you’ll go to dinner with me.” At that point I wondered if he really wanted to use me instead of forgive me. If he had not hit on me, the relationship would have gotten stronger.

Minimizing

Minimizers communicate forgiveness by redefining the seriousness of the offense. In general, minimization approaches appear to deny the feelings and rights of the wounded party. Sample messages included “I just said that the offense was no big deal and blew it off,” “I made them understand that it was not so important to make a fuss about,” and “I said she need not worry.” Waldron and Kelley (2005) noted that this approach was sometimes used even when wounded partners reported significant levels of relational damage and personal hurt. They speculated that minimization was used to avoid confrontation or bury negative emotion, so the relationship could be maintained. In some instances, the perceived magnitude of the offense had been diminished through explanation and discussion.

Discussion

Discussion strategies are similar to the explanatory approach to forgiveness-seeking. The forgiver indicates an openness to dialogue (“We talked it out. We looked at both sides.”). Discussion-based approaches are oriented to increase understanding of both partners and the reasons for the problems. A woman responded this way to a boyfriend who was unfaithful: “I told him I understood why he felt he might have to prove to himself that he was attractive to another woman and that I felt that we could move past this if we understood *why* it had happened.” Another purpose is to help the offender understand the effects of the transgression. “We talked about what happened.

I let him know how disappointed I was in him and how hurt I felt. He asked me to forgive him." Forgiveness episodes often prompt the partners to reflect on and negotiate the status of their relationship. "We simply discussed the issues and nature of our relationship." Problem-solving is another theme. "She called me and we talked about the problem and resolved it."

Harold and Sophie have been using discussion-based approaches for more than 40 years:

Sophie: I will take him [and say], "I need to talk to you, now when can we sit down and discuss this?" And we make a little appointment because he may be going somewhere and need to go, and so we'll have this discussion. But we don't raise our voices.

Harold: One thing that helps us significantly, I think, is when she has something that involves me, she is considerate enough to me to say that. You know, "Let's sit down and talk about this," or she'll say, "Sometime today we need to sit down and talk."

Explicit

Included among the 20 behavioral responses Waldron and Kelley (2005) analyzed was an item describing explicit forgiveness: "I told them I forgave them." The item exhibited interesting statistical properties in that it highly correlated with both the nonverbal display and discussion categories but not with items describing conditional and minimizing communication. The utterance "I forgive you" and its close variations may have considerable force in relationships (Scobie & Scobie, 1998). It is the kind of speech act that conveys an unconditional pardon. As suggested above, it was often used in conjunction with other approaches. One participant wrote, "I told him, 'OK. I forgive you.' Then I gave him a big hug and a kiss."

Explicit forgiveness communicates a sense of finality. It may be the strongest way to indicate that things are "OK" and the offense is put firmly in the past. Because it is generically recognized as a way of pardoning others, we think participants sometimes reported explicit utterances such as "I forgive you" when they could not remember the verbal and nonverbal details of their forgiveness-granting communication. Other times, they may have refrained from using the words "I forgive you" in order to save face for their partner.

Alternative Approaches

In many (but not all) of the examples presented thus far, we have emphasized the communication behaviors of individuals. However, because forgiveness is sometimes an ongoing negotiation embedded in a complex social system, we know it is simplistic to describe only the discrete "tactics" of individuals. In fact, our interviews have revealed several approaches that are better thought of as collective and interactive.

Requesting intervention

Third parties can be instrumental in prompting forgiveness. In some cases, third parties intervene of their own volition. Other times their help is requested. Lindy wrote that she had been in a protracted conflict with her sister, who was bitter over Lindy's comments about a boyfriend:

My sister never forgave me, until a year later. I finally had my mom intervene and she gave a very dramatic speech in which we both cried our eyes away and my sister forgave me. Ever since then, we've been on good terms.

Dahlia's husband was abusive when he drank. She forgave him only when he took her threat seriously and sought outside help for his alcohol problem:

I said, "I can listen to you from today until tomorrow and it's not going to change anything. And you have to get some help," and he was resistant. Finally, I said, "Either you get some help or I'm going to, you know, get out of here." His decision to seek help set in motion a process that resulted in forgiveness and ultimately saved the marriage.

Returning to normal

Forgiveness is sometimes implied, but not expressed. In forgiveness narratives, this is described with sentences such as, "He never said it, but I just knew he had forgiven me." More often, partners recognize their relationship as "returning to normal." In Tessa's household, forgiveness is rarely requested explicitly. Instead, you know you are forgiven when the silent treatment ends. She wrote:

I got into a huge fight with my father and didn't talk to him for about 2 weeks. I said some nasty things to him . . . I would see

both of my parents but only talk and acknowledge my mother. My father didn't notice me for those entire 2 weeks. It was the silent treatment. Anyways, he wanted me to apologize for what I said. I should have, because what I said was wrong . . . I guess he got sick of the silent treatment and he walked over and picked me up and gave me a big hug. Told me I was a super kid. No other words were exchanged. I didn't even hug him back because he basically just picked me up in a fun way. Our relationship was back to normal within minutes after the hug.

This happens in our family about every 6 months and always resolves the same way (fight, silent treatment, hug, normal).

Relational rituals

A variation on the *return to normal* theme is the resumption of relational rituals. Forgiveness is sought or granted when one of the partners suggests that a familiar pattern be resumed. Mindy and her sister went out for ice cream, a familiar ritual for the sisters, and a sign that they were friends again. She "made the suggestion to go out for ice-cream. After I forgave her, our relationship went back to normal. We are friends again. We laugh, giggle, and joke with each other (until the next crisis)."

Habits of forgiveness

In our interviews with long-term couples, it appeared that forgiving communication could become a habit fundamentally embedded in their patterns of interaction. Phyllis and Charlie have been married 51 years. Phyllis assumes that forgiveness will be needed and granted on a regular basis if two people are to live together for a very long time. It is a habit that keeps her marriage together, like holding hands in church:

Sometimes it happens where you know, you might wake up in the morning, you're not feeling well, or whatever. You might say something cross and you don't mean to. And yet we always make it a point to apologize, ask for forgiveness. And, uh, we go on from there. We don't let that go without being forgiving of one another. And we also, I guess, we touch a lot. Always have. We hold hands a lot when we walk. We hold hands when we're in church.

Interaction sequences

It is obvious from many of our examples that forgiving communication occurs as coordinated sequences and combinations of behavior,

not single actions. Often a wounded partner chooses not to say “that’s ok” until the offender apologizes. We noted that explicit acknowledgments and nonverbal assurances often occur together to take responsibility for a wrongful act and to reduce uncertainty about the relational future. Reciprocity may be particularly powerful in creating the conditions for mutual forgiveness. Jack, married more than 30 years to Amanda, is the type of person who for various reasons (the way he was raised, stereotypes about masculinity, vulnerability) finds it difficult to say “I’m sorry” first. In this marriage, his wife always starts the forgiveness sequences:

She was always quicker to come back and say, “I’m sorry,” even though she was right. Then when she did, I’d say, “No, I’m sorry.” It was easier for me to say that once she had come back and done it. Otherwise I wouldn’t. I was stubborn or something. I just wouldn’t give in.

Using time

A factor not fully acknowledged thus far is the communicative use of *time* (but see McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Worthington et al., 2000). By allowing time to pass, communicators let emotions build, wounds fester, or hurt diminish. Remaining silent for long periods of time can communicate how seriously one takes an offense or how well one is listening. The passing of time can increase the burden of guilt and thus the motivation to seek forgiveness. In the next section, we address the role of time more explicitly by contemplating the communication that defines the period after forgiveness is initially granted. We assume that this can be a time of relationship redefinition. The forgiveness negotiation continues as partners reconcile or choose not to, experience a stronger relationship or a weaker one, and resume old communication patterns or experiment with new ones.

❖ RELATIONSHIP NEGOTIATION AND TRANSITION

We consider the *negotiation* and *transitional* elements in Figure 4.1 together, because they involve similar communicative practices. Forgiveness may prompt partners to negotiate new rules and values (or they may simply recommit to existing ones). During the transition period, new rules are “pilot tested” as the partners determine what their future holds. Will they fully reconcile? Deintensify their bond? Terminate the

relationship? As the figure suggests, monitoring of new practices and/or recollections of the painful episode may prompt the partners to restart the forgiveness cycle. In the forgiveness narratives we have collected, several communication practices are common in the “aftermath” of the initial episode. These are ongoing processes that serve as a “bridge” from the tumultuous period that defines the early stages of forgiveness to a more stable time in the relational future.

Rescripting Relational Rules

During the negotiation and transitional period, partners often propose and practice new relational agreements. Communication scholar Sandra Metts (1994) explained that the response to relational transgressions is often a relegislation or reaffirmation of relational rules. Similarly, Hargrave (1994) argued that partners may renegotiate the “relationship covenant,” or set of values and agreements that bind partners (e.g., sexual fidelity). As time passes, compliance may increase feelings of stability and psychological safety. During the transitional period, rule compliance may gradually restore trust (Kelley & Waldron, 2005). Meta-communicative behavior, the messages partners use to comment on their own patterns of communication, may be important as they experiment with and evaluate new behavior patterns (Dindia & Baxter, 1987).

Editing and Monitoring

Partners may be particularly careful to edit and monitor their behavior during the transitional period. They may go out of their way to avoid repeating past mistakes so they don’t create new problems in a relationship that may be vulnerable. They may be hyperconsiderate and attentive. Kirsten explained that she now thinks of her boyfriend’s feelings before she does anything “major”:

I went to Hawaii 2 years ago without calling my boyfriend the entire time I was there. I came home with a real bad attitude, thinking I could do better than him. It hit me about a week later how wrong I was to treat him that way. I apologized to him over and over. I was very grateful that he forgave me. I think back to it all the time. I was a jerk. Very selfish. I have changed a lot since then. I think of him and his feelings before I do anything major. We are closer now and treat each other with more respect.

Second Courtships

Romantic couples sometimes describe a process of “starting over again.” After a serious transgression, especially infidelity, the partner may need to be “won back.” The unfaithful partner may need to provide evidence that he or she “deserves” the relationship. This may involve a kind of second courtship. In one of our interviews, Roland and Shelley, a couple married for four decades, described how a combination of monitoring and renewed courtship allowed her to trust him again:

Shelley: And Roland, do you remember those ways that you know, you tried to win me back, to establish trust again? For a while I did [distrust him], you know. Just questioning everything he did. You know, “Why would I believe you *now*?”

Roland: I would make sure she knew where I was at. I’d call her. I would do things for her. I think we started courting again, in a sense, you know.

Shelley: Uh huh. He started courting me again, in a way.

Roland: And I’d do special things for her. I’d bring her flowers and stuff like that.

Collective Remembering

Parties to a forgiveness episode may jointly recollect it. Shelley’s question to Roland prompted him to reconstruct an important part of their past. Collective remembering keeps mistakes from the past salient in the present, reminding us of “lessons learned.” Memories of traumatic or hurtful experiences help couples keep current challenges in perspective. “We have survived worse,” older couples tell us about their current difficulties. Family or friendship bonds may be strengthened through recollection of difficult times that were weathered “together.” Episodes that were once painful may be recalled with humor. (Recall the example of teenage sisters who threw a party while their parents were out of town, and now recall their parents’ reaction as evidence of a great relationship.)

Mutual Planning

Forgiveness researchers have identified planning (or replanning) the relational future as an essential component of relationship recovery

(Gordon et al., 2000). This kind of communication is evidenced when partners discuss goals, plan trips, or otherwise imagine a future together. As Kelley (1998) has argued, forgiveness provides *hope* to couples who have experienced distress. Mutual planning may be a way to maintain hope while the parties rebuild the foundations of their relationship. From a dialectical perspective, mutual planning is way of creating a spirit of interdependence and connectedness after a period of separateness or emotional distance.

❖ CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this chapter, we claimed that communication plays an important role in nearly every step of the forgiveness process. The process itself was described as episodic but nested within the longer history of a given relationship. We argued that the negotiation of forgiveness is linked to individual, relational, and community values. Forgiving communication is constructed by individuals, but it is also enacted in patterns of interaction and even stimulated by third parties. Forgiving communication is a complex blend of nonverbal and verbal behavior, some of it intentional and some not. In the messages they use and the meanings they create, partners negotiate forgiveness at a given point in time. However, communication processes continue to be important as the relationship evolves and the partners reinterpret the episode.

We have generally avoided prescriptions. We have not discussed “competent” communication or linked various approaches with relationship success. After all, the social science literature on our topic is relatively young, communication is complex, and each relationship is unique. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that forgiving communication can have beneficial effects on relationships and individuals. Some approaches do appear to “work” better than others, and it is possible to articulate some of the “steps” involved in achieving forgiveness in relationships. Therefore, Chapter 5 is designed to provide readers with practical guidance based on the research that has accumulated thus far.