Activity Overview

Title: Reach for Forgiveness: Perspective Building Activities for Forgiveness and Compassion

Target Virtue: Love (Forgiveness, Mercy, Compassion)

Target Courses or Activities / Criteria: Psychology courses (general, personality and individual differences, clinical and counseling, health, developmental), communications courses (developing well-rounded conflict management skills), studies/courses dealing with interpersonal relationship analysis, addressing difficulties encountered when working in team-based activities (e.g., miscommunications), remedying less severe/intense conflicts.

Summary: Two writing activities and a class discussion to engage students in perspective building in order to help develop interpersonal conflict management and their ability to have compassion and forgiveness for others.

Key virtue outcomes: McCullough and Worthington (1995), found that this intervention decreased individual's feelings of revenge, increased positive feelings and affirming attributions towards their offender, and increased conciliatory (e.g., reconciling differences, willingness to compromise) behavior. While discussing their forgiveness model, Root and Worthington (2007) drew on similar studies to further highlight how one's ability to forgive was associated with positive mental health, greater well-being and physical health, and lower levels of depression.

Citation: McCullough, M. E., & Worthington, E. L. (1995). Promoting forgiveness: A comparison of two brief psychoeducational group interventions with a waiting-list control. *Counseling and Values, 40*(1), 55–68. https://doi.org/10.1163/2161007x-04001007

This activity was collated by Sean Sheveland and edited by Harry Georges.

CLASSROOMS THAT CULTIVATE CHARACTER

Reach for Forgiveness: Perspective Building Activities for Forgiveness and Compassion

In four exercises, students will engage in reading and writing activities which function on three primary facilitators (persuasion, priming, and consistency-maintenance) to evoke value change, increasing one's desire to help others.

Before You Start: Consider having your students complete the Defining Love quiz and reflection before completing this activity. It may also be helpful to provide students with this infographic about what virtues are and why they matter.

Materials: For parts 2 and 3, students will need a writing utensil and two sheets of paper, or an electronic device with typing capabilities. For parts 1 and 4, the instructor should either print out the discussion questions/prompts, make them available as a PDF, or project them onto a projector screen.

Implementation Suggestions: This intervention isn't a one-size-fits-all solution for complex, deep-rooted conflicts. Students may raise such scenarios, and it's okay to acknowledge the intervention's limits. While the goal is to encourage a mindset shift, it's important to let students pursue that change at their own pace.

Procedure:

Part 1. Prepare students for this activity by reading the following argument from McCullough and Worthington (1995) in justification of forgiveness and engaging in a short reflection of the material.

> 'Choosing to engage in forgiveness may lead to reducing the negative personal consequences of the offenses incurred... [Consider] the paradox of forgiveness discussed by Hope (1987): although voluntarily "letting go" of the offenses that one has incurred seems contrary to one's self-interest, it is ultimately more costly not to let go of such offenses'.
>
> The researchers further state that engaging in forgiveness could possibly lead to feeling a reduction of obsessive thoughts regarding the offense; of emotions such as anger, fear, and bitterness; and of stress-related symptoms.

After reading the above, let students individually reflect on their reactions and responses to the justification for forgiveness. Do they find themselves agreeing or disagreeing? Why?

When students have concluded their personal reflections, provide time for them to share their initial thoughts and reactions in class discussion. Encourage students to stick with "I statements" and remind them that some of these topics might be sensitive depending on the type of grievance or offense that comes to mind for them when they think about forgiveness (or unforgiveness).

Part 2. Have students identify a situation where someone hurt them (ideally a less intense conflict) and reflect on the offender's perspective. They will write a letter from the offender's point of view, exploring possible motives or circumstances relating to the situation—such as the offender having a moment of weakness or their actions leading to unintended consequences. These don't have to be the correct motivations or circumstances, and they aren't intended to justify the offense. Rather they are supposed to help individuals imagine another person's perspective and heighten their awareness of the circumstances and emotions the offender might have experienced (or be experiencing in the present when they reflect on the offense). This activity aims to build empathy and understanding for the person who had hurt them.

Part 3. After completing the initial perspective-taking activity, students will write a follow-up letter—this time from their own point of view—sharing their honest thoughts and feelings about what happened, how the offender's actions affected them, and what the consequences have been. In this letter, encourage students to explore

where they currently stand in the process of forgiveness. Some may already feel ready to forgive, while others may still be processing the hurt; both are valid. Students can describe active steps they're taking to forgive or simply express a desire or intention to move in that direction. Speaking forgiveness into existence—even before it feels fully possible—can be a powerful first step. The purpose of this exercise is to gently redirect students' focus away from the pain of the offense and toward personal healing, emotional resilience, and a sense of agency over their response.

Part 4. After completing the previous writing activities, have students revisit the prompt from McCullough and Worthington (1995) in Part 1 and consider how (if at all) it connects to their own experience of the letter writing activities.

If time allows, invite students to share their responses. Possible discussion questions include: How did your body and mind feel when taking your offender's perspective—was it illuminating, aggravating, or something else? Did writing your letter surprise you? Was it cathartic, frustrating, or did it feel pointless? Has your view on this prompt changed since the beginning of the activity? Why or why not?

Conclude with this final prompt:

"Consider altruistically choosing forgiveness. Think of a time when you needed forgiveness and someone offered it freely. How did that affect you? Do others deserve that same compassion?"

Wrap up the session by offering time for individual questions or one-on-one processing with the instructor.

Extensions:

At CultivateCharacter.com our approach to virtue cultivation is grounded in the belief that when students encounter virtue content through multiple modalities, it is more likely to stick. Below are potential extensions of the empirically-grounded virtue activities described above to help stretch your assignments and enhance the likelihood that your classroom cultivates character.

Possible Extensions:

Environmental – If possible, have students visit the site of the conflict. Since memories tied to strong emotions can become distorted, revisiting the location—physically or mentally—may aid recall while writing letters or working toward forgiveness. This offers a chance to practice temperance and emotional regulation, fostering deeper understanding of the event and compassion for the offender.

Cognitive – Ask students to list the positive and negative effects of withholding forgiveness on their mind and body. Have them compare their lists— which is longer or more compelling? How does it feel knowing their body suffers negative consequences when they refuse to forgive? Is it worth giving the offender that power? Do the positive effects outweigh the negatives?

Behavioral – If comfortable, students may share their letters from parts 2 and 3 with their offender to foster vulnerability and emotional openness. In future conflicts, encourage students to practice compassion by considering the situational factors influencing their offender.

Affective/Somatic – Ask students to reflect on how choosing forgiveness feels compared to resentment. Have them recall the last time they forgave someone—what did they notice in their body? Relief, ease of mind, or increased self-assurance? Then, contrast these feelings with those from the conflict they wrote about: Did resentment bring dread, anxiety, lingering stress, or physical tension?

Motivations –Encourage students to reflect on how forgiveness aligns with their values and why expressing it matters for those they care about most.

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