

The Family Journal

<http://tfj.sagepub.com>

"Forgive and Forget": A Case Example of Contextual Marital Therapy

Gary R. Mauldin

The Family Journal 2003; 11; 180

DOI: 10.1177/1066480702250172

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://tfj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/11/2/180>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors](#)

Additional services and information for *The Family Journal* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tfj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tfj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://tfj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/11/2/180>

“Forgive and Forget”: A Case Example of Contextual Marital Therapy

Gary R. Mauldin
Tarleton State University

The following is a case example of contextual marital therapy in the treatment of a couple who presented for therapy because of an extramarital affair. It contains background information concerning presenting issues, a theoretical conceptualization, a narrative of the therapy process, discussion, and conclusions. The focus of this case centers on how the idea of forgiveness might be utilized to facilitate reconciliation in conflicted relationships.

Keywords: *extramarital affairs; forgiveness; marriage therapy; contextual therapy*

Marriage and family counselors will identify with the issue that Pittman (1989) posed concerning therapy with couples in which one or both persons have had an extramarital affair. The first challenge is to facilitate the end of the affair both emotionally and behaviorally. The second equally daunting task is to help the couple rebuild their marriage. The following case example illustrates the potential value of a contextual model of marital therapy to use in such case situations. Obviously, no single model will be effective for all couples. However, the following case provides an example of how to facilitate healing in a relationship through forgiveness and the progressive reestablishment of trust.

CASE BACKGROUND

“Can you please help me? I am almost certain that my husband Bill is having an affair. I can feel it. It is almost as if I can smell her when he comes home. It may be all in my mind, but I was hoping you could help.” And so began the first contact that I had with Bill and Sharon via Sharon’s frantic telephone call for help. And through this simple call, my life as a therapist and the lives of Bill and Sharon would be changed forever. In that initial conversation, Sharon described herself as depressed, angry, and above all, heartbroken. She spoke of the hope that I could do something to be helpful to her in her marriage. She feared the worst, that the truth about the affair would become public knowledge, and that her marriage would be over. She feared embarrassment if her friends and family ever found out about Bill’s indiscretion. “I guess I have

to blame myself. I should have known this was coming on. He started smoking again and I knew something had changed. I just could not put my finger on what was different.”

I would later discover that Bill and Sharon had been married for 34 years. He was 52 years of age and she was 49. They were the proud parents of three children: two boys and one girl, all of whom were fully grown. Each of their children, Bill Jr., Sam, and Julie had married soon after graduation from high school. It was not long afterward that each child’s first marriage ended in divorce. At the time that I became involved with this family, all three children of Bill and Sharon had remarried. Although their children had a checkered history of stormy relationships, Bill and Sharon had lived and shared their lives together for all of those 34 years.

Bill and Sharon were 18 when they married. They had discovered the pleasures and pains of life in the shelter of each other’s arms. For most of those years, they had lived in the same home. Sharon and Bill had raised their family in that home. The walls of that house were rich with memories of Sunday dinners, holidays, and hours spent playing in the yard. It was a life that had been well spent. Inside the walls of that home, the couple had built a business, a family, and a cache full of memories. Looking in from the outside, it would appear to the entire world that Bill and Sharon had the ideal life and the ideal marriage.

But then, Bill had the “it.” Sharon frequently referred to Bill’s affair as an “it.” So long as she could depersonalize the event in some way, she could deal with it. In fact, the “it” she referred to in our first conversation, I would later discover, was not an “it” at all. As Bill and Sharon began to work with me with the goal of rebuilding trust and forgiveness in their marriage, I was to find out the “it” was a “they.” Bill had actually had four affairs over the couple’s 34 years of marriage. The pattern for each affair was essentially the same.

Bill would go to work each day and come home each afternoon. No one would suspect that most days he would visit a local “gentleman’s club” on his lunch break. It was at this club, and similar clubs, that he would meet young women whom Bill perceived as needing help. His pattern was to first

befriend the younger women, set them up in an apartment, and then literally live two separate lives. He would spend his days with his girlfriend and his afternoons and evenings with his spouse. Bill was an on-again-off-again cigarette smoker. It became a pattern for him to start up smoking again while he was having an affair. The smoking was one of the ways that Sharon began to suspect something was wrong. She learned the smell of smoke meant trouble was brewing. On the other hand, Bill's smoking was his not-so-subtle signal to Sharon that his life had once again become unmanageable. He was lost, and the lingering smell of cigarette smoke was his sign to her about how lost he felt.

The presenting problem was the latest of Bill's affairs. After 34 agonizing years, Sharon had finally had her fill of Bill's behavior. Typical to each affair, Sharon would pay a private detective to investigate her suspicions. The detective would take pictures of Bill and his friends and then the truth would come out. Bill would come home and confess to what he had done and ask for Sharon to allow him to return home.

Each time, Sharon would welcome Bill back, but she never forgot the hurt and the pain that resulted from his infidelity. The final affair of Bill's marriage ended no differently. In between that initial phone call and our first formal counseling session, Sharon once again confronted him with a private investigator's ugly photographs of Bill entering another steamy motel with a young dancer from the club. In living color, the truth hurt deeply, but the pattern of behavior was consistent over time. Sharon's ultimatum to Bill was to go with her to therapy or she would finally leave forever.

CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION

As our conversations began, I was interested in two major questions. First, I was curious as to what it meant for Bill that, after four affairs, he continued to practice these serial extramarital relationships yet describe his marriage and wife as "perfect." I was curious about why he was unable to control his actions and behavior when it came to his girlfriends and why he could control his actions to perform the role of the happily married man.

Second, I was curious about why Sharon was always willing to allow him to return home after each affair. What stories from the past put this couple on this particular roller-coaster that led them from an apparently ideal marriage, to an extramarital affair, to hiring a detective to investigate suspicious behavior, to confession and reconciliation, which inevitably brought the couple full circle back toward the ideal marriage? However many twists and turns this roller-coaster would take, one thing remained constant, the couple always got off the ride where they had gotten on.

The first question that Bill and Sharon struggled with in our conversations revolved around the issues of rebuilding forgiveness and trust. Soon after we began, they asked, "Can

we find a way to forgive each other?" And second, "If we can forgive each other, can we ever forget?"

Contextual Marital Therapy

The idea of forgiveness that formulated my thinking about this case and that formed the core intervention in our work together is most closely associated with the contextual model of therapy as developed by Boszormenyi-Nagy (1987). Contextual marital therapy is a transgenerational model of therapy that assumes we are all born into families in which we are bound together by systems of relatedness and obligation (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984). It is contextual in the sense that who and what we are, and how we behave, are all wedded to our families, culture, systems of belief, and the basic trustworthiness and inherent justice of these relationships. Boszormenyi-Nagy (1987) assumed that human behavior, thought, and emotion are influenced by distinct and mutually interactive relational factors. The factors that influence individual and family development are individual variation in growth, development, and culture; individual and family variation in physiological and psychological development; the systemic affective, behavioral, and communication interconnection in families; and the level of trust and trustworthiness in these close relationships.

Boszormenyi-Nagy (1987) assumed that the maintenance of trust and trustworthiness between persons and family members is crucial in the forging of well-being and happiness in human relationships. Contextual marital therapy thus assumes that the seeking of forgiveness and the commitment of a wrongdoer to change are vital for an intimate relationship to be restored after an extramarital affair.

In the case above, I assumed that the consequences of Bill's past actions affected the nature and quality of his marriage to Sharon and the relationship dynamics in the family. The fracture of trust between Bill and Sharon gave rise to the couple's unhappiness and their children's checkered history of unhappiness in marriage. I also assumed that the seeking of forgiveness and Bill's willingness to change would be key in helping the couple to rebuild their marriage.

A Model for Forgiveness

As I began to work with this couple, I was also influenced by Hargrave's (1994a, 1994b) and Hargrave and Anderson's (1992) model of forgiveness as an intervention in family therapy. The model assumes that forgiveness is the process through which a fractured relationship might be restored. In a fractured marriage, the act of forgiveness and the encouragement of a couple to forgive each other might facilitate the rebuilding of trust. The model assumes four distinct stages through which a couple would progress. The stages of this model include the need for both parties to gain insight into why the affair occurred, understanding of why it was painful,

emotional compensation for the hurt, and a ritual or visible act of forgiveness. Initially, a wronged person exonerates a wrongdoer of responsibility for their future happiness through insight and understanding. In a case of marital infidelity, when both persons understand what hurt and why the betrayed person felt hurt, the couple may be able to begin to rebuild. Forgiveness is further facilitated by an offer of compensation for the hurt and an actual act or ritualized demonstration of forgiveness.

Forgiveness as an Intervention

I assumed that this type of forgiveness intervention might be helpful in allowing Sharon and Bill to restore their broken relationship. Clearly, there was a relationship between Bill's infidelity and Sharon's emotional wound. Insight and understanding of this relationship would enable Sharon to tell Bill how the affairs hurt her so that Bill could understand what he had done that had been hurtful. If the marriage could be rebuilt, it would mean that Bill would have to change his behavior to earn the right to be forgiven. It would mean that Sharon would have to change her emotions and behavior to be willing to accept a new life with Bill.

I assumed, as Hargrave (1994a, 1994b) and Hargrave and Anderson (1992) have suggested, it would be important for both Bill and Sharon to give one another an opportunity for compensation and restitution for the harm the affairs had caused. Bill's affairs cost the family emotionally and financially. Bill's progressive reestablishment of honesty and truthfulness would enable Sharon to be *emotionally* compensated for her pain and for trust to be rebuilt. It would enable Bill to tell the truth and the walls between the couple to, I hoped, disintegrate. Finally, I assumed healing would be further facilitated by an overt act of forgiveness wherein Bill would ask for forgiveness and Sharon would express her willingness to forgive him. I assumed that such an act of forgiveness would rebalance the relationship that had been harmed because of the affair (Hargrave, 1994a, 1994b; Hargrave & Anderson, 1992).

COUNSELING PROCESS

Sessions 1-3

The focus of the first three sessions was on allowing the couple to tell their story of the history of the affairs and their resolution. I encouraged each one to identify areas of their own behavior that they believed might have contributed to the formation of the affair. Initially, Bill was quick to accept full blame and deny that Sharon was ever at fault for his behavior. Sharon tended to focus on her own wounds and hurts. Initially, she tended to blame herself for Bill's behavior. "I know I always focused on our children. I was a mother, and somewhere the idea of being a lover got lost." These sessions gradually moved toward each person's identifying things in their

own behavior and thought processes that may have contributed to the formation of the problem.

Session 4

The fourth session focused on the overt intervention of forgiveness as described below. I believed at this point that Sharon and Bill had a sufficient level of insight into why the affair occurred. Now it was time to begin to help the couple move toward reconciliation and forgiveness. The following transcript describes a ritual of forgiveness that was used in the therapy room to bring about healing in the couple's relationship. This intervention occurred during our fourth session together. It was a watershed moment for all who were involved.

Therapist: It is clear from what you have told me, that to a degree neither one of you could be honest about the affairs, or your suspicions about them, but somehow both of you knew something was wrong.

Bill: I just wish she had come to me. Called me and all of this stuff could have been prevented. I wanted to tell her a thousand times. It did not have to come to this. I shouldn't have done it. I don't know what is wrong with me.

Sharon: But I did tell you about my fears, Bill. I did. I just didn't know what was wrong with me. I told you I needed help. I knew you were smoking again. I could smell it on your clothes. I remembered that smoke smell from the last affair. I knew, but I did not know.

Bill: Yes, you told me. I just didn't know what to do. I wish I could have been more honest. I don't know what I could have said.

Sharon: I wish I had confronted you. I wish I had called you.

Therapist: I am curious. Both of you have indicated your regret for what happened. Sharon said she wished he could have confronted the behavior sooner. Bill has said that he wished he had turned to Sharon before he became so desperate. I was wondering, have the two of you actually asked the other person to forgive you and to say you are sorry for what happened?

[Both Bill and Sharon look at each other and nod their heads.]

Bill: No. I don't guess we have done that yet.

Therapist: Would you like to ask for forgiveness?

[Both nod affirmatively.]

Therapist: If that is what you would like to do, then turn and face each other and say, as best you can, what you are sorry about and for what you would want to be forgiven.

[Bill and Sharon spontaneously hold hands and face each other.]

Bill: I am sorry that I was not there for you. I am sorry I ever had the affair. I know it broke your heart. I am sorry that I did not answer you when you said there was something wrong. I hope you will forgive me.

Sharon: I love you and forgive you. I am sorry for turning away from you. I was just so desperate. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what you would do. Please forgive me.

The couple then embraced as Sharon whispered in his ear her forgiveness and love. The therapy session ended with this interchange, both clients weeping as they held each other in their arms.

Sessions 5-8

These sessions focused on going back over some of the past history. It was clear that the previous sessions had unleashed a great deal of emotion. Bill had even suggested moving out for a short time period and did so for about a month. Soon, Bill believed he was ready to move back home, and Sharon was willing to allow him to live with her again. When I asked them, "What had changed?" They both said, "It's time to forgive and forget." I took that to mean that the couple had found a way to begin to rebuild their marriage. I believe *they* took that to mean they were ready to move on to the next challenge in life.

Sessions 9-12

I did not see the couple again for a number of weeks. In-between time, I received a phone call from Bill, who told me he had recently been diagnosed with lung cancer. "The years of smoking have caught up with me," he said. Bill's health began to fail quite rapidly. The last few sessions were spent with Bill and Sharon and their entire family. The goal of these sessions was to enable the family to better adjust to Bill's illness and allow each of the children to come to terms with their father and forgive him for the past. The family was scheduled for a 13th meeting but was unable to make it because Bill had entered the hospital for surgery and chemotherapy.

CASE OUTCOME

Our counseling ended with Bill and Sharon attempting to rebuild their shattered marriage and family. It was clear that the couple had been able to forgive each other. However, to use Sharon's words, "I don't think I will ever be able to forget. It's that country-western song, 'forgiving you is easy, but forgetting seems to take the longest time.'" In fact, it was not only the passage of time that healed the wound but the events of life itself. Indeed, it was Bill's cancer that helped reunite the family and the marriage and enabled forgiveness to be shared. The cancer was obviously associated with years of secret smoking. In spite of that fact, Sharon stood faithfully at Bill's side through surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. Sadly, all of those treatments simply slowed the inevitable progress of Bill's cancer and the rapid approach to the end of his life.

The last time I saw Bill was at his bedside in his home. Sharon called me and said, "Gary, I don't believe he is going to make it through the night. He is asking for you. You are the one man he admires more than any other." So, I went to his home. The family was all gathered around his bed. He could no longer talk. Toward the end of our time together, Bill sat up in his bed and took my hand. He then reached over to his wife and sons. He took my hands and put it in their hands. I could not have been more moved. He was dying. And his last act was an act of love for his family. When he gave me his son's hands, I suspected that he was saying to us all, "Here is someone who can help you if you need a friend."

I shall be forever different for having known Bill and Sharon. They made me a part of their lives. My life has been enriched and made more sacred because of the time that we spent together. It is an honor to have known them. It is wonderful to think that I may have helped them in some way. It is even more wonderful to know they have helped me.

CONCLUSION

Bill and Sharon told me that what was most helpful to them was the overt act of forgiving each other during their fourth session. Both had wanted to find a way to forgive and forget, but Bill did not know how to ask for it and Sharon was afraid to offer it. I believe that session indicated that the value of an intervention of forgiveness is that it changed family process more than content. It was not the specific words they said but the act of forgiving itself that proved the most helpful. This would tend to confirm Hargrave's (1994a, 1994b) and Hargrave and Anderson's (1992) conclusion that an overt act of forgiveness is necessary before trust can be restored. It was a small change done in the therapy room that led to a bigger change and improvement in the quality of the couple's relationship.

Sharon was disappointed in Bill's behavior, and Bill did not know why he had a difficult time committing himself to his marriage. The initial offer of forgiveness was an act of giving that rebuilt trust and tapped into the attachments that had sustained the couple through 34 years of marriage. This giving was reciprocated by more giving back, thus reversing the downward trend of distancing and negative feelings that had built up over the years.

I was able to help facilitate this change by giving Sharon and Bill the opportunity to speak directly to one another in a frank, honest way; this act, I believe, led to a beginning of mutual insight and understanding. The changed atmosphere between Bill and Sharon almost naturally developed into their giving to each other opportunities to make amends to one another. In fact, both implicitly asked for and gave forgiveness for the past. This act was the start of the healing process that occurred during their remaining last few months together.

Finally, I was moved by the strength of the couple's marital connection, which survived despite many years of emotional

distance and many extramarital affairs. The human drive for closeness and intimacy had been wounded by the pain of infidelity, yet it grew again through the act of forgiveness and the supportive environment of contextual marital therapy.

REFERENCES

Boszormenyi-Nagy, I. (1987). *Foundations of contextual therapy: Collected papers of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, M.D.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.
 Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Krasner, B. R. (1986). *Between give and take: A clinical guide to contextual therapy.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.
 Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. M. (1984). *Invisible loyalties: Reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Hargrave, T. D. (1994a). *Families and forgiveness: Healing wounds in the intergenerational family.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.
 Hargrave, T. D. (1994b). Families and forgiveness: A theoretical and therapeutic framework. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 2, 339-348.
 Hargrave, T. D., & Anderson, W. T. (1992). *Finishing well: Aging and reparation in the intergenerational family.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.
 Pittman, F. S. (1989). *Private lies: Infidelity and the betrayal of intimacy.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Gary R. Mauldin, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of counseling and psychology at Tarleton State University, Stephenville, Texas. Please forward comments or questions to him via e-mail: mauldin@tarleton.edu.

