

Forgiveness could shield suffering people in South Africa from overwhelming feelings of withdrawal or impulsive action

Rudy A Denton
North-West University, South Africa

Introduction and background

Suffering and pain inflicted by injustice, violence and oppressive systems could deeply alter people's lives and shatter their worldview. As far as we would like to avoid suffering, the reality of life is that painful events occur and 'we are left with the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical wounds of our experiences. We gather the broken pieces left and continue to live life with the impact of the emotional stress, yet those experiences carry on within us' (Mildes 2017). It is in this traumatised world where people endure oppression, suffering and humiliation, and become hurt and wounded.

Undeserved injustice of a suffering humanity is unavoidably the greatest mission field of the twenty-first century (Langberg 2015:8). Violence and oppressive systems cause physical and psychological harm to countless victims. The wounded and traumatised think about themselves through the grid of the violent offences and injustices they experienced; and the relational and spiritual impact of the transgression on their lives.

South Africa is no different than the rest of the world with a tormenting history of abuse, oppression and injustice that was a systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma (cf. Daye 2011:129-130). The process of change in the new South Africa harmonise the ideals of diverse populations in a new constitution to put fears and suspicions to rest; however new-fangled perpetrated offences surface as people in positions of authority compete for power and influence (cf. Vorster 2017a:381; Worthington & Cowden 2017:292). Regardless of the new dispensation, cluttered injustices, atrocities and struggles continue and poverty, inequality and corrupt systems extinguished personal relationships of living together in a trauma-free world. In the new South Africa that has emerged from the apartheid era to a liberal democracy, it has become apparent that basic survival needs of the affected populations are necessary but not sufficient conditions for social healing are met. Overwhelming feelings of withdrawal or impulsive, intrusive action often became a way of life and people rarely deal with forgiveness.

Injustice, violence and oppressive systems

People endure oppression, suffering and humiliation in broken families, violence-ridden communities, and a society full of tormenting trauma where they become hurt and wounded. To study emotionally draining circumstances where people are hurt and wounded implies to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the world and with the dimensions of sin, immorality and depravity in human nature (cf. Herman 2015:7).

The "multi-dimensional" or "multi-faceted" picture of Africa not only portrays Africa in terms of visible effects of economic poverty, but also in terms of the devastating effects of failing social-political systems resulting in injustice, poverty, famine, health and social problems, diseases, exploitation, violence, civil wars, racial discrimination, refugee camps, informal settlements and corruption (Banda 2010:119). These categories of suffering defines people who feel the pain of hunger, oppression, insufficient health care, lack of proper housing, lack of education and unemployment; and therefore, a group of vulnerable people who lack the basic essentials for human survival.

Overwhelming feelings of withdrawal or impulsive, intrusive action

Due to persistent poverty and inequality in South Africa, the position of the poor and vulnerable did not improve. The impact of suffering and pain inflicted by injustice, violence and oppressive systems is not something individuals struggle with, but communities and larger systems in society as well. It disrupts peoples' sense of security and order in society. Repeated exposure to overwhelming distress creates a gradual process of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. The impact of suffering and pain varies from person to person depending on the traumatic event and the individual's resilience to manage the distress with greater endurance. Suffering and painful events intrudes on public awareness and social justice grounds where denial, repression and dissociation operate on an inseparably connected social as well as individual level, often internalized and exhibited by behavioural and emotional symptoms. The dialectic of trauma constantly challenges the emotional equilibrium between overwhelming feelings of withdrawal or impulsive, intrusive action.

➤ Overwhelming feelings of withdrawal

Overwhelming feelings of withdrawal interfere with interpersonal relationships, and may also be damaging when posttraumatic depression, isolation and alienation characterise people's anger, guilt and shame (cf. Worthington, 2003: 258).

➤ Impulsive, intrusive action

A general reaction to trauma involves the repeated thought and reflection on harm, disadvantage, powerlessness, unfairness and injustice experienced. Regarding a post-apartheid South Africa, efforts to encourage peace, forgiveness and reconciliation are often received with distrust and uncertainty due to discrimination, failed social, political and economic systems, violence, nepotism, corruption and selfish governance (cf. Monye 2016:121-122). People who suffered the violent effects of distress, succumb to a culture of violence, retaliation and self-defence as a result of the post-traumatic effects thereof (cf. Makhulu 2001:377). Impatient responses, frustrations and anger can spill out on resistant civil disobedience, stone-throwing and rage. The quest of settling the scores and a desire for retaliation can be so overpowering that people rarely deal with or consider forgiveness.

Forgiveness to shield suffering people

Suffering have the capacity to overwhelm people and influence their faith and disrupt their worldview, belief system and perceptions.

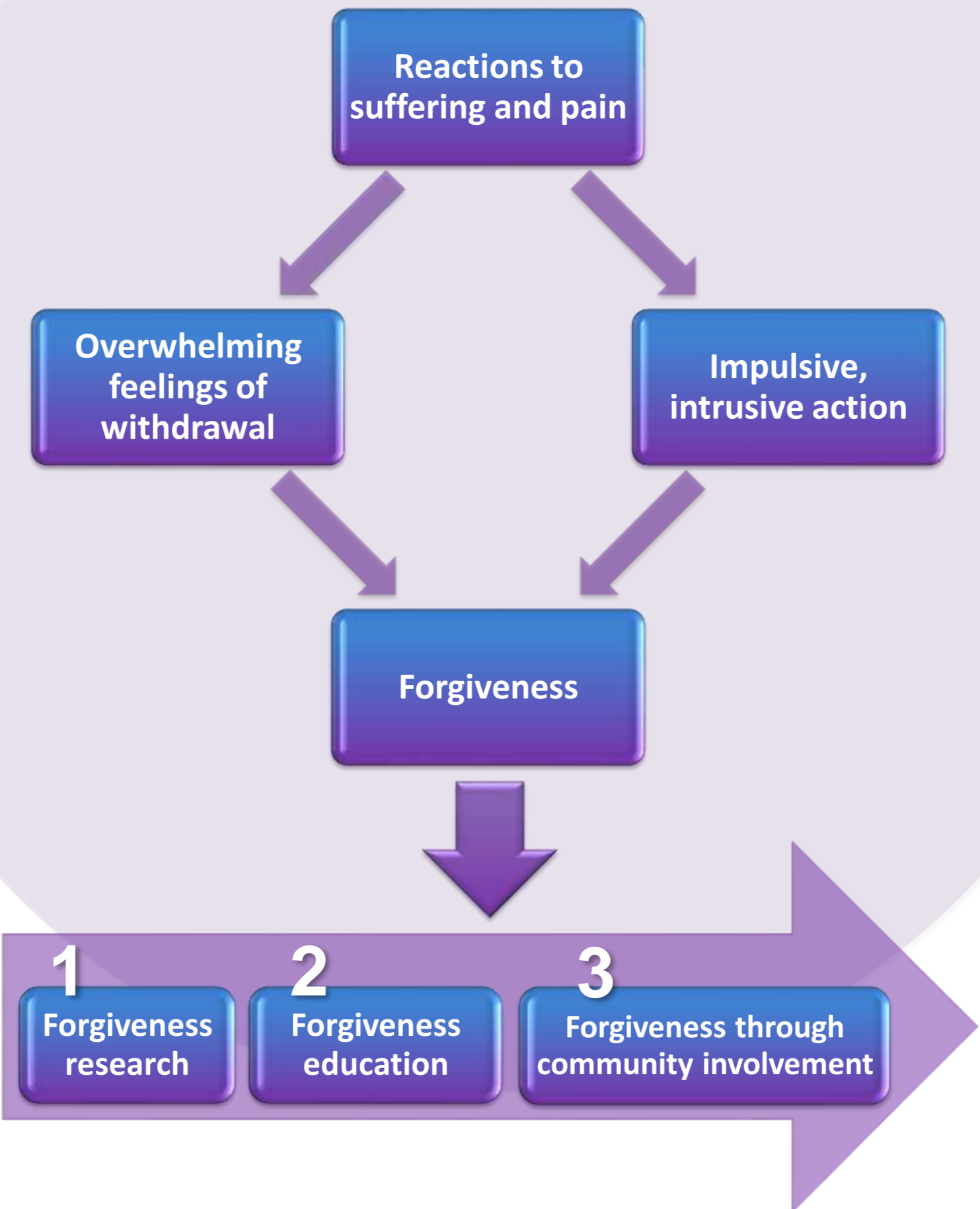
A hermeneutical overview of forgiveness

Forgiveness is an interdisciplinary topic and central concept in Christianity that strives towards peace and an acceptable way of life and human behaviour. Levinas (2000:20) insists that there is a complex 'horizontal' dimension to forgiveness among human beings and an indispensable 'vertical' forgiveness from God. Hartwell (1999) points out that 'the relationship between anger, revenge, and forgiveness is particularly important in understanding the role of forgiveness in reconstructing a society following conflict.'

Forgiveness is not an act to set perpetrators who deserve retribution free, but also brings healing in suffering people's hearts for the wrong done to them (Bash 2011:loc.1302). It demands remembrance that includes changing hearts, but does not include memory loss or changing minds about sustained wounds from an act itself. Forgiveness is an expression of morality centered around mercy and not retaliation.

Individuals and larger social groups ought to embody (personify) the practices of forgiveness. The process of forgiveness begins when suffering people recognises themselves as injured and humiliated by the impact of injustice and ends in giving up negative emotions, thoughts and behaviours towards oppressive systems and offenders. Forgiveness should serve the purpose of peace, maintenance of human dignity and reconciliation in community building to prevent disorder.

Good practice for sustainable forgiveness



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Guidelines, strategies and practices

Within the South African context, the idealisation of an African soul inclined to forgiveness and communal life, blends with the principle of 'ubuntu'. The most useful description of 'ubuntu' is that 'a person is a person because of others'. 'Ubuntu' is rooted in the search for identity and human dignity. It could be interpreted as a comprehensive African worldview based on the core values of intense humanness, compassion, sharing, caring, respect, and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life (Chuwa 2014:13).

A vital resolution is to have guidelines, strategies and practices in place to protect peoples' personhood and human dignity to ensure that overwhelming feelings of withdrawal or impulsive, intrusive action does not become a way of life.

➤ Theological interpretation

The redemptive compassion of Christ for the most vulnerable members of society brings forgiveness, reconciliation, and a new life-changing transformation to the world where people become hurt and wounded. With this approach, Christian participants can enter the South African discourses where forgiveness can play a decisive role. As a result of conducting forgiveness, it should be seen as manifestations of the kingdom of God in the society and community.

➤ Ethical reflection

The nurturing of human dignity and social justice principles must go hand in hand with the development of public morality. Forgiveness can be seen as a complex and prolonged evolutionary process linked with truth, repentance, apology, justice and reconciliation to stop the transfer of bitterness and resentment from one generation to the next.

➤ Good practice for sustainable forgiveness

Based on the importance of forgiveness as a component of religious teaching, people with a personal religious commitment are likely to be more forgiving and tolerant to the restructuring and transformation of relationships (cf. Hayward & Krause 2013:5).

1. Forgiveness research

Research on forgiveness has multiplied in recent years, but many important issues about forgiveness in South Africa have not been studied.

2. Forgiveness education

Forgiveness education could dismantle the egocentricity of overwhelming feelings of withdrawal or impulsive, intrusive action. Forgiveness education can be the key to unleashing all kinds of and forms of social injustice committed in and between individuals, and in and between communities (cf. Enright 2003:26).

3. Implementing forgiveness through community involvement

The dialogue aimed at forgiveness should occur in the community with the support of the church and civil society. The church's communal care 'koinonia' and compassion includes all dehumanised people or outcasts (the marginalised, the lost, hungry, weak and poor) who suffer economically, physically and socially. It includes those who experience oppression or humiliation to bringing them to gracious acceptance, dignity and liberation from injustice that is not disconnected from the practice of forgiveness and hope of reconciliation (Migliore 2014:135).

Conclusion

For forgiveness to turn into reality, South Africans have to shield themselves from being funnelled by their emotions. Guided by the Word and Spirit of God Christians should take up their responsibility to proclaim a future of justice, freedom and peace to the poor and oppressed, welcome outcasts and strangers, and call people to repentance and a new way of life characterized by love for God and others. Forgiveness will have to grow into a larger part of human reality if we are to be spared from endless cycles of violence.

Establishing any lasting peace requires an organized effort where forgiveness can play a decisive role and shield suffering people in South Africa from overwhelming feelings of withdrawal or impulsive, intrusive action. Forgiveness should be recognised as a living entity (dynamic organism) as part of everything South Africans perceive and participate in. Communities need to come together to integrate restorative and reconciliatory initiatives into a more cohesive framework and turn toward forgiveness. Forgiveness allows us to find a connection between wisdom grounded in the past and hope for a bright and promising future. The imperative to forgive should rise to a permanent attitude and become a way of life that reforms or re-frames people's hearts to grant forgiveness even when oppressive systems justify retaliation and perpetrators deserve revenge.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Dr Rudy A Denton
Faculty of Theology
Unit for Reformed Theology
North-West University
South Africa
Email: rudydenton@outlook.com
Phone: +27824599710



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