

2015

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Susan Stuntzner

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, susan.stuntzner@utrgv.edu

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Recommended Citation

Stuntzner, S. (2015). Stuntzner's Forgiveness Intervention: Learning to Forgive Yourself and Others Following Disability. Counseling Association of India.

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Stuntzner's Forgiveness Intervention: Learning to Forgive Yourself and Others

Susan Stuntzner PhD, LPC, LMHP, CRC, NCC, DCC, BCPC, DAPA, FAPA
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

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Author Biography

Dr. Susan Stuntzner PhD, LPC, LMHP, CRC, NCC, DCC, BCPC, DAPA, FAPA is an Assistant Professor of Rehabilitation Counseling and Human Services at the University of Idaho – Coeur d’Alene. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor, a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor, a Nationally Certified Counselor, and a Distance Credentialed Counselor. Dr. Stuntzner has employment experience in working with persons with disabilities in a number of contexts. She has worked as a psychology staff member in the Midwest, a rehabilitation counseling professional, a vocational evaluator, and as a program coordinator for a non-profit rehabilitation agency in the Northwest.

Dr. Stuntzner is a graduate of the Rehabilitation Psychology program at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Her research interests include: coping and adaptation to disability, development of intervention techniques and strategies, resilience, forgiveness, self-compassion, and mentorship of professionals with disabilities. She has published articles on forgiveness, compassion, and self-compassion as they relate to persons with disabilities and the field of rehabilitation counseling, skills counselors need to know about disability, and resilience. Dr. Stuntzner is the author of three books relating to coping and adaptation and/or resilience following disability. These books are entitled, *Living with a Disability: Finding Peace Amidst the Storm*, *Reflections from the Past: Life Lessons for Better Living*, and *Resiliency and Coping: The Family After*.

More recently she has co-authored and published a 10-module resilience skill building intervention entitled, *Stuntzner and Hartley’s Life Enhancement Intervention: Developing Resiliency Skills Following Disability*. This resilience intervention has recently been undergoing pilot-testing and is showing significant results in decreasing anxiety and depression while also improving forgiveness and resilience. It also demonstrates significant increases in positive adjustment phase of disability. Additionally, she has written four articles for The Coeur d’Alene Press about self-compassion, resilience, forgiveness, and mentorship needs of women with disabilities to advance in the workplace.

Dr. Stuntzner has a website devoted to helping people and professionals learn about personal healing and growth following disability. More information about her work may be found at: www.therapeutic-healing-disability.com

RESEARCH

Forgiveness is a concept that has traditionally been discussed and associated with spirituality or religiosity (Richards & Bergin, 1997). In these contexts, many people understand forgiveness to be for people of faith or those pursuing a faith-driven life. Although forgiveness is important to these individuals, it is also an area of interest which has relevance to many other individuals. As a result, forgiveness has found its way into the counseling and psychology professions.

Over the past 25 years, forgiveness has emerged in the helping professions through the promotion and research of forgiveness scholars and forgiveness intervention research (i.e., Enright and colleagues, Worthington and colleagues). Throughout, forgiveness scholars have attempted to explain and define the meaning of forgiveness in a way that is accessible and beneficial to all people. By defining forgiveness we are able to differentiate between what forgiveness is and that which it is not, develop models or processes to help people forgive, educate people on possible ways to reach and practice forgiveness, and construct forgiveness scales to measure changes in forgiveness.

Additionally, forgiveness has been studied among various groups of people and populations who have experienced some severe or unjust hurt as well as among Christians and persons of faith. However, during this time, very little focus has been given to the needs of persons with disabilities and how forgiveness relates to their coping and adaptation process, to the experience of disability, or to the many difficult or hurtful people and situations they encounter because of disability (Stuntzner, 2008).

More concerning is the fact that, too often, persons with disabilities receive ambiguous but blatant messages by society and other people that they are to “man up and deal with their situation.” While they receive these messages, persons with disabilities are given little or no guidance and support for how to successfully help themselves move forward (Stuntzner, 2014c). Given this reality and the information gleaned from previous forgiveness and coping (i.e., resilience) studies (Stuntzner, 2008; Stuntzner & MacDonald, 2014), it was evident that forgiveness needed to be explored and considered in regards to its applicability among persons with disabilities. Feedback from these studies corroborated my initial beliefs as a rehabilitation educator, a researcher, and as an individual living with a visible disability that forgiveness has a place in relation to disability and the needs of persons with disabilities.

In an effort to help persons with disabilities learn to forgive and to achieve a more peaceful and serene way of life, a seven module forgiveness intervention has been developed. While the full intervention consists of seven modules, some professionals, depending on the person, group, or situation, may tailor the process to only six modules. This is because an additional but specific module (i.e., *Module 2*) was added for women with disabilities. While many of the experiences, feelings, beliefs, and personal hurts or offenses are similar regardless of gender, it was felt that an additional module be included for women with disabilities because this is a group of individuals who are doubly- or triply-stigmatized (Deegan & Brooks, 1985; Saxton, 1985). Further, it is well documented throughout the

research that women with disabilities are more likely to be single or divorced, stigmatized even to a greater extent than their male counterparts with disabilities, and often have fewer personal and financial resources to help themselves (see Nosek & Hughes, 2003; Olkin, 2008; Stuntzner, in press). As a result, women with disabilities may not receive enough attention and focus from professionals, agencies, or others trying to assist them in moving forward following disability. This forgiveness intervention was developed to try and change that historical trend.

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