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THE USE OF FORGIVENESS IN HIGH-CONFLICT DIVORCE:  
A STUDY OF A PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL APPROACH  
TO INCREASING FORGIVENESS AND COPARENTING

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THE USE OF FORGIVENESS IN HIGH-CONFLICT DIVORCE:  
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by

Ernest William Reilly

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## Abstract

THE USE OF FORGIVENESS IN HIGH-CONFLICT DIVORCE:  
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The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients. The study used two conditions of sixteen randomly assigned adult participants (N=32) from a pool of high-conflict divorced parents. This randomized control trial using an immediate treatment/wait list control design with a seven-week follow-up found that high-conflict divorced parents who participated in a seven-week self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting demonstrated significant positive results in decreasing unforgiveness, increasing decisional and emotional forgiveness, and increasing cooperative coparenting. Forgiveness was demonstrated to be an important mechanism of positive change in cooperative coparenting. A positive relationship was also demonstrated between decisional forgiveness levels and cooperative coparenting levels. Parents in high-conflict divorces who make the decision to forgive their former spouses increase their cooperative coparenting levels.

## Table of Contents

	Page
LIST OF TABLES.....	8
LIST OF FIGURES .....	9
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	10
CHAPTER 1 PROBLEM .....	12
Purpose.....	16
Research Questions.....	17
Research Question #1 .....	17
Research Question #2 .....	17
Research Question #3 .....	17
Definition of Terms.....	17
High-Conflict Divorce .....	17
Coparenting.....	18
Forgiveness .....	18
Psycho-Educational Forgiveness Program .....	19
Ministry Project .....	19
Context.....	20
Methodology .....	21
Participants.....	23
Instrumentation .....	23
Variables .....	23
Data Collection .....	24

Data Analysis .....	25
Generalizability .....	26
Theological Foundation .....	26
Overview.....	30
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE.....	32
The Impact and Effects of Divorce.....	32
How Divorce Impacts Children and Family Members .....	33
How High-Conflict Divorce Impacts Children and Family Members.....	36
The Impact and Effects of Forgiveness .....	43
The General Impact of Forgiveness .....	43
How Forgiveness Impacts Relationships .....	48
How Forgiveness Impacts Divorce .....	50
How Forgiveness Impacts Coparenting .....	52
REACH Forgiveness Model .....	57
Theological Framework .....	64
Context and Related Scriptures.....	66
Loving God .....	69
Loving Others .....	78
Loving Oneself.....	86
Summary .....	92
Research Design.....	93
Instrumentation .....	93
Conclusion .....	94

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....	96
Problem and Purpose .....	96
Research Questions and Hypotheses .....	96
Research Question #1 .....	97
Research Question #2 .....	97
Research Question #3 .....	97
Population and Participants.....	98
Design of the Study.....	99
Procedure of the Study.....	102
Instrumentation .....	105
Variables .....	108
Data Collection .....	108
Data Analysis.....	109
Forgiveness and Unforgiveness .....	109
Coparenting.....	110
Ethical Procedures .....	111
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS.....	112
Problem and Purpose .....	112
Participants.....	113
Cleaning of Data .....	114
Initial Equivalence of Conditions .....	114
Research Question #1 .....	115
Research Question #2 .....	118

Research Question #3 .....	119
Summary of Major Findings.....	123
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION.....	125
Major Findings.....	125
Research Question #1: Increase in Forgiveness Levels.....	126
Research Question #2: Increase in Coparenting .....	130
Research Question #3: Positive Relationship Between Forgiveness and Coparenting.....	133
Implications of the Findings .....	137
Limitations of the Study.....	142
Unexpected Observations .....	144
Recommendations.....	145
Postscript.....	147
APPENDICES	
A. TRIM-R and TRIM-A.....	149
B. Decisional Forgiveness Scale.....	150
C. Emotional Forgiveness Scale .....	151
D. Coparenting Questionnaire .....	152
E. Demographic Survey .....	153
F. Informed Consent Letter.....	155
REFERENCES .....	158

List of Tables

Page

**Table 4.1** Means and Standard Deviations of the Wait list and Immediate-Treatment Conditions ..... 121

## List of Figures

	Page
Figure 3.1. Wait list Design .....	100
Figure 3.2. CONSORT Flow Chart to Track Participants' Progress through the Study.	105
Figure 4.1. TRIM across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times.....	121
Figure 4.2. DFS across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times .....	122
Figure 4.3. EFS across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times.....	122
Figure 4.4. CQ across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times .....	123

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## Chapter 1

### Problem

For the last thirty years, the divorce rate in the United States has ranged between 40–50% (Clark-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Gaulier, Margerum, Price, & Windell, 2007), and research indicates that the divorce rate is approximately 10% worse for second marriages (Engblom-Deglmann, 2009; Ganong, Coleman, & Weaver, 2002). With this level of marital dissolution, almost half of the children born today will experience the divorce of their parents (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989), and because approximately three quarters of those who divorce will remarry (Amato, 2000), many children will experience more than one divorce during their childhood. Parents who divorce may be legally separated from their former spouses, but they remain tied to one another through their children, thus facing the challenge of coparenting.

The hurt, anger, and sense of injury experienced after most divorces will often impair or reduce the functioning of the divorcing individuals and their families. The divorce often impacts each individual's parenting, coparenting, professional work, and social functioning (Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Bevvino & Sharkin, 2003; Bonach, 2007; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Everett, 1991; Fruzzetti, 2006; Johnston, 1994; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Margulies, 2007; Moon, 2011; Sakraida, 2005; Smith & Bradford, 1997; Stewart, 2005; Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wallenstein & Lewis, 2004; Wang & Amato, 2000). With approximately half of all marriages ending in injuries of this kind, the problems facing divorcing parents are substantial.

The families most severely impacted by divorce, however, are the approximately 20–25% of parents and children involved in high-conflict divorces (Gaulier et al., 2007; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Malcore, 2011; R. Stewart, 2001). A high-conflict divorce is one in which the level of cooperative coparenting is low and the level of conflict is high. The conflict has a chronic quality and the relationship has an intense degree of emotional reactivity, anger, blame, dysfunctional communication, and/or the vilification of the other parent (Levite & Cohen, 2012; Anderson, Anderson, Palmer, Mutchler, & Baker, 2011; Weeks & Treat, 2001). These parents are what Gaulier, Margerum, Price, and Windell (2007) call the angry 20% who are unable to end their marriages without prolonged anger, conflict, and coparenting problems. Without effective interventions, these couples will continue to battle throughout their children's lifetimes resulting in years of poor coparenting and injury after injury to each other and their children.

Coparenting is an enterprise of two or more adults, typically parents, who take on the shared responsibility to care for and raise a child or children (McHale, 2007; McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). When children are part of family relationships in which they are cared for and socialized by multiple parenting figures, some sort of coparenting is occurring (McHale, 2007; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). In the 1970s and 1980s as more and more children began to be raised in post-divorce coparenting situations, evidence began to emerge that severe emotional and behavioral distress was occurring in the lives of these children (Emery, 1982; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). However, in families where coparenting existed and parents worked well together and supported one another's parenting efforts, the children's functioning, development, and mental health were not as

severely impacted, and children showed far fewer signs of distress (Bonach, 2007; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; McHale, 2007; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Coparenting can make all the difference in the world for a developing child, and its absence can be devastating to that child.

Unfortunately, high-conflict divorced parents typically lack any reasonable ability to coparent cooperatively (Anderson et al., 2011; Carter, 2011; Gaulier et al., 2007; Henry, Fieldstone, Thompson, Treharne, 2011; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The high level of conflict in these parental relationships and the lack of coparenting, injures children even more severely than the typical divorce (Anderson et al., 2011; Carter, 2011; Gaulier et al., 2007; Henry et al., 2011; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The intensity of the pain, anger experienced, and lack of forgiveness in these damaged relationships is immense and can be long-term if proper healing is not achieved (Bonach, 2007, 2009; Fruzzetti, 2006). These negative effects lead many researchers and clinicians to seek ways to reduce the trauma of divorce and its effects, especially its impact on the children of divorce.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an increased interest and push from professionals in a variety of fields to find ways to decrease conflict, increase positive exchanges, and increase coparenting in divorce (Deutsch, 2008; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Some recent attempts have included parent education programs, collaborative family law approaches, divorce consultations, differentiated evaluations, mental health counseling and divorce recovery services, focused therapeutic interventions or reunification therapy, and parenting coordination. Some of these approaches such as parent education have been around for many years but have been finding new momentum while others such as

collaborative family law and parenting coordination are quite new. These interventions all show great promise and all have an important role helping to reduce conflict and facilitate more effective coparenting and reduce problems associated with divorce (Deutsch, 2008).

Recent studies also indicate that forgiveness interventions may be another effective way to decrease conflict and increase cooperative coparenting as well as decreasing the negative emotional, psychological, and relational damage for both the parent and the child (Bonach, 2007, 2009; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Rye, Fleri, et al., 2012). Extensive research has been completed on the usefulness of forgiveness in general and its ability to increase relationship satisfaction and decrease interpersonal conflict. Forgiveness has been shown to increase emotional, psychological, relational, and even physical health. Currently I know of no research on the use of forgiveness interventions in high-conflict divorces where coparenting is involved. This study theorized that a robust forgiveness intervention would increase forgiveness and increase cooperative coparenting in high-conflict divorce cases.

Researchers have developed interventions to help people with interpersonal wounds increase their level of forgiveness. One intervention that has received much outcome research is the REACH model of forgiveness (Worthington, 2001, 2003, 2006; Worthington, Jennings, & DiBlasio, 2010). According to the REACH model, an effective way to achieve forgiveness can be described in a series of five important steps labeled REACH: (a) Recalling the hurt, (b) Empathy development, (c) Altruistic gift of forgiveness, (d) Committing publicly to forgive, (e) Holding onto forgiveness. This model is a psycho-educational intervention that is typically offered in a group led by a

facilitator. Over the course of a number of studies, participants in REACH psycho-educational programs report less anger, reduced conflict, increased relational satisfaction, increased forgiveness levels, and decreased unforgiveness (Worthington, 2001, 2003; 2005; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000; Worthington, Hunter, et al., 2010).

The use of an individual workbook format is a recent innovation in the ongoing development of the REACH intervention. Recent studies have demonstrated that the REACH intervention can be successfully converted into a self-directed workbook while maintaining its effectiveness (Harper, et al., 2013; Greer, Worthington, & Lavelock, 2012; Lavelock, & Worthington, 2012). The ability to convert the program into a self-directed workbook allows greater flexibility in order to assist populations that are difficult to gather together in a facilitator-led group. One can surmise that the difficult-to-reach population of high-conflict parents could benefit from the REACH intervention. For this reason, this study set out to test whether providing a psycho-educational, workbook-based forgiveness intervention with high-conflict divorced individuals would increase their level of forgiveness and increase cooperative coparenting.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients.

### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of the study, three research questions provided a focus for this investigation into the effectiveness of a seven-week, self-directed, psycho-

educational forgiveness workbook based on the REACH model to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients.

### **Research Question #1**

Would parents in high-conflict divorces who complete the forgiveness workbook intervention report a decreased level of unforgiveness and an increased level of forgiveness?

### **Research Question #2**

Would parents in high-conflict divorces who complete the forgiveness workbook intervention demonstrate an increased level of cooperative coparenting?

### **Research Question #3**

Would forgiveness levels predict cooperative coparenting over and above variance that is explained by the demographic variables including gender, age, race, religious affiliation, and circumstantial differences, including, time since divorce and length of time married?

## **Definition of Terms**

Several terms found in the purpose statement of this study need to be defined. These terms are high-conflict divorce, coparenting, forgiveness, and psycho-educational forgiveness program. Each of these terms is used with very specific definitions within this study.

### **High-Conflict Divorce**

For the purpose of this study, high-conflict divorce was defined as a divorce that was more severe than a normal level of conflict yet not to the point of domestic violence.

It also needed to have a chronic quality and have a high degree of emotional reactivity, anger, blame, difficulty communicating about and cooperating with coparenting, and/or the vilification of the other parent (Levite and Cohen, 2012; Anderson et al., 2011; Weeks & Treat, 2001).

### **Coparenting**

Coparenting, cooperative coparenting, quality coparenting, and positive attitude towards coparenting were used interchangeably within this dissertation and were defined as the process of parents working together in the same direction or aimed at achieving this goal. An attitude of cooperation and a willingness to work together and share decisions and the parenting process is present. The parents cooperate with each other for the best interest of the child. They share a belief that both parents are important in the child's life despite difficulties the parents may have with each other.

### **Forgiveness**

For the purpose of this study, forgiveness occurs when a person who has been unjustly hurt releases resentment towards the offender and offers goodwill and compassion instead (Edwards, 2007; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Worthington, 2005). The definition includes cognitions, emotions, and behaviors within both decisional and emotional forgiveness. Decisional forgiveness is a behavioral choice and intention to resist an unforgiving stance and action and to respond differently toward a transgressor. The person chooses to act in ways that are empathy based and offers worth and dignity to the other person despite his or her past hurtful actions. Emotional forgiveness is the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions. The person replaces hot emotions, such as anger, resentment, fear, or



bitter rumination, following a perceived hurt or offense with positive emotions, such as agape love, empathy, and compassion.

### **Psycho-Educational Forgiveness Program**

For the purpose of this study, psycho-educational forgiveness program was defined as a specifically tailored version of the REACH forgiveness model with an adjustment in two primary ways. First, the REACH forgiveness program, which typically has a psycho-educational presentation with a leader-facilitated delivery and a participant manual, was developed into a self-directed workbook through which the participants could work on a weekly basis. Second, the REACH workbook program was adapted for high-conflict divorce coparenting individuals.

### **Ministry Project**

Research has clearly demonstrated the significant damage that can occur to children, adolescents, parents, and families involved in divorces where forgiveness is lacking and conflict is high. Children often lose their childhood and have significant damaged relationships with one or both parents. These children are negatively affected emotionally, relationally, psychologically, and behaviorally. The parents are also negatively affected in their ability to parent their children, in their relationship with their child or children, and in their level of joy in coparenting. In addition, families are torn apart and friendship groups and communities are frequently strained. The noteworthy negative effect of high-conflict divorces demonstrated a need for interventions to help reduce these effects, increase forgiveness, and increase coparenting in high-conflict divorce situations.

Often children in these high-conflict divorcing families are referred for counseling. When child counseling occurs, a parent typically sits in the waiting room much of the time simply waiting while the children receive counseling. I believed that this time could be better used to help the parents increase forgiveness and cooperative coparenting. In order to address this issue, a seven-week, psycho-educational workbook program was created for divorced coparents based upon the REACH forgiveness model. The workbook was also adapted to fit congruently in much of the terminology, concepts, and some techniques with Enright's forgiveness model (Enright, 2001, 2012) and Luskin's forgiveness model (Luskin, 2002) so as to fit well with three primary evidenced-based models of forgiveness available to the public without compromising the REACH model approach.

I theorized that this seven-hour (across seven weeks) psycho-educational forgiveness model would decrease unforgiveness, increase forgiveness, and increase cooperative coparenting with this population. Because these factors both directly and indirectly affect all parties involved in the divorce, changing them would improve the lives for all parties involved, including children, adolescents, adult coparents, and families. The negative effect of high-conflict divorces could be ameliorated and lives could be improved through this intervention.

### **Context**

The project was conducted among parents of children receiving counseling services who are involved in a high conflict divorce. These parents all reside in a large metropolitan area in Central Florida that is home to several million people. The project drew from seven counties and numerous towns and cities. The population of this area is

diverse in race, ethnicity, culture, background, lifestyles, and values. Although the area has extensive resources available to the population, the area also has a large transient population, and many families lack social and familial roots and extensive social support systems. Typically only one parent was involved in bringing a child to counseling services and only one parent was available for the study.

### **Methodology**

This randomized control trial used an immediate treatment/wait-list control design (Kiefer, et al., 2010; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Rye, Fleri, et al., 2012; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010) with a seven-week follow-up to test for changes in forgiveness level (unforgiveness, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness) and cooperative coparenting. It used two conditions of sixteen randomly assigned adult participants (N=32) from a pool of high-conflict divorced individuals whose children were receiving counseling services at a counseling center. This design allowed for a control group and a follow-up group, while still affording all study participants the intervention, eliminating ethical concerns that can occur in some studies regarding the withholding of treatment (Creswell, 2009).

The study was completed over a total of twenty-one weeks. The workbook was designed for completion within seven weeks (seven, one-hour, self-directed workbook sessions). Participants were initially evaluated by a licensed therapist to assess if they met the definition of high-conflict divorced coparents. Once participants were selected, they were paired and randomly assigned, one to the immediate treatment condition (IT) and the other to the wait list condition (WT). The two participants simultaneously progressed through the study together. The immediate treatment condition (IT) received the seven-

week treatment condition/REACH psycho-educational workbook between observation one (O1) and observation two (O2). The wait list treatment condition (WT) received the seven-week treatment condition/REACH psycho-educational workbook between observation two (O2) and observation three (O3).

Initially both conditions (IT and WT) received pretest measures during (O1) to serve as baselines for both conditions. Following O1 the IT condition of randomly assigned adult participants received the intervention (X) while the WT condition of randomly assigned adult participants served as a control group and received no intervention. After the seven-week intervention was completed for the IT condition, both conditions were tested a second time (O2). These second measures were administered in order to compare outcomes reported by participants assigned to the immediate treatment condition to outcomes reported by participants assigned to the wait list condition.

The WT condition then began the seven-week intervention. After the intervention was completed for WT, both conditions were assessed a third time (O3). The third assessment functioned as a follow-up and post treatment assessment for the IT and WT control conditions, respectively. The follow-up observation measured how well the intervention results were maintained, assessing if the results dissipated, sustained, or became enriched in some manner. This design allowed all participants eventually to receive the intervention while still having the benefit of a control group.

### **Participants**

Participants were chosen randomly from a pool of high-conflict divorced individuals whose children were receiving counseling services at a counseling center. The study used two study conditions of sixteen randomly assigned adult participants, thirty-

two total participants (N=32). As an inclusion criterion, all participants were identified as being part of a high-conflict divorce during the assessment process for their children's treatment. During a standard assessment process, all parents bringing their children into treatment are commonly interviewed to gather clinical data. At that time, individuals in high-conflict divorces were identified, informed of the study, and offered an opportunity to participate in the research.

### **Instrumentation**

Three measurements were used to measure forgiveness. Unforgiveness was measured by the Transgression-Related Inventory of Motivations (McCullough, Rachel, et al., 1998). Decisional forgiveness was measured by the Decisional Forgiveness Scale (Hook et al., 2007). Emotional forgiveness was measured by the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (Hook et al., 2007). These scales were completed three times (O1, O2, O3) serving as a comparison between the two conditions and a pre- and posttest for each of the two conditions (immediate treatment and wait list treatment).

Cooperative coparenting was measured with the Coparenting Questionnaire (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001) modified for divorced parents (Rye, Fleri, et al., 2012). This scale was completed three times (O1, O2, O3), serving as a comparison between the two conditions and as a pre- and posttest for each of the two conditions (immediate treatment and wait list treatment).

### **Variables**

This study included several different types of variables, including an independent variable, several dependent variables, and several intervening variables. The independent variable was the seven-week, psycho-educational forgiveness workbook intervention.

The dependent variables in this study were forgiveness level and level of cooperative coparenting.

An intervening or confounding variable was active participation and fidelity to the workbook. As this study included a self-directed workbook, active participation was an intervening variable. At the beginning of the study, each participant signed a contract to complete one hour per week. In addition, at the end of each week the participant reported how much time was spent on the study that week.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected over twenty-one weeks. Participants were initially evaluated to assess if they met the definition of high-conflict divorced coparents. Once participants were selected, they were paired and were randomly assigned, one to the immediate treatment condition and the other to the wait list condition. The two participants simultaneously progressed through the study together. Participants were pretested on the first day they entered into the study at O1 to formulate a baseline. Demographic data was also collected at this time using the demographic data assessment form. Participants in the immediate treatment condition received the seven-week workbook intervention between observation one and observation two and were given posttests with all of the measurement tools at observation two. The wait list condition participants were also tested using all of the measurement tools at observation two as the control group. The wait list condition then received the seven-week workbook intervention between observation two and observation three while the immediate treatment condition received no treatment during this time. Both conditions were tested again at observation three using all the measurement tools. The wait list treatment condition was tested to provide

posttest scores. The immediate treatment condition was tested to assess for maintenance of progress.

### **Data Analysis**

This quantitative study used descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample. Inferential statistics assessed the change in forgiveness level and the change in cooperative coparenting from before the intervention to after the intervention and assessed the relationship between forgiveness and cooperative coparenting.

**Forgiveness and unforgiveness.** Forgiveness and unforgiveness were measured with the Decisional Forgiveness Scale, the Emotional Forgiveness Scale, and the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale. A between–within subjects 2 x 3(s) [condition x time(s)] multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine the effect of treatment in two conditions (immediate treatment condition vs. wait list control condition) across three time periods on unforgiveness, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness ratings. When significant multivariate effects were found, a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVAs) was completed on each dependent measure to determine the locus of any observed effects. Univariate analysis of variances indicated the locus of effect for each category: unforgiveness, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness.

**Cooperative coparenting.** Cooperative coparenting was measured with the Coparenting Questionnaire (CQ). A between–within subjects 2 x 3(s) [condition x time(s)] analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine the effect of treatment

on coparenting behaviors in two conditions (immediate treatment condition vs. wait list control condition) across three time periods.

**Forgiveness and coparenting.** The relationship between forgiveness and cooperative coparenting was measured using a three-level hierarchical multiple regression, which was computed using the coparenting outcomes (CQ) as a dependent variable. In the first block, demographic factors already known to predict variance in coparenting were included. The second block contained both demographic and circumstantial factors. The third block included forgiveness outcomes (EFS, DFS) to determine if forgiveness predicts attitude toward coparenting when controlling for the influence of the same demographic variables.

### **Generalizability**

This study is generalizable to high-conflict divorcing couples. This study is limited in that the sample size is small. The study may be limited by ethnicity, gender, religion, and other demographic factors. The extent to which this intervention could be useful for individuals who have no serious need for increasing forgiveness levels or who possess a positive attitude towards cooperative coparenting, as in low-conflict divorces and cooperative coparents, is unknown.

### **Theological Foundation**

Although recently science has begun to do research within the field of interpersonal forgiveness, until this change, most forgiveness work had been firmly rooted in religious arenas. Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, and Buddhist holy texts all have important concepts related to forgiveness either as originating with God, as a virtue people should choose, as a practice of healing relationships, or as way of preventing



damage to one's well-being. Within the United States, however, most religious discussions and exploration has occurred within Christian or Judeo-Christian circles. As Worthington (2005) states, when working in the arena of forgiveness, the theological foundations should not be ignored. As such, the theological foundation for this project is outlined briefly in this section and expanded upon in Chapter 2.

The theology of this project came out of, and is structured within, what is often referred to as the most important and greatest commandment of the Christian faith found in Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12: 28–31. In addition, the theological work of Volf (1996, 2005), Jones (1995) and Worthington and Sharp (2006) were foundational for this study and necessary in order to explore the implementation of this commandment.

In Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12: 28–31, Jesus declared that the greatest of all commandments involves loving God, loving others, and loving self properly. In doing so, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:4, which is often called the *Shema* and is considered sacred to the Jewish faith, and another important Scripture found in Leviticus 19:18 (Edwards, 2002). Although Jesus gave two commandments, he asserted that they are united. The two combined are the greatest commandment from which all other commandments are derived (Edwards, 2002; Gundry, 1993; Hooker, 1991).

As mentioned, in these passages Jesus asserted that loving God means loving others and loving self and that people are commanded to do all three: love God, love others, love themselves. Working within the structure of the Great Commandment, many important theological aspects of forgiveness can be discussed. Several of these aspects can be directly drawn from the commandment itself. For instance, the love of God, God's desire for people to love one another, God's desire for people to love themselves properly

can be drawn directly from the commandment. Several important aspects of forgiveness, however, are not drawn directly but are implied within the commandment. For instance, God's promoting of forgiveness and God's desire for people to have healthy relationships are implied but not directly stated within the commandment. The theological analysis briefly described here and more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2 will show how forgiveness is embedded in the Great Commandment even though it is not explicitly stated.

Because God is clear in Scripture that he desires people to forgive each other, people seeking to love God, to follow his commands, and people seeking to respond gratefully to his love should seek to forgive one another as God forgave them. When individuals experience God's love and God's forgiveness, they should be willing to seek to become forgiving people. People's response to God's love, to his forgiveness, and to his desires for them will find that to do so requires becoming forgiving people (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996, 2005).

God asks people to love others and to forgive them because he loves them and forgave them. God has a loving and forgiving character (Oden & Oden, 2006), and because people are made in his likeness, they have the capacity to love and forgive one another (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996, 2005). Ephesians 4:32, Romans 5:8, Colossians, and Matthew 18:21–35 are just a few of the many Scriptures that demonstrate God's desire for people to forgive each other. The clear theme of Scripture is that people are to forgive each other as God has forgiven them. More Scriptures displaying God's offering of forgiveness and his desire for people to forgive each other are discussed in Chapter 2.

As people and human relationships are imperfect, the command to love others can only occur if people have the ability to offer and receive forgiveness. Healthy relationships require forgiveness, as individuals cannot resolve differences very well without it. Without forgiveness, people get stuck in what Volf (1996) terms the spiral of vengeance. This downward spiral of conflict and vengeance is common in divorce and often results in severe consequences for the children (Bradford, Vaughn, & Barber, 2008; Emery, 1982; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009; Martin, Vosvick, & Riggs, 2012; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009). Having the ability and willingness to forgive a former spouse is one important way for a divorced coparent to love and protect their children.

The command to love oneself requires the ability to forgive as holding on to resentments becomes a poison. Forgiveness has been well documented to assist with healthy living and to aid in both physical and mental health issues (Enright, 2001; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen 2000; Shechtman, Wade, & Khoury, 2009; Wade, Worthington, & Haake, 2009, Worthington, 2005). When people forgive, they open themselves up to form healthy relationships, reclaim happiness, and achieve peace despite having been treated unjustly (Smedes, 1984).

Theologically forgiveness is intimately connected with the Greatest Commandment. Forgiveness is an essential part of loving God, loving others, and loving self. Loving God involves following his commands and God commands his people to forgive one another. God expects people to forgive each other as they gratefully respond to his love and forgiveness for them. He expects his love and forgiveness to yield a willingness to love and forgive others.

Forgiveness is loving others because it releases people of the injustices committed. It offers freedom, creates the opportunity for healing, and allows the cycle of vengeance to stop. Forgiveness frees individuals, couples, and families to be healthier and to function better.

Lastly, forgiveness is loving self because it releases the forgivers from resentment, bitterness, and hatred and frees them to live physically, emotionally, and relationally healthy lives. Forgiveness is good for people, and it is good for those around them.

Forgiveness is clearly an essential part of loving God. Forgiveness is certainly a vital part of loving others and maintaining healthy relationships. Forgiveness is also an important part of self-care. Forgiveness, therefore, intimately follows from and is embedded within the Great Commandment.

### **Overview**

Chapter 2 establishes the foundational review of literature and pertinent research on the impact of divorce on children and families, in general, and high-conflict divorces specifically. It also reviews literature on forgiveness as a way to resolve interpersonal betrayals in general, forgiveness within divorce, and forgiveness as a way to increase coparenting. Also within Chapter 2, the REACH forgiveness model is examined, the theological foundation of this project is further reviewed, and a brief exploration of this study's research design is offered. Chapter 3 presents a detailed explanation of the project's design, the research methods, and the methods of data analysis. Chapter 4 reports the findings of the study. Chapter 5 discusses the major findings of the study and

the practical applications that flow out of the research. It also offers suggestions for further inquiry.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients. With the prevalence of divorce and the negative impact divorce has on all parties involved, the importance of finding ways to reduce the negative effects of divorce cannot be overstated. First, this literature review explores the impact and effects of divorce on children and family members, in general, and within high-conflict divorces, in particular. Second, this literature review explores the use of forgiveness as a way to resolve interpersonal betrayals, in the context of divorce, and then within the context of coparenting after divorce. Third, this literature review looks at the REACH forgiveness model. Fourth, this literature review presents the theological foundations of this project. Finally, this review presents the research design for this project.

#### **The Impact and Effects of Divorce**

Divorce has been around almost as long as marriages (Clark-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). Divorce has always been a life-changing phenomenon that results in emotional, social, psychological, and relational upheaval as each individual involved goes through the pain and difficult adjustment involved. These changes are often accompanied by feelings of anger, depression, grief, loneliness, and a range of other emotions (Engblom-Deglmann, 2009).

### **How Divorce Impacts Children and Family Members**

Few common family injuries are as traumatic and pervasively destructive and hurtful as a divorce for all family members. Divorce is frequently considered almost as traumatic as the death of a spouse for the divorcing couple (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Margulies, 2007) and often even more immense, intense, and pervasive for the children of the divorce. The consequences are severe and complex (Everett, 1991). The injurious effects to children and families are well documented and numerous as research reflects a wide range of cognitive, emotional, relational, and behavioral factors that are tied to post-divorce adjustment (Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Bevvino & Sharkin, 2003; Bonach, 2007; Emery, 1982; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Everett, 1991; Fruzzetti, 2006; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Johnson, 1994; Margulies, 2007; Moon, 2011; Sakraida, 2005; Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Smith & Bradford, 1997; Stewart, 2005; Sweeper, & Halford, 2006; Tschann et al., 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Wang & Amato, 2000). Typically the pain does not go away easily, nor does it end when the divorce becomes final. It can often remain for years following the divorce, cheating divorced adults out of life's enjoyment and many times cheating children out of their childhood (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

Much divorce literature indicates that children from intact families have far fewer behavioral problems and demonstrate greater psychological adjustment than children from divorced or remarried families (Moon, 2011). As Clinton and Trent (2007) point out, serious emotional, psychological, social, interpersonal, financial, custodial, coparenting, stress management issues, and many other deep wounds occur because of

divorce. This reality was emphasized by a longitudinal research study on children of divorce by Wallerstein and Lewis (2004).

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) followed 131 children, ages 13–18 when their parents divorced, for 25 years after their parents' divorces, assessing their functioning along the way and comparing that to the functioning of their peers from intact families. They reported a statistically significant difference between the functioning of the two groups and appeared to demonstrate that when parents divorce they are not creating a truncated version of the intact family, as many think, but are fundamentally and radically changing the family into something very different from an intact family with negative outcomes for their children. In fact, many of these children reported that their childhood ended when their parents divorced. This study demonstrated that divorce is not simply an acute, stressful, short-lived event but rather a life-transforming event. Things are typically never the same after a divorce.

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found that many adult children of divorce reported serious relationship difficulties, difficulty understanding how to love and to be loved throughout life, increased sexual acting out in their adolescence, poorer selection of relationship partners (often choosing fairly troubled partners), or resistance to relationships. In addition, earlier and more heavy drug use over a longer period of time, lower likelihood of attending college, commitment struggles, higher levels of anxiety, and many more impulsive and destructive choices are also much more common in children of divorce.

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) also found that parent–child relationships were harmed. When the marriage ends, parent–child relationships often change in ways that



are not predictable from their course during the marriage. Childhood and parenthood are changed and are often heavily burdened. In fact, even children who maintained regular contact with their nonresidential fathers tended to have much less contact with their fathers once they became adults compared to their peers from intact families.

Divorce may set many adults free, and many second marriages may be happier for the adult however, these benefits do not typically extend to their children. Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found that divorce births fewer marriages, poorer quality marriages, and more pervasive divorces, producing a negative, life-transforming event for children. The consequences of divorce are substantial.

Many of these children experience their parents' divorce as a form of sacred loss or as a desecration of something very sacred. As a result, many of these children have spiritual struggles and rejection of their faith or religion. By rejecting their faith and religion, children lose one more possible avenue for support, comfort, and strength. These children report higher levels of depression, anxiety, parental blame, self-blame, feelings of loss, a sense of abandonment, and intrusive thoughts, often viewing life through the lens of divorce (Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009).

Amato and Sobolewski (2001) used a 17-year longitudinal study from two generations to demonstrate many of these same effects within adults who had experienced divorce as children. They demonstrated the causal relationship between divorce and children's psychological well-being. Their research showed how divorce actually has a cumulative impact as time goes by, often times influencing generations rather than diminishing over time. Divorce has been well documented to transmit from one generation to the next. Amato and DeBoer (2001) report that divorce approximately

doubled the odds that the children would be in marriages that end in divorce and that each future generation will likely see an increase in numbers of divorces.

Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet (1991) found that divorce increased the odds of the children eventually becoming divorced themselves by approximately 70% for daughters and by 189% if both the child and his or her future spouse's parents had been divorced. Amato & DoBoer (2001) report that parental divorce is one of the strongest predictors of children's eventual likelihood of becoming divorced themselves someday. Children of divorce encounter greater difficulties in achieving loving relationships, healthy sexual intimacy, and a strong commitment to marriage and parenthood (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

### **How High-Conflict Divorce Impacts Children and Family Members**

To make things worse, children who experience a high-conflict divorce have all of these same problems but with more severity. Children of high-conflict divorces have even greater behavior and psychological difficulties and have much less ability to cope with life stressors than children whose parents find a way to get along (Emery, 1982; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Ongoing interparental discord and tension undermines the child's sense of self, sense of trust, and sense of security and often impacts the way the child views the world, relationships, authority, and themselves. Bradford, Vaughn, and Barber (2008) demonstrated that overt interparental conflict yielded increased linkages to antisocial behavior and covert interparental conflict yielded increases in depression and antisocial behaviors in youth ages 12–18.

Often the ongoing parental conflict specifically is more damaging than the divorce itself. This pervasive conflict frequently places children at the greatest risk for

social, emotional, and behavioral problems (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Jekielek, 1998; Malcore, 2011; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). Emery (1982) places the trauma a child receives from a high conflict divorce at the same level as having a parent die.

Research clearly demonstrates that high levels of interparental conflict after divorce are predicative of child emotional and behavioral maladjustment and poorer child outcomes, including increasing a child's chances by two to four times the likelihood that he or she will actually become clinically disturbed compared with the national norms (Johnston, 1994). This painful process of a high-conflict divorce is associated with even greater rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, and increased difficulties for children, including suicidal thoughts and behaviors, greater than in a typical divorce (Fruzzetti, 2006).

Conflict is virtually always involved to some degree with couples (Gottman & Silver, 1999). However, the potential for conflict to escalate beyond the normal level is well established within the literature (Anderson et al., 2011), and approximately one fourth of divorces involve high conflict (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). These divorces are disastrous for everyone involved, especially the children. Although this fact is true, in most divorce research, rarely are conceptual distinctions made along the types or level of conflict. The term *high-conflict divorce* is quite commonly used in literature across a variety of fields, including divorce, family court, and psychotherapy (Anderson et al., 2011) and is usually used to refer to couples whose timing, duration, frequency, and intensity of their conflict results in fairly extensive negative effects for the relationship, the individual partners, children, and other family members (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

Although commonly used, the term is difficult to define precisely in a clinically meaningful way and typically is defined rather subjectively (Anderson et al., 2011), leaving numbers of high-conflict divorces likely to be underrepresented. Because the literature within both the legal and treatment spheres does not offer a consensus as to what occurs exactly within these relationships and what differentiates couples with regular conflict, and those with high conflict, identifying high-conflict couples can be difficult (Anderson et al., 2011).

Weeks and Treat (2001) describe three types of conflict in couples. Low-conflict couples argue in fairly issue-specific and solution-focused ways. They accept responsibility for issues easily, have a healthy sense of trust between each other, and maintain a hopeful environment. Medium-conflict couples typically have more blaming, reacting, less solution focus, less trust, coparenting struggles, and less hope. They have more difficulty taking responsibility for issues or seeking solutions. These couples typically have more family of origin baggage that complicate and increase the conflict. High-conflict couples are similar to the medium category but with a much more chronic quality, more severe coparenting difficulties, and frequent vilification of the partner. In high-conflict couples, one or both parties typically lack much of an ability to take responsibility for their role in the conflicts. They focus more on their partners rather than solving the issue and usually have higher levels of frustration, resentment, anger, distrust and pessimism or helplessness about their partner (Anderson et al., 2011). Lavee and Olson (1993) describe highly conflicted couples as having a high level of bitter personal attacks and being unhappy with the personal characteristics of their partners. Isaacs, Montalvo, & Abelson (2000) describe these difficult divorce situations as involving

former partners who often have a vested interest in injuring the other parent's role in their children's lives as they see the divorce as a war and cooperation as a form of giving in to the enemy. Gottman and Silver (1999) report that when criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, long-standing negative thoughts, and attribution errors about partners flourish within the relationship, these couples have perpetual problems and life-long misery relationally.

Anderson, Palmer, Mutchler, and Baker (2011) review literature concerning high-conflict divorce and offer a synthesis of their observations of court personnel and the authors' own clinical experiences. Conflict is envisioned along a continuum that positions high-conflict couples between low-conflict couples and those with violent relationships. High-conflict couples are defined as having pervasive negative exchanges and/or hostile, insecure emotional environments. They are often either characterized by recurring destructive communication patterns, defensiveness, counter attacking sequences, rapid escalation of conflict, unremitting change attempts, continual rejections of such attempts, and negative attributions between the couple and/or strong negative affect, a lack of safety, a sense of mutual distrust, emotional reactivity, triangulation, and enmeshment. Outcomes from these interaction patterns typically include frequent unsuccessful attempts at resolving their conflicts without assistance and failure of standard interventions to help resolve conflict.

For that reason, the last 15–20 years have been filled with significant attempts from a multitude of disciplines seeking to find ways to decrease conflict, increase positive exchanges, and increase coparenting in divorce especially for these high-conflict divorces (Deutsch, 2008; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Some of the recent attempts have

included parent education programs, collaborative family law approaches, divorce consultations, differentiated evaluations, mental health counseling, divorce recovery services, focused therapeutic interventions, reunification therapy, and parenting coordination (Deutsch, 2008). Some of these approaches such as parent education, have been around for many years but recently have been finding new momentum, while others like collaborative family law and parent coordination are quite new.

Although parent education programs have been around for years, the widespread availability of these programs has now reached every state within the United States and every province within Canada (Deutsch, 2008). Many states now even mandate attendance in a parenting program in order to get a divorce. Deutsch (2008) reports that some of the research that has been completed on these programs appears to show promising results with process-orientated, skill-based programs displaying more effectiveness than strictly informational programs, and programs of six hours or longer demonstrating more effectiveness than shorter programs (Deutsch, 2008; Bacon & McKenzie, 2004). The proliferation of these programs displays the overwhelming need for services that address divorce-related issues.

Collaborative family law is another approach that is growing in popularity and is now available in the United States, Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, and Australia. This service typically combines the use of a team approach to resolving disputes with the goal of decreasing conflict, emotional and relational damage, and preservation of the economic and emotional resources of the divorcing couples. These collaborative teams typically consist of an attorney for each client, a mental health professional and/or child specialist, a financial planner or forensic accountant, and sometimes even a divorce

coach. The process is negotiated so that all parties agree to proceed without litigation in order to avoid the destructive nature of the court process and do not rely on court-imposed solutions (Deutsch, 2008). This level of collaboration is very promising and can be a great benefit to couples as they seek to reduce conflict and increase cooperation in coparenting.

Divorce consultation with a mental health professional is another useful tool for parents seeking to find healthier ways to navigate through the divorce process. Parents will often use the services of a mental health professional to help them find more effective approaches to parenting, coparenting, and developing a useful and realistic parenting plan (Deutsch, 2008).

Differentiated evaluations are another process available to divorcing parents. These evaluations conducted by mental health professionals address issues related to the divorce process in order to facilitate healthier outcomes. These evaluations may include comprehensive custody evaluations or brief-focused evaluations at the request of the court, if the parents are unable or unwilling to agree on a parenting plan. These evaluations may also be used if allegations of child abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, visitation resistance, or alienated children are present (Deutsch, 2008). Divorces involve complex processes that are difficult for the parents, their attorneys, or the court to resolve in a healthy fashion without the assistance of further information and evaluation by a mental health professional.

Mental health counseling services, coparenting counseling, and divorce recovery services are other avenues available for families wanting to reduce conflict, increase cooperation, and increase healing while going through divorce. The typical formats

available are individual counseling for the parent and/or the child to help the parent and child adjust, cope, and recover from the divorce, coparenting counseling for the parental dyad, or group counseling for the children or parent. Divorce recovery groups and support groups for children, adults, or parents are commonly available through schools, community centers, and churches within the community. These divorce recovery groups and support groups are often led by trained mental health professionals, paraprofessionals, or volunteers.

Focused therapeutic interventions or reunification therapy can also be useful for divorcing parents who are struggling with more complex, pervasive, or particularly troubling issues taking place. For example, children sometimes refuse visitation with a parent due to substantial alienating factors. These alienating factors can result in the estrangement of the parent and create longstanding injury for the child (Deutsch, 2008). These therapeutic interventions can be extremely complex, time consuming, and nuanced for the therapist, but when they are effectively achieved, these interventions can often open up opportunities that previously did not appear possible.

Parent coordination is another intervention intended to help reduce conflict, increase coparenting, and resolve parenting-related issues more effectively. This intervention is one of the newest approaches to address high-conflict divorces (Deutsch, 2008). This court-ordered or mutually agreed-upon, child-centered, alternative, dispute-resolution approach uses a mental health or legal professional specifically trained in parent coordination to help parents implement their parenting plan and coparent by facilitating the resolution of their disputes more efficiently and more effectively (Carter, 2011; Gaulier et al., 2007; Henry et al., 2011). This approach is well suited for divorced



individuals who have refused or have failed at other intervention methods and are experiencing a high level of coparenting problems.

Some recent attempts have included parent education programs, collaborative family law divorce services, divorce consultations, differentiated evaluations, mental health counseling and divorce recovery services, focused therapeutic interventions or reunification therapy, and parenting coordination (Deutsch, 2008). Some of these approaches such as parent education have been around for many years but have been finding new momentum while others such as collaborative family law and parent coordination are quite new. These interventions all show great promise and all have an important role and play an important part in helping to reduce conflict and facilitate more effective coparenting, thereby reducing problems associated with divorce.

### **The Impact and Effects of Forgiveness**

This section of the literature review explores the use of forgiveness as a way to resolve interpersonal betrayals, in general, in the context of divorce, and within the context of coparenting after divorce, in particular. Social scientists and clinicians have recently demonstrated considerable interest in the positive effects of forgiveness (Fehr, Gelfand & Nag, 2010; Sandage & Worthington, 2010; Worthington, 2005). Some authors even suggest that every current model of psychotherapy has some forgiveness type of construct as part of the approach (Madanes, 1990; Sandage & Worthington, 2010).

### **The General Impact of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is defined as a prosocial process in which an individual who has been wronged in some way releases anger, resentment, and negative emotions towards the offender and offers goodwill, compassion, and positive emotions towards the offender

even though it is undeserved (Edwards, 2007; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachel, 1997). Enright (2001) defines forgiveness as a process in which individuals decide after rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, to forgive and to abandon resentment willfully and related responses to which they have a right and to choose to respond to the transgressor based upon the principle of beneficence, which often includes compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and love to which the transgressor, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right. Worthington (1998) defines forgiveness as a process in which individuals choose to release their right to retaliate against or withdraw emotionally from a wrongdoer after an offense.

Worthington (2001, 2003) describes two types of forgiving: decisional and emotional. Decisional forgiveness is the person's actual decision to forgive, not to seek revenge, not to avoid the wrongdoer except in cases where proximity might be dangerous and to treat the individual as a person of worth even though they may not have completely forgiven the person emotionally. Emotional forgiveness is the replacement of negative, unforgiving emotions such as toxic anger, resentment, fear, hostility, and bitterness with more healthy, protective, positive emotions such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, kindness, or love. Research studies have demonstrated that decisional forgiveness is related to behavior choices and to reducing revenge (Watkins et al., 2011; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007) and can, therefore, positively impact quality of life (Chi, Du, & Lam, 2011). In contrast, emotional forgiveness appears more related to the emotional qualities of life and may actually have more physical and mental health benefits (Chi et al., 2011; Worthington, Witvliet et al., 2007).

Forgiveness involves letting go of some unhealthy unproductive thoughts, emotions, and choices and taking hold of other healthier more productive thoughts, emotions, and choices. Forgiveness, therefore, acts much like an antibiotic and an inoculation. It is both a cure and a preventative protective action. It is a medicine that brings healing while also having a protective effect (Holeman, 2004).

People often misunderstand what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is often confused with condoning, overlooking, or excusing what happened or is happening. Forgiveness does not condone, overlook, or excuse wrongful behavior at all. Forgiveness is not the same as forbearing or enduring and does not ask a person to be subjected to inappropriate behaviors by unwisely removing necessary boundaries. Forgiving is also not the same as nor does it require forgetting or reconciling. Forgiveness leads to a reduction in toxic anger and hate yet forgiveness does not mean letting go of healthy, productive anger. Sometimes anger is very appropriate. Nontoxic anger will often spark healthy corrective action. For forgiveness to occur, it must begin with the acknowledgment that people have a right to be treated fairly and with respect. Forgiveness is about changing thoughts, perceptions and actions, not denying what has happened (Enright, 2001, 2012; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2001; Enright & North, 1998; Holeman, 2004; Luskin, 2002; Smedes, 1996; Spring, 2012; Worthington, 2001, 2003, 2005).

Enright (2001) points out that many people hold on to anger because they refuse to acknowledge hurt or they hold on to anger in an attempt to demonstrate strength or self-respect. People will sometimes perceive that they will lose power in some way by admitting that they have been hurt or by choosing to forgive. Unhealthy pride often

imprisons people in their toxic anger and quest for vengeance (Klein, 1997).

Unforgiveness, however, is often associated with fear, shame, and a sense of worthlessness while forgiveness is a much more respectful, noble, and protective route for people to take. Rather than remaining weakened by toxic anger, hostility, bitterness, and hate, forgiveness strengthens a person and frees them for more productive living (Enright, 2001; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2001; Enright & North, 1998; Holeman, 2004; Smedes, 1996; Worthington, 2001, 2003, 2005). Forgiveness demonstrates a commitment to self-care and health and actually reduces the likelihood of being reoffended (Wallace, Exline, & Baumeister, 2008).

Virtually all research in this area suggests that forgiveness is not a simple or easy task. Forgiveness involves overcoming many emotional, social, relational, and cognitive obstacles and barriers. For instance, the process of forgiving is heavily influenced by the relationship between the victim and the wrongdoer, the intent of the wrongdoer, the blame the victim attributes to the wrongdoer, the level of hurt experienced, the use of an apology, the level of empathy the victim has towards the wrongdoer, the level of anger the victim has towards the wrongdoer, and the severity of the offense (Fehr et al., 2010; Al-Mabuk, Deidrick, & Vanderah, 1998; McCullough, Worthington, Rachel, 1997; McCullough, Rachel, et al., 1998; McCullough, Pargament et al., 2000).

Many people have difficulty finding the strength to forgive. Some people do not know how to forgive. Some people, however, believe forgiveness should rarely even be pursued. For instance, Lamb and Murphy (2002) and Murphy (2003) find the glowing reports of forgiveness to be overrated. They caution people about its use and claim that unforgiveness, resentment, and the desire for revenge have an important purpose and

deserve a more respectful place in people's lives. In contrast, McCullough et al. (2000) state that no clinical evidence exists that forgiveness is harmful and extensive evidence supports the danger of unforgiveness and the intense healing power of forgiveness (Enright, 1998, 2001; Green, DeCourville, & Sadava, 2012; Harris & Thoresen, 2006; Worthington, 1998, 2005). Mental health professionals and researchers have spent considerable time exploring the dynamics and effectiveness of forgiveness and have found that forgiveness can free people to live better functioning lives, decrease unwanted anger and its dangerous side effects, reduce stress, increase psychological well-being, and allow people to enjoy relationships and the process of living more effectively.

Although much of the early exploration and discussions of forgiveness had centered in religious discussions (Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga & Zungu-Dirwayi, 2000; Waldron & Kelly, 2008; Worthington, 2005), recently social science affirms the power of forgiveness. Research has demonstrated that forgiveness improves relationship satisfaction. Forgiveness is also associated with higher levels of self-esteem (DiBlasio & Benda, 2002) and more emotional stability (McCullough, 2001). Researchers have also demonstrated that forgiveness has a wide range of important medical, relational, and psychological benefits in a broad array of population groups.

Research indicates that forgiveness is a useful part of the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse (Beckenbach, 2003, Freedman & Enright, 1996; O'Leary, 2008), spousal abuse survivors (Reed and Enright, 2006) and victims of parental neglect (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995). It has also been shown to decrease vulnerability to substance use in individuals who struggle with drug and alcohol dependence (Lin, Enright, Mack, Krahn, & Baskin, 2004). Forgiveness has also demonstrated powerful

healing effects for eating disorder patients, suicide survivors, HIV/AIDS patients (Martin et al., 2012), and cancer patients, to name just a few. It has been shown to have powerful effects for children, adolescents, adults, elderly, and a wide variety of cultural, ethnic, and other populations. In addition, forgiveness reduces health risks and promotes health resilience (Kendler, Liu, Gardner, McCullough, Larson, & Prescott, 2003; Luskin, 2002; Noll, 2005; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001; Worthington, 1998, 2005; Worthington, Mazzeo, & Kliever, 2002; Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007).

### **How Forgiveness Impacts Relationships**

Forgiveness has also demonstrated considerable power as a way to resolve interpersonal betrayals and heal relationships. The positive individual and relationship benefits of forgiveness are well-known. Relationships need forgiveness in order to survive and thrive (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Burchard et al., 2003; DiBlasio & Benda, 2008; Enright, 2001, 2012; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Fincham, 2000; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010).

Several studies that explore the impact of forgiveness on relationships are particularly noteworthy. Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich and Fincham (2007) looked at 180 participants in romantic relationships. Participants answered questions about forgiving the most serious transgression they had ever had in their relationships. They found that relationship satisfaction increased with the participants' ability to forgive. Forgiveness demonstrated power within intimate relationships, including marriage, dating, and cohabitation.

In Edwards' (2007) study, 312 people completed questionnaires in order to examine how attachment, conflict, empathy, and forgiveness are related and how they contribute to satisfaction in relationships. Higher forgiveness levels were associated with higher relationship satisfaction. Similarly, in a study by Burchard et al. (2003) of marital enrichment programs, they found that a positive correlation exists between quality of life and disposition to forgive.

Often changes occur in what good and bad motivations the victim attributes to the wrongdoer as the individual moves through the forgiveness process. Through the forgiveness process, the victim may even begin to develop a deeper understanding of the wrongdoer. Often, because of the forgiveness offered, significant decreases in negativity and hostility occur (Gordon & Baucom, 1998). In a similar study, Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, and Litzinger (2009) researched the relationship between family functioning and forgiveness. The participants included 87 women and 74 men, their spouses, and their adolescent children. All participants reported having experienced a serious interpersonal betrayal. Less positive forgiveness, holding a grudge, or desiring revenge was associated with less marital satisfaction. Higher forgiveness levels were associated with more satisfaction and a greater parenting alliance. In addition, when positive forgiveness levels were absent, the couple's children reported higher levels of marital conflict.

Ripley and Worthington (2002) looked at 43 couples as they participated in forgiveness programs and compared them to a wait list control group. The couples that participated in forgiveness programs both fared much better than the wait list control group in improving marital communication. In a study by McCullough and Worthington

(1995), forgiveness groups using psycho-educational approaches were compared to wait list controls. The 65 participants in the psycho-educational groups demonstrated decreases in feelings of revenge, increases in positive feelings towards the offenders, and increases in conciliatory behaviors compared to the control group.

### **How Forgiveness Impacts Divorce**

However, recent studies also indicate that forgiveness interventions may be an effective ways to decrease conflict and increase healing after divorce and after the breakup of intimate relationships (Aysta, 2010; Bonach, 2007, 2009; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Mazor, Batiste-Harel, & Gampel, 1998; Rohde-Brown, & Rudestam, 2011; Rye, Pargament, et al., 2005; see also Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010). Extensive research has been completed on the usefulness of forgiveness in general and its ability to increase relationship satisfaction and decrease conflict after divorce.

Certainly after divorce forgiveness can be a powerful way to help all parties involved move past the injuries and become open to new possibilities (Sandage & Worthington, 2010). It is an effective way to heal the hurt experienced because of the breakdown in the marital relationship and to move forward (Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Gordon, Hughes et al., 2009) and help restore positive emotional health (Edwards, 2007, Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), which then contribute to a smoother relationship (Mazor et al., 1998). Because of these effects, more divorce recovery groups are beginning to focus attention on forgiveness as a means to encourage psychological and interpersonal healing (Aysta, 2010).

Aysta (2010) investigated the relationship between attending a divorce recovery group and the participants' level of forgiveness of former spouses. Through the use of a



pretest–posttest research design, this study explored the forgiveness levels of 43 non-coupled participants, including 29 females (67%) and 14 males (33%). Most of the sample ( $n = 35$ ) had participated in DivorceCare support groups while the remainder ( $n = 8$ ) had participated in Catholic Charities support groups. The study investigated whether participants showed changes in levels of forgiveness of former spouses and divorce adjustment after 8-12 weeks in a divorce recovery group. It also examined the strength of the relationship between forgiveness of former spouses and divorce adjustment. A significant correlation was found between posttest measures of forgiveness and divorce adjustment. In other words, forgiving a former spouse helps improve the life of the forgiver.

Rohde-Brown and Rudestam (2011) investigated the correlation between forgiveness and emotional well-being in post-divorce adjustment. Subjects included 91 participants who were divorced less than 30 months and correlated scores on forgiveness inventories and divorce inventories. Researchers found that increases in forgiveness were correlated with decreased depression and anger towards the former spouse.

Graham, Enright, and Klatt (2012) tested the effectiveness of a forgiveness intervention for young adult children of divorce, theorizing that a forgiveness intervention would not only increase forgiveness levels but also improve parent–child relationships and mental health factors. Research participants were between the ages of 20 and 40 and received pretest, posttest, and eight-week follow-up. The researchers found that the forgiveness group made positive changes on measures of forgiveness, parent–child relationships, and anxiety compared to the control group.

Rye, Pargament, et al. (2005) evaluated the effectiveness of two versions of an eight-session forgiveness group intervention (90 minutes each session, 12 hours total). Participants (randomized 192; analyzed 149) were assigned to a secular forgiveness condition, a religious forgiveness condition, or a no-intervention comparison control condition and were tested at pretest, posttest, and had a six-week follow-up. Participants in both treatment conditions increased significantly in forgiveness of former spouses, understanding of forgiveness, and mental health compared to the control condition. Research studies such as this one demonstrate that forgiveness is a powerful mechanism for improving several post-divorce problem areas.

### **How Forgiveness Impacts Coparenting**

Coparenting is a common struggle for most divorced coparents. Although the parent's marriage ends at the time of divorce, their coparenting relationship continues. Like all relationships, these relationships have opportunities for both positive and negative features. Unlike marital relationships, however, a coparenting relationship cannot be severed if it becomes unsatisfying or strained. In a classic study on the relationships between divorced coparents, Ahrons (1981) explored some of the common nuances of coparenting relationships. This study examined the coparenting relationships of 54 pairs (N=108) of divorced coparents who had been divorced for approximately one year. Ahrons found that the majority of them (85%) had regular contact with their former spouses, and a small percentage (15%) had no contact. About 50% of the participants believed their relationships were conflictual at least some of the time. Interestingly, 96% of the coparents said they would go out of their way to accommodate changes in visitation, but only about 75% acknowledged that their former spouses would

accommodate for their needs. The group of parents who spent the most time sharing coparenting also interacted more and perceived their coparenting relationships as mutually supportive and more satisfying. Parents who rarely shared child-rearing decisions were more conflictual, less supportive, and less satisfied with their coparenting relationships. Coparents who are willing to put in the necessary effort to make their coparenting relationship work, therefore, find that their coparenting relationships are more productive and satisfying. One important component for making these post-divorce relationships work is the ability to release the past, reduce unforgiveness, increase forgiveness, and increase cooperation levels that may have been injured during the divorce process.

As mentioned previously, forgiveness is a powerful, yet teachable, method for healing interpersonal relationships. Kiefer et al. (2010) demonstrated that coparents can be trained to increase their forgiveness levels. Utilizing a multiple-group, wait list control research design to investigate the effect of training 27 parents (3 fathers and 23 mothers) of children 0-9 years old in how to forgive transgressions of coparenting partners, these researchers explored the efficacy of a nine-hour, psycho-educational forgiveness group intervention based on Worthington's forgiveness model. Researchers found significant increases in forgiveness of a targeted offense and increases in forgiveness of all coparenting offenses. They noted that their study offers evidence that an intervention to promote forgiveness in parents could be beneficial to coparenting relationships.

Bonach (2007, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002) reported that researchers are devoting more and more energy towards attempting to understand the ways that forgiveness can be used to improve relationships and promote personal and interpersonal

well-being by reducing the hurt, anger, and resentment caused by the injurious behaviors of others. Bonach and colleagues point out that forgiveness work has rich implications for the post-divorce coparenting relationship. Work on increasing forgiveness in coparenting relationships has the potential to help many people live much-improved lives, as a strong coparenting alliance is vital to help protect children during the separation and divorce (Jacobs & Jaffe, 2010; Weissman & Cohen, 1985).

Bonach and associates (2007, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002) also point out two important factors within post-divorce coparenting that add to the complexity of forgiveness. The first factor includes the emphasis on the ongoing raising of children and the impact the extent of forgiveness will have directly and indirectly on these children. The second factor is the fact that these formerly married individuals must continue to interact regularly on rather personal and important topics associated with parenting, while at the same time these individuals are moving on with their new lives. In essence, they must continue to relate to the person they just divorced. This process often results in ongoing emotional distress for the coparents and the children and makes forgiveness both a more difficult and more essential task. Divorced coparents who fail to forgive each other have little likelihood they will coparent effectively, and their children will pay the price for this failure.

For many parents, in fact, the most powerful motivator for forgiving their former spouses is that doing so is in the best interest of the children in order to reduce tension and ongoing interparental conflict. In order to forgive and reduce conflict, the parents will often need to find ways to decrease distorted cognitions or change hurtful ways of viewing the demise of the marriage life together and find ways to reduce negative

emotions and thoughts towards the other parent (Bonach, 2007). Changing the ways the other parent is viewed and the way the marriage and the demise of the marriage is viewed can open a person up to the possibility of forgiving his or her former spouse.

Forgiveness will often allow less discord and more functionality in the ongoing relationship between the divorced parties (Mazor et al., 1998). Forgiving allows the parties to change the stories they tell themselves about why their marriage ended, about their former spouse, about the spouse's character, and about the former spouse as a parent, or it can simply reduce the energy dedicated to rumination of negative thoughts and stories about the ex-partner.

Bonach and Sales (2002) investigated the mediating role of forgiveness between post-divorce cognitive processes and coparenting quality. Their sample included 135 coparents. Researchers reported a significant negative relationship between cause attributed to the former partner ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ) and quality coparenting. This negative relationship became nonsignificant ( $\text{Beta} = .06, p = .50$ ) when forgiveness was introduced. A strong positive relationship was also reported between forgiveness and quality coparenting ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ). They also found that greater forgiveness was negatively related to cause attributed to the former partner ( $r = .34, p < .001$ ) and less severe offense judgments ( $r = .22, p < .01$ ). Bonach and Sales summarized their findings as follows: The more cause of wrongdoing that was attributed to the former partner, the lower the level of forgiveness and the lower the quality of coparenting; the more forgiveness present, the greater the quality of coparenting present.

Rye, Fleri, et al. (2012) evaluated an intervention designed to help divorced parents forgive their ex-spouses. Participants included coparents ( $N=99$ ) with children

under the age of 18 who reported that their ex-spouses had wronged them in a serious and very hurtful manner with most reporting being wronged in more than one way. The offenses involved failure to fulfill obligations (90%), verbal abuse (86%), lying (82%), undermining parenting (67%), infidelity (51%), malicious gossip (50%), financial wrongdoing (41%), and physical abuse (29%).

Using a wait list control design, Rye, Fleri, et al. (2012) randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions: (a) a one-day, six-hour forgiveness workshop with journaling on gratitude following the completion of the workshop, (b) the same workshop with subsequent journaling on daily events, or (c) a wait list control comparison condition. The workshop content was based on forgiveness and coparenting material taken from Rye, Pargament, et al. (2005) and the REACH forgiveness model (Worthington, 2001, 2003). Journaling included 10-15 minutes of daily writing for 10 weekdays with writing assignments on gratitude adapted from Emmons and McCullough (2003). Rye, Fleri, et al. (2012) measured forgiveness using the Forgiveness Scale (Rye, Loiacono, et al., 2001). Coparenting was measured using the Coparenting Questionnaire (Margolin et al., 2001), which was modified slightly for divorced couples. Participants were tested at pretest, posttest (after the workshop but before the journaling), and at a one-month follow-up after the journaling had been completed.

At pretest, coparenting was positively related to situational forgiveness ( $r = .24$ ,  $p = .045$ ) and dispositional forgiveness ( $r = .35$ ,  $p = .004$ ). At posttest, participants in the one-day forgiveness workshop with gratitude journaling improved on situational and dispositional forgiveness. However, at one-month follow-up, participants in neither the gratitude journaling condition nor the daily events journaling condition improved on

coparenting or mental health when they were compared to the wait list control condition. In their discussion of the results, Rye, Fleri, et al. (2012) discussed that given the complexity of divorced coparenting situations, the one-month follow-up may have been too short of a time to detect change as Worthington, Kurusu, et al. (2000) have demonstrated that longer interventions produce larger treatment effect sizes. Rye, Fleri, et al. (2012) theorized that the intervention may have increased positive coparenting if they had spread the six-hour intervention over a longer time period rather than using a one-day workshop format, allowing participants to have more opportunity to process the material and practice forgiveness.

Forgiveness has been shown to be of benefit in mediating conflict and improving parental relationships in divorces with conflict (Bonach, 2007, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Kiefer et al., 2010). The studies just reviewed appear to indicate great promise for the power of forgiveness to impact high-conflict divorces. Forgiveness is one of the best gifts a parent can demonstrate for children, teach children, and benefit children by doing regularly (Enright, 2012). If forgiveness levels can be increased, then conflict can be reduced and quality coparenting can be increased.

### **REACH Forgiveness Model**

The last several decades have seen increasing attention paid to developing intervention models that can effectively increase forgiveness levels. Recently Wade, Kidwell, Hoyt, and Worthington (2014) published a comprehensive meta-analytic review of forgiveness research studies looking at the efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions to promote forgiveness. Wade and his colleagues reviewed all available studies of forgiveness interventions up until 2012. They then compared the forgiveness

interventions to each other, to alternative treatment approaches, and to non-treatment/control groups.

The meta-analytic review (Wade, Kidwell et al., 2014) yielded three results that are relevant for this study. First, researchers found that interventions designed to promote forgiveness were much more effective at helping participants achieve increases in forgiveness and hope and at reducing depression and anxiety than either no treatment/control groups or alternative treatments. Genuine forgiveness interventions showed clearly superior efficacy over alternative treatments or non-treatment within the meta-analytic review.

Second, fitting with findings from past meta-analyses (e.g., Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000), treatment duration or the amount of time the participant spent working on forgiveness during the intervention was an important predictor of forgiveness outcomes. For those who were receiving forgiveness treatment, shorter interventions promoted less forgiveness than did longer interventions. This meta-analysis found similar results to Worthington, Kurusa et al., (2000) who had looked at studies with varying intervention times using the REACH forgiveness model and found that interventions of less than two hours did not have much effectiveness in promoting forgiveness, but with greater time, participants showed increased levels of forgiveness. The amount of forgiveness generated by an intervention was proportional to the amount of time spent producing it. For each hour of forgiveness work, approximately 0.1 standard deviation of forgiveness was reported. These studies demonstrated that forgiveness takes time.

Wade, Kidwell, et al. (2014) also discovered a third finding in their meta-analysis. The specific forgiveness model employed did not appear to matter as much as how long



the participant worked on forgiving. That is not to say necessarily that any treatment is equally efficacious for developing forgiveness but that all genuine forgiveness interventions showed superior efficacy over alternative treatments, and all well-grounded theoretical models did almost equally well at reducing forgiveness. In fact, they found that when intervention time was controlled, no statistical differences between forgiveness outcomes of the two most researched interventions (Enright's process Model and the REACH psycho-educational model) existed.

Psycho-educational approaches are one of the most commonly effective methods for forgiveness intervention delivery (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Wade, Kidwell, et al., 2014; Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005; Worthington, 2001, 2003; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000; Worthington, Hunter, et al., 2010; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). The psycho-educational approach has also shown itself to be generalizable to a multitude of settings, cultures, and population groups (Worthington, 2001; 2003; Worthington, Hunter, et al., 2010). As mentioned previously, one such format receiving considerable research over the years is Worthington's REACH model, which attempts to replace negative emotions such as anger and fear, and those associated with unforgiveness with the more positive emotions of empathy, sympathy, compassion, and love (Worthington, 2001, 2003, 2005; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000; Worthington, Hunter, et al., 2010; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010).

The REACH model is a psycho-educational intervention developed for use in the general population to promote forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, et al., 1997; Worthington, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005). The standard approach of the REACH model is a facilitator-led, manually driven, psycho-educational group format. The facilitator uses a

standardized psycho-educational manual, with participants using a companion workbook. The facilitator guides the participants through content and experientially focused exercises over the course of a number of sessions, typically six to eight. The program has been researched rather extensively and has shown excellent results and great promise as a robust and reproducible forgiveness intervention. Throughout the literature, participants in REACH psycho-educational programs increased forgiveness levels, decreased unforgiveness levels, reduced conflict, decreased hostility, and increased relational satisfaction (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough & Worthington, 1999; McCullough, Sandage & Worthington, 1997; Sandage & Worthington, 2010; Worthington, 2001, 2003, 2005; Worthington, & Drinkard, 2000; Worthington, Hunter, et al., 2010; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005; Wade, Worthington, & Haake, 2009; for a history of the development of REACH, see Worthington, Mazzo, & Canter, 2005). The REACH model is also demonstrating promise in assisting children and adolescents, and whole families (DiBlasio, Worthington, & Jennings, 2013).

A study by Ripley and Worthington (2002) evaluated an early model of the REACH forgiveness-based program with a sample of 43 married couples (86 participants). Researchers compared the hope-focused marital enrichment process, which included the Handling Our Problems Effectively (HOPE) communication-based program and the REACH forgiveness model (McCullough & Worthington, 1999), to a wait list control group. The study demonstrated positive results for both the HOPE and REACH interventions in observational measures of couple's communication. The study did not target existing betrayals or an expressed need for forgiveness however Ripley and

Worthington theorized that future research would likely find that these forgiveness interventions would be effective with couples experiencing a pressing need to forgive a specific betrayal. One such population is the high-conflict divorced population.

One of the advantages of the REACH forgiveness model is that it uses a straightforward, easily understood and recalled five-step approach as compared to more complex systems (e.g. Enright's twenty step model). Wade, Kidwell, et al., (2014) note that each letter in the REACH acronym represents a major forgiveness component. In the first step of this forgiveness model, participants recall (R) the hurt they experienced and the emotions associated with it. Objective identification, inasmuch as possible, assists the healing process (Worthington, 2001). Only by being honest about the wound can a foundation for healing occur.

In the second step, participants work to empathize (E) with their offenders, look at other perspectives, and consider factors that may have contributed to their offenders' actions and their victimization. This process is done without condoning the offenders' actions or invalidating the often-strong feelings the victimized person has as a response (Wade, Kidwell, et al., 2014). This step involves gaining insight into the offender's point of view, trying to understand the offender's thoughts and feelings and what has led them to do the things they do in life. Worthington (1999, 2001, 2003, 2005) report that empathy is important for building and maintaining emotional forgiveness (i.e., replacement of negative emotions with positive, other-oriented emotions). Empathy puts a face on suffering and allows the exchange of negative emotions for positive emotions to begin. Motivations and beliefs begin to change because of empathy and negative emotion replacement.

In the third step, participants explore the idea that forgiveness can be seen as an altruistic (A) gift to the offender. Participants learn that forgiveness can be freely given or legitimately withheld and recall times when others forgave them (Wade, Kendrick, et al., 2014). This step involves recognizing that the wounded person has the power to offer a gift that no other person can offer and that this gift is forgiveness. The process includes a healthy sense of empowerment as the person can choose to offer that gift to someone who has no right to demand it. This step involves giving an unearned gift freely (Worthington, 2001). A commitment to decisional forgiveness—a statement of behavioral intention not to seek revenge against and not to avoid an offender (DiBlasio, 1998; Exline & Baumeister, 2000)—can be made apart from the experience of emotional forgiveness. However, through this decisional forgiveness, the ability to develop emotional forgiveness typically takes a step forward (Worthington, 2001).

In the fourth step, participants make a commitment (C) to forgive. This process includes committing to the forgiveness that the offended person has already achieved as well as committing to work toward more forgiveness. The participant learns that forgiveness is a process that often takes time to mature fully (Wade, Kendrick, et al., 2014). In this step the offended person is asked to commit publicly in some fashion to forgive (i.e., to a friend, a spouse, a confidant). When individuals tell others that they have made this commitment, the announcement makes doubting the decision harder despite recurrences of unforgiving emotions (Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010). This public decision helps keep people on track with their commitment (Worthington, 2001). Whereas decisional forgiveness is a choice, a switch turned on or off, the emotional forgiveness process increases and decreases at times due to circumstance and triggers.

The emotional aspects of forgiveness can be described as the dimmer switch for a light. At times, more light (forgiveness), exists and at other times, things may be quite dark (very little forgiveness). Another metaphor to describe this emotional process can be a volume knob on a radio. At times forgiveness is coming out very loud and clearly and other times it is barely audible. Making this decision public in some fashion (i.e., to a friend, a confidant, a group) helps people maintain the course during those dark times when forgiveness is barely audible and emotionally they do not feel very forgiving towards the individual.

The REACH model's strong focus on decisional and not just emotional forgiveness gives the REACH method additional power in the world of coparenting. In coparenting contexts, maintaining forgiving feelings (emotional forgiveness) is difficult due to the frequent and ongoing contact and potential conflict between the parents. However, coparent individuals can still decide (decisional forgiveness) to act in more forgiving ways toward their former partners.

In the last step, participants seek to hold (H) onto or maintain their forgiveness through times of uncertainty or when a return of anger and bitterness becomes tempting (Wade, Kendrick, et al., 2014). This last step is to hold on to forgiveness, using one or more actions the person has developed. Many things can be done to hold on to the forgiveness he or she has developed. Having made this journey and achieved some development of empathy, some replacement of negative emotions with positive, a change in motivation to forgive, the development of decisional forgiveness, and being well on the way to emotional forgiveness, the process becomes one of maintaining and deepening rather than developing (Worthington, 2001). As a person does this step he or she also

develops more skills and abilities in what Jones (1995) refers to as the craft of forgiveness and what Volf (1996, 2005) refers to as becoming a forgiving person.

The REACH model has traditionally been a facilitator-run, manual-driven, intervention. The use of an individual workbook format is a recent innovation in the ongoing development of the REACH model. Recent studies have demonstrated that the REACH study can be successfully converted into a workbook while maintaining its effectiveness (Harper, et al., 2013; Greer, et al., 2012; Lavelock & Worthington, 2012). Harper et al. (2013) report results indicating, “delivery of the REACH Forgiveness Intervention via a self-directed workbook is at least as efficacious, if not more so, than delivery of the intervention via psycho-educational group therapy” (pp. 18). The research supports that using a workbook can add an additional intervention option without losing effectiveness.

In addition to being effective, the adaptation of the model into a self-guided workbook allows a more easily disseminated delivery method, greater flexibility, and the ability to assist populations that are difficult to gather together in a facilitator-led intervention. One can surmise that the difficult-to-reach population of high-conflict parents could benefit from the REACH intervention. For this reason, this study set out to test whether providing a psycho-educational, workbook-based forgiveness intervention with high-conflict divorced individuals would increase their level of forgiveness and increase cooperative coparenting.

### **Theological Framework**

Many theological reasons exist for why people should forgive. A good starting place to structure a theological discussion of forgiveness is to look at what is often

referred to as the most important and greatest commandment of the Christian faith. Jesus claimed no greater commandment exists and that all scriptural laws and the teachings of all the prophets depend upon it. This commandment is found in Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–31:

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22: 34–40, ESV)

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12: 28–34, NIV)

Working within the structure of the Great Commandment, many important theological aspects of forgiveness are noted. These include facets one can examine within the commandment itself: the love of God, God’s desire for people to love one another, God’s desire for people to love themselves properly, and, less overt but nonetheless implied, God’s promotion of forgiveness and healthy relationships. The following theological

analysis will show how forgiveness is embedded in the Great Commandment even though it is not explicitly stated. Therefore, this theological section will initially look at the context of the Great Commandment and related Scriptures and then will explore forgiveness through the three parts of the Great Commandment: love God, love others, and love self properly.

### **Context and Related Scriptures**

Jesus declared that his Great Commandment captures all the commandments and provides one united principle from which all Scripture can be derived. Hooker (1991) states rabbis commonly tried to summarize all 365 prohibitions and 248 commands into one Scripture or teaching or to find one basic principle from which the whole law could be derived. In the Great Commandment, Jesus participated in this historical process as he summarized all the laws, prohibitions, commandments, and teachings of the prophets into one principle or commandment.

In condensing all the laws, prohibitions, commandments, and teachings into one commandment, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:4, which is commonly referred to as the *Shema*. The *Shema* is considered sacred and foundational to the Jewish faith. Pious Jews recited it every morning and evening. As a creedal summary, it is as fundamental to Judaism as the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed is to Christianity (Edwards, 2002). Jesus also quoted from another important Hebrew Scripture, Leviticus 19:18. Jesus took these two passages and combined them to form what he terms the greatest of all commandments.

As the following analysis will show, these two passages explain each other. Loving God involves loving others and properly loving oneself. Loving others and



properly loving oneself is an essential part of loving God. Fully understanding one passage helps expound upon the other (Edwards, 2002; Gundry, 1993; Hooker, 1991). Edwards (2002) adds that in the Great Commandment the most sacred love, the love of God, is placed on equal footing with the love of others. If loving God means to love people, and this Scripture confidently states that loving people includes loving others and loving self, then this project needs to review what loving God, loving others, and loving self means in light of forgiveness, especially in light of divorce.

Within the term *others*, Jesus included those who are similar and different from self, such as family members of the person, strangers, children and adults, friends and enemies, and those who have helped or have hurt the person (Edwards, 2002; Gundry, 1993; Hooker, 1991). This same point is also made in Matthew 5:43–47 and Luke 10:25–37:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (Matt. 5:43–47)

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What is written in the Law? he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’;

and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25–37).

In these two passages, Jesus refers to the importance of not only loving those who are easy to love and those toward whom someone naturally feels love but also loving those who are difficult to love, including enemies, strangers, those who are hurting, and those who are different in some way. Two other noteworthy Scriptures that appear to help explain the Great Commandment are 1 John 4:8, which states, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love," and 1 John 4:20, which states, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their

brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.”

These related Scriptures help provide some context and define or add meaning to the Great Commandment. Three parts of the commandment—love God, love others, and love self properly—relate to forgiveness.

### **Loving God**

In further breaking down Matthew 22: 34–40 and Mark 12: 28–34, the first section of the passage refers to loving God. The passage states that a person is to love God with their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Even though the Greatest Commandment does not define loving God in these ways, it is commonly viewed that loving God involves responding to God in loving ways, trying to live in the ways God designed people to live, and following God’s commands (Hooker, 1991).

Working within the framework of this Great Commandment, many have argued that when God’s love and forgiveness is fully experienced and understood then people should well up with altruistic forgiveness towards others out of gratitude to God (Jones, 1995; Volf 1996, 2005; Worthington & Sharp, 2006) as individuals realize all people sin and fall short and need forgiveness (Worthington & Sharp, 2006). Once people fully experience the freedom of God’s love and forgiveness, they naturally respond to God in loving ways and become inclined to forgive others their wrongdoings as God has forgiven them (Jones, 1995; Volf 1996, 2005).

Since humans were created in God’s image and since God is a forgiving and loving God (Grenz, 2000; Oden & Oden, 2006), then humans should be forgiving and loving and that God expects this behavior from his people. God models the way of

forgiveness for his people. Those who love God and are designed in his image should follow his example (Jones, 1995; Volf 1996, 2005; Worthington & Sharp, 2006).

Part of loving God is listening to and following his commandments and desires for people (Hooker, 1991). For that reason, knowing what God commands, what he desires for people to do regarding forgiveness, and how Scripture handles the subject of forgiveness is of vital importance to loving God and living out this Great Commandment. Throughout Scripture, forgiveness is often directly addressed. Scripture has approximately twenty-four sections directly using the word forgive and hundreds more referencing forgiving acts or providing examples of forgiveness directly or indirectly (DiBlasio, 2010). Scripture states that God offers and expects people to offer forgiveness although forgiveness does not come naturally or easily for them.

Several of the earliest scriptural accounts of forgiveness are found in Genesis. In Genesis 3:12-13 the first case of blaming another for a wrongdoing occurred as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. Prior to sin, no blaming occurred in the world. This passage displays how fundamental the process of blaming is when sin has entered into people's hearts. In Genesis 4:8 Cain kills Abel. Worthington and Sharp (2006) point to this verse as they discuss how fallen people will inevitably create more offenses, hurt feelings, place blame on others, betray people's trust, and perpetrate unjust acts against each other.

Genesis 33 provides the first example of expressed forgiveness. It occurs between Esau and Jacob as Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him despite Jacob's wrongdoing towards Esau. Genesis 37-50 gives an even more powerful example of forgiveness in the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers yet offering his brothers

forgiveness. Joseph had plenty of reasons to take revenge and to seek some sort of justice from his brothers and he had the means. In Genesis 50:17, Joseph acknowledged that his brother intended to harm him but that God took what was intended for harm and turned it into something good. Joseph does not see the wrongdoing from a place of victimhood. He does not ruminate in his anger. He does not let unforgiveness and bitterness take hold of him. Joseph granted his brothers forgiveness despite their extremely unjust actions towards him. Joseph showed God's forgiveness to his brothers and saved the entire family. These two Scriptures demonstrate examples of God's people forgiving despite having been wronged in very serious ways.

David also forgave Saul's intentions to kill him in 1 Samuel 24 and 26. Second Samuel 9:6–13 also illustrates how David forgave Saul by caring deeply for Saul's son, Jonathon, and caring for the last member of his household, Mephibosheth. David's ability to forgive may be one of the reasons God stated on David's behalf in Acts 13:22 that David is a man after God's own heart. Proverbs 10:12 and 17:9 express that hate stirs up conflict between individuals while a loving approach will seek to cover over an offense and let it go. Proverb 19:11 also declares that wise people are patient and slow to anger and that being willing to overlook an offense is to a person's glory. The easier path is to be impatient and quick to anger or to hide anger behind passive aggressive actions. Scripture, however, teaches people to do the opposite.

Proverbs 20:22 states that people should not seek revenge but leave things to God. Proverbs 25:21–22 advises kindness and the giving of food and water to an enemy if the enemy is hungry or thirsty. Leviticus 19:18 states, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." Worthington and

Sharp (2006) state that these Hebrew Scriptures and others affirm God's desire for people not to hold onto negative emotions, negative attitudes, or grudges nor to seek revenge towards an offender.

The story of Jonah is also a good display of God's forgiveness. God sent Jonah to offer the opportunity of forgiveness to the city of Nineveh (Jon. 3:10). God's conversations with Jonah regarding Jonah's thoughts and feelings in many ways display God's heart regarding forgiveness. The story of the prodigal or lost son as told by Jesus (Luke 15: 11–32) is a beautiful and complex story of deep wounding and healing and the complexity of human dynamics and love played out via forgiveness.

Jesus' life and his teaching demonstrated the reality of forgiveness and served as a model of forgiveness in action. His prayer on the cross is the ultimate example: "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Jesus demonstrated pure altruistic love of one's enemy, as they did not simply hate him. They were killing him (Worthington & Sharp, 2006). Jesus's ultimate sacrifice on the cross is not only the ultimate act for forgiveness. It is also the ultimate example and statement of how much God loves people and how important forgiveness is to him. Through this sacrifice God offers forgiveness to an undeserving world and thereby not only offers the world the most important gift of all times, but he also demonstrates his loving and forgiving nature.

In Romans Paul states, "Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse" (Rom.12:20), reaffirming what Jesus lived (Worthington & Sharp, 2006). Romans 5:8 describes how God offers forgiveness first, while people are still firmly against him in thought and deed. Despite a person's oppositional stance towards God, he still offers

forgiveness. Paul instructs God's people to forgive others, as God has forgiven them (Col. 3:13).

The parable of the unforgiving servant teaches that when people have been forgiven such great debts by God that they are to forgive debts others owe them:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matt. 18:21-35)

Being forgiven by God is intended to produce gratitude and a willingness to forgive others. Forgiveness is supposed to be good news for everyone as it is meant to spread from God to his followers to the whole world.

Unforgiveness has been associated in the psychological and theological research with ingratitude, bitterness, resentment, hatred, fear, and shame. Forgiveness has been associated with thankfulness, gratitude, kindness, love, security, and healthy self-esteem. Unforgiveness is psychologically and relationally unhealthy and sinful, whereas forgiveness is healthy, productive, and holy. God provides the offer of forgiveness and asks that we accept it and experience thankfulness, gratitude, kindness, love, security, and healthy self-esteem and pass these things on to others.

In Matthew 5:43–48 Jesus asked people to go a step further and to love their transgressors, those who have wronged them in some way, even their enemies. In a high-conflict divorce, a former spouse is often viewed as having an oppositional stance towards the other spouse and owing a great deal because of his or her harmful behaviors. In many situations the former spouse is viewed as an enemy, yet even in the worst of all divorces, forgiveness is required.



Matthew 5:21–24 addresses that people are commanded to resolve and let go of anger towards each other and to find ways to move out of high-conflict situations with each other by seeking resolution. These verses stress that letting go of anger and working through conflict is even more important than bringing a gift offering to the Lord. In other words, conflict resolution and healing a relationship is more important, more urgent, than anything a person has to offer the Lord. Ephesians 4:32 adds a softer touch as it requests people not only to resolve conflict, seek forgiveness, and offer forgiveness but also to be kind and tenderhearted as they forgive one another as God forgave them.

Some scriptures that appear within the bible on the surface take stances contrary to forgiveness, where vengeance or punishment are depicted as prescribed responses to injustice, oppression, and other forms of wrong-doing. Several instances of these Scriptures can be found in what is often referred to as the imprecatory Psalms. In Psalms 5, 6, 11, 12, 35, 37, 40, 52, 54, 56, 58, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, 139, and 143, the writer seeks God's judgment or asks for curses upon the writer's perceived enemies (Goldingay, 2013; Kraus, 1993; Mays, 1994). The books of Hosea, Micah, and Jeremiah are also often considered imprecatory and are full of statements of judgment and the consequences of evil actions including curses and promised calamities (Clements, 1988; Limburg, 1988; Wolff, 1990). Scripture also describes times in which God appears forgiving of one group or individual but less forgiving of another. Israel is delivered; Egypt loses their first-born males and also loses their armies in the Red Sea. Israel is pardoned; Saul is told to destroy the Amalekites. David is forgiven; Saul is rejected. Scriptures like these are also found within the New Testament when Paul quotes from the imprecatory Psalms and consigns his opponents to judgment. The book of Revelation is

also full of statements of judgment (Mounce, 1998; Osborne, 2002). All of these Scriptures must be looked at in reference to God's commands to forgive.

As the Great Commandment is the filter, these Scriptures need to be interpreted per Jesus' clear statements in Matthew 22:40. A reading of the imprecatory or seemingly contradictory verses need to be understood that they are intended to be seen through a lens of loving God, loving others, and loving self properly. As such, these Scriptures primarily fall within the categories of (a) an appeal by an individual to God for the individual's enemies or the enemies of God himself to be judged, punished, or cursed in some manner (b) God's words of warning to people through prophets (c) a statement of what God has promised for those who stand against him (d) or the scriptures are sometimes a report of God's commands and actions within God's prerogative through God's divine understanding and knowledge. None of these Scriptures, however, command a person to judge and seek the person's own vengeance.

The fact that scripture includes many examples of a person's desire for God's vengeance to be bestowed upon their enemy demonstrates that scripture deals with real life, real people, and the natural desire for vengeance. To be allowed to have these normal feelings is both natural and healthy. God's acceptance that a people would have these feelings demonstrates his love for people and fits well within his request that people would be kind and loving towards themselves and others.

As people do not understand other people's hearts, motivations, struggles, or the inner workings of other people's internal life, they are ultimately told not to judge or seek vengeance. While God sees all, understands all, and knows the inner workings of all people, God's actions are pure, correct, and just. People have no real ability to do judge

or seek vengeance properly, therefore, they are commanded not to do so (Volf, 1996, 2005). As such, none of these verses portrays God requesting his followers to take judgment and vengeance into their own hands. In fact, Romans 12:17–21 and Romans 14:7–13 clearly state that judgment belongs to the lord (Kruse, 2012; Moo, 1996). These verses do not contradict Romans 12 and 14, nor do they conflict with God’s request that people forgive each other. Instead, these verses stand as further illustrations of God’s love for people and his desire for people to love and follow him, to love each other, and to love themselves properly.

In high-conflict divorces, people may have previously tried forgiving their former spouses, and have found that reinjuries occur. Eventually they stop forgiving. As this type of quitting is common, it is important to look to Scripture to see what it says about how often a person should forgive. As mentioned previously, Matthew 18:21–22 addresses this issue. In this passage, Peter asked Jesus how many times he should be expected to forgive someone when the person has sinned against him. Jesus told Peter that he is to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times, indicating that people should be prepared to forgive even when they have done so many times before.

Worthington and Sharp (2006) add, Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness links God’s forgiveness with human forgiveness of others (Matthew 6:12, 14, 15; 18:21, 27; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; 11:4, 25; 17:3–4; 2 Corinthians 2:7, 10; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12–15). They also note that interpersonal forgiveness is meant to be given regardless of an apology, any action of admends, any responsibility taken on the side of the offender, or any justice. Forgiveness is meant to be unilateral (Luke 23:34; 1 Sam. 25:23–25; Gen. 50:15–21; 2 Cor. 1:5–11; Eph. 4:2, 32; Col. 3:12–15; Mark 11:20–25; Matt. 18:21–35).

God knows a person's heart but humans cannot know one another's heart. If human forgiveness was dependent upon an action by the other person and offering forgiveness is linked to divine forgiveness, then an offender could easily deny a victim divine forgiveness by failing to make amends or repenting. God would not want a denial of forgiveness to occur; therefore, people are asked to offer forgiveness regardless of offenders' actions or lack of actions.

The Great Commandment is clear that people are to love God. It is commonly viewed that loving God involves responding to God in loving ways, trying to live in the ways God designed people to live, and following God's commands. This section argues that although not directly stated in the Great Commandment, the process of people forgiving each other is implied in the command to love God. This process is implied because forgiveness is an important part of responding to God's love, to trying to live out lives that reflect God's image, and it is an important part of being obedient to the commands and desires God has for people as found in Scripture.

### **Loving Others**

In the Great Commandment, Jesus also wedded the command to love God with the command to love others. Although not explicitly stated, this command has some important meaning within the framework of forgiveness as forgiveness appears to be embedded within it. Loving others is not an easy process as people inevitably hurt each other and wounds manifest. Forgiveness becomes essential at this point as only forgiveness can heal and restore individuals and relationships (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996, 2005). Relationships that lack any ability to forgive will ultimately fall apart as forgiveness is the repair kit that every relationship will eventually need. For this reason, it

is impractical to consider following the command to love others seriously without making use of forgiveness.

Forgiveness, however, can be quite a difficult process when wounds run deep. Within the heart of every victim, anger typically swells up and the seeds of hate begin to sprout against the perpetrator as the victim longs for some form of vengeance that brings a sense of justice (Volf, 1996). Jones (1995) writes that instead of wanting to forgive, deep down something broken and sinful inside people instinctively seeks vengeance. People are tempted to believe that only revenge, hatred, and force in all its faces offer effective ways to respond to wrongs inflicted. Many people believe that their best hopes are found in having the skill and power to utilize revenge and force more effectively than anyone else. In many people's view, an evil deed should not be owed for long as it demands repayment in kind (Volf, 1996, 2005). People want to strike back (Hunt, 2007). Pride almost demands revenge (Klein, 1997). People usually see vengeance and violence in its many forms as a more satisfying and effective approach to injustice (Jones, 1995). In this worldview, forgiveness has no value, as it is a liability not an asset.

In the worldview of vengeance and violence, all violence must be met with counter-violence and injustice with force (Jones, 1995). The kind of vengeance of which Lamech spoke of in Genesis 4:24, in which every blow is returned with seventy-seven, is considered reasonable and useful. However, the worldview of vengeance is a trap that enslaves its participants in a process that leaves victim and perpetrator and those around them ultimately in worse circumstance than when they began (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996, 2005). Volf (1996) terms this process the *spiral of vengeance* as violence is indeed fed by revenge, and, in return, revenge is fed by violence, creating a cycle that enslaves all who

enter it. Jones (1995) points out that many enter into this cycle because they view the world as originally and naturally a hostile violent place and one in which violence is an appropriate response to injustice. In this view, people are not trapped in violence, but revenge actually offers freedom from a life trapped by weakness.

Jones (1995) argues two competing narratives surrounding this issue. As mentioned, the first narrative asserts that the world is naturally a dangerous, hostile, violent place where force and vengeance rule the day. The first construct insists that violence, vengeance, conflict, evil, and sin are the fundamental characters of the world; therefore, peace, cooperation, goodness, and purity are unnatural states whose existence is foreign to people.

The second construct asserts the opposite. The second narrative places peace as logically and ontologically prior to violence. In this worldview, friendship is placed as existing prior to conflict and goodness is assumed to exist prior to sin. It insists that peace, friendliness, cooperativeness, goodness, and purity are both the beginning from which the world was created by God and the *telos* towards which all things are—or at least ought to be—striving (Jones, 1995). This construct does not ignore the very real state where misery, violence, and evil exist. This second construct, however, insists that these aspects of life infect the world; they are not the world. Whereas the first narrative asserts violence, conflict, evil, and sin are the world, as it really exists, the second narrative asserts that violence, conflict, evil, and sin are types of diseases attacking the natural states of peace, cooperation, goodness, and purity, which God intended in creation.

As Jones (1995) points out, depending on the narrative to which one subscribes, one will have problems either understanding why goodness is in the world or why evil exists. In addition, these two views create significant divergences about the importance and role of forgiveness. Those who view the world as a place in which the natural order began and ought to be a violent, full-of-conflict, evil place see the importance and role of forgiveness differently from those who view the world as a place in which the natural order was and ought to be striving towards peace, cooperation, and goodness.

If one takes on the view that the natural order of the world began and ought to be striving for peace, cooperation, and goodness, then one needs to ask how the violence, vengeance, conflict, and evil become so prevalent. The biblical narrative offers an answer to this question in humankind's fall (Jones, 1995), and Christians position the concepts of good and evil in relation to the biblical narrative. For Christians, violence, conflict, vengeance, sin, and evil are problems specifically because they are incompatible with God's gracious, loving, and forgiving character (Jones, 1995; Oden & Oden, 2006). The biblical narrative offers a solution to the interpersonal issues of violence, conflict, and the cycle of revenge and evil. The solution is to respond to God's love and forgiveness with love for him and, therefore, love for and forgiveness of others who have committed wrongdoing. In other words, the biblical answer to escaping the spiral of vengeance is forgiveness (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996, 2005).

Contemporary world leaders have made similar claims. For example, Mohandas Gandhi's work appealed to this same sentiment with the theme, "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind" (as cited in Fischer, 1947, p. 61) as he pleaded for people to forgive each other despite horrific treatment. Bishop Desmond Tutu (2000) boldly states

in his description of the atrocities that occurred in South Africa that no future exists, without forgiveness. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1983, 1986) responded to the oppressor with the message of forgiveness and love. Larson (2009) reports the same conclusion regarding the essential need for forgiveness after the slaughter of nearly a million fellow citizens within a hundred days in Rwanda. Vengeance would not move people closer to peace and healing, only further away. If one does not escape from the world of violence for violence and vengeance after vengeance, relationships and people's lives only get worse and worse with each action.

At times some people believe that the answer to an escape from the cycle of vengeance is justice. Although justice is often something to be pursued and is not necessarily incongruent with forgiveness, justice cannot end the spiral of vengeance. People rarely agree entirely about whom the victim and the perpetrator are as injuries are often complex issues. Even when people do agree, the spiral of vengeance and conflict often continues due to an error of attribution. Each party in a particular conflict attributes a different level of injury to the victim. This level of injury and the level of justice needed to right the wrong are even less congruent. While one party sees itself as only seeking justice or perhaps even settling for less than justice, the other party often perceives the same actions as a form of taking revenge and committing an injustice (Volf, 1996). Each party perceives his or her own action in the best light and the other person's action in a less favorable light, creating a lack of sync between perspectives. The intended justice is often perceived by the other party as an overreaction and an injustice. This new injustice then demands counter-justice. Jones (1995) states that people get locked into this spiral of vengeance because of the predicament of their own partiality. The parties that are locked



in conflict fail to agree on the moral significance of each party's actions. Forgiveness is often the only way out of this predicament (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996).

Another reason the spiral of vengeance continues is that people lack the ability to undo or reverse what they have done. Humans live within space and time and cannot reverse time to undo an injury or wrongdoing. Even if they agree that they wronged someone, they cannot take the wrongdoing back. If their deeds and the many consequences that result from these deeds could be reversed, revenge would be unnecessary. However, humans are stuck within a predicament of irreversibility. For this reason, the urge of vengeance seems inescapable. Once again, theologians propose that the way out of this predicament is through forgiveness as it breaks the power of the past and transcends the call for justice, counter-justice, vengeance, and counter-vengeance (Arendt, 2006; Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996, 2005). Forgiveness stops the spiral of vengeance dead in its tracks (Volf, 1996).

Jesus provides an example of (stopping the spiral of vengeance) in Matthew 18:21. Jesus took the worst type of vengeance like the one sought by Lamech in Genesis 4:23–24 and righted it. As discussed previously, in Matthew 18:21 Jesus demanded his followers not simply resist falling into the cycle of revenge but to forgive as many times as Lamech sought to avenge himself. Strict restorative types of justice can never truly be satisfied. People's partiality puts the lid on the coffin of justice; attribution errors act as nails; and, the predicament of irreversibility nails the lid tightly down, so injustice cannot simply be overcome with the pursuit of justice or with revenge and counter-revenge but only when forgiveness is present (Volf, 1996).

Related to the previous discussion are the expectations of victim and victimizer of what it will take to restore justice to an unjust exchange. Worthington and Sharp (2006) call this process the injustice gap. This gap occurs when a person has been wronged and his or her sense of justice is triggered: “We respond with an immediate visceral response wanting justice” (p. 34) and the difference between reality and what was hoped for is called the injustice gap (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003; Worthington, 2003; Worthington & Sharp, 2006; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). This gap is the difference between a person’s evaluation of the way things should be and the way they currently operate: “The size of the injustice gap is hypothesized to be directly proportional to the amount of unforgiveness one feels and inversely proportional to the ease of forgiving” (Worthington & Sharp, 2006, p. 34). New information or things the wrongdoer does can increase or reduce the injustice gap. For instance, if the wrongdoer apologizes or makes amends or if new information arises, limiting the guilt of the wrongdoer, then the injustice gap reduces and forgiveness becomes easier.

Worthington and Sharp (2006), like Volf (1996, 2006) and Jones (1995), report that the injustice gap makes it difficult to find peace because unless the perpetrator or others act to reduce the injustice, a sizeable gap continues. As a result, a doomed or fallen version of the motive for justice is continually activated but cannot succeed at what it is intended to produce. Justice is intended to right wrongs, restore peace, and heal wounds but justice alone cannot produce these results. Forgiveness succeeds where justice alone naturally fails.

Concluding that interpersonal justice is almost always doomed to some level of failure and the spiral of vengeance within relationships, families, communities, nations,

and generations will continue unless forgiveness occurs, Volf (2005) takes another look at the concept of justice and people's desire for it and offers this additional insight. He asserts that as God offers forgiveness for every one of the wrongs people commit in their totality for all eternity, God then asks people to offer forgiveness to others for the acts committed against them. People who are given complete forgiveness for all wrongful and unjust acts can therefore offer forgiveness to another person for a wrong without forgoing justice. The wrong the individual forgives will never merit what God has forgiven. God is not being indifferent to sin and the price for wrongdoing; he chooses to pay the price himself and asks people to do the same for others (Harvey & Benner, 1996). The altruistic gift of forgiveness that God offers is so much greater so people can afford to forgive as many times as Jesus commands while never coming close to equaling what they have received themselves (Jones, 1995).

In the Great Commandment Jesus told his followers that the command to love others is of primary importance and even though it is not explicitly stated within the Great Commandment itself, forgiveness appears to be a vital element to making this command a reality. The process of loving others requires forgiveness, as people will always end up hurting each other in some manner either intentionally or unintentionally. As discussed, the worldview that subscribes to the concept that vengeance is the secret to healthy living is deeply flawed. The views that justice alone can ultimately right wrongs and heal and restore broken lives and relationships is also flawed as people have great difficulties achieving justice and it rarely brings peace or restoration. Forgiveness therefore becomes essential to the process of loving people, as it is only through forgiveness that individuals and relationships can be healed and restored (Jones, 1995;

Volf, 1995, 2005). Love without the ability to forgive will ultimately become damaged and relationships that lack any ability to forgive will ultimately become broken. For these reasons, the Great Commandment can be seen as having the need for forgiveness clearly embedded within it.

### **Loving Oneself:**

In further looking at Matt. 22: 34–40 and Mark 12: 28–34, the third section of the passage refers to loving self. Even though the Great Commandment does not define what loving self entails, the commandment is clear that people are supposed to love themselves. Theologically, people properly loving themselves involves living the lives God designed and intends for people to live. Almost certainly this type of living includes living as physically, emotionally, psychologically, and relationally healthy lives as people can live, given their circumstances. This type of living also almost certainly also includes people living as holy or virtuous of lives as is possible for them to live. These two parts of living out God's desires for people, however, are only possible or at least aided by the use of forgiveness. Therefore, in demonstrating that forgiving others is part of loving oneself, this section first explores how forgiveness frees people to live physically, emotionally, psychologically and relationally healthier lives. Second, this section explores how forgiveness helps people enjoy living holy or virtuous lives.

Modern research confirms what many have known for years. Forgiving is good for people and improves their lives physically, emotionally, psychologically, and relationally (Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2005). Theologians have long understood that God desires for people to live healthy lives, and they have also understood that God desires for people to forgive (Volf, 1996, 2005). This theological section is asserts that

one of the many reasons God desires his people to forgive is that it helps them care for themselves properly and to live healthier lives as physical, emotional, psychological, and relational beings.

Scripture has many verses that make clear God's desire for people to live healthy lives. In Isaiah 40:29 Scripture reveals, "He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength" Jesus spent an enormous amount of his time healing sick and hurting people. For example, in John 4:43–54, Jesus healed the official's son who was dying. In Mark 1:29–34, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever and many others who were suffering from illness and disease. In Mark 1:40–45, Jesus healed a leper. In Mark 2:1–12, Jesus healed a paralyzed man on a mat. In Mark 3:1–6, Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand. In Matthew 8:5–13, Jesus healed a Roman centurion's servant. In Mark 5:21–43, Jesus healed a woman who had been bleeding and a young girl who had died. In Matthew 9:27–34, Jesus healed the blind and the dumb. In Mark 6:53–56, Jesus healed many at Gennesaret of a variety of illnesses. In Mark 7:24–30, Jesus healed a young girl whose mother asks for healing. In Mark 9:14–29, Jesus healed an epileptic boy and the scriptures are full of so many others that make clear that God desires for his people to have health and to be free of disease, illness, hurting and woundedness whenever possible. First Corinthians 6:19–20 says,

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

Scripture makes clear that God desires his people to respect and care for themselves properly and to live physical, emotional, psychological, and relational healthy lives

whenever possible.

In Matthew 11:28–29, Jesus said “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul,” (NIV), and in John 10:10 Jesus stated, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” In Matthew 5:23–24 Jesus stated “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and then remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” These verses are just a small sample of the many pieces of Scripture that make clear God’s desire for people to live healthy lives because he loves people and wants what is best for them.

Prior to the fall of humanity in Genesis 3, when people were living the way God intended them to live, no illness, disease, strife, or emotional, psychological, or relational issues existed. As a result, forgiveness was not necessary. Once humankind fell due to sin, forgiveness became a necessary part of human living. Forgiveness became necessary in order to assist with these areas of brokenness. An explicit display of forgiveness is, therefore, recorded as soon Genesis 33 when Esau ran to embrace Jacob despite Jacob’s wrongdoing. Genesis 37–50 displays the story of Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers where God, through the act of a man forgiving his brothers, saved the Hebrew people.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, forgiveness has been well documented to assist with healthy living and to aid in physical, mental, psychological, and relational health issues (Luskin, 2002; Enright, 2001; McCullough, Pargament, et al., 2000; Shechtman et al., 2009; Wade, Kidwell, et al., 2014; Wade, Worthington, et al., 2009;

Worthington, 2005). People benefit from forgiving others. When people forgive, they realize that they find inner peace, liberation, and freedom from resentments, unforgiveness, and the toxic anger associated with lack of forgiveness (Volf, 2005; Worthington & Sharp, 2006). Forgiveness is in a person's best interest as it offers benefits to a person that greatly outweigh any possible benefit of unforgiveness, resentment, or anger (Luskin, 2002). When people forgive they avoid prolonged pain, and they avoid unnecessary troubles that can arise from holding on to resentments, injustice, and a refusal to forgive. When people forgive, they open themselves up to form healthy relationships, reclaim happiness, have better health, and achieve peace despite having been treated unjustly. Through forgiveness people are also able to regain their sense of control of their thoughts and actions and to avoid ruminating on their wounds and the wrongdoers, thereby increasing their health, well-being, and quality of life (Smedes, 1996). When people forgive and heal relationships, the forgiver benefits. Only through relationships can people feel loved by others, enjoy loving others, and receive the joys of living intimately. Forgiveness offers a way for people to sustain this important part of life.

In addition to living physically, emotionally, and relationally healthy lives, living as virtuously as possible is also something God desires for people. Virtuous living is good for people as it opens them up to live in God's image and is a blessing for themselves and others. Living as virtuously as possible can be accomplished through the work of God's Spirit and receiving and then giving out of God's forgiveness (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996, 2005; Worthington and Sharp, 2006). Oswald (1999) writes that God's goal for people's lives is that they will experience the immense blessing of sharing in his

character and living out their lives in him through Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit who makes such a life possible. God's goal is that people, through his offer of forgiveness, will pursue him and become virtuous and able to forgive and pursue healing with other people. The goal is not right living through cold, harsh perfectionism and legalism, like the Pharisees, but through a warm, soft, openness and loving union with God and others. Caussade (1975) wrote that through faithfulness to God and responding to his loving and forgiving nature by way of obedience to his will, people become virtuous and holy and are blessed with freedom and joy. Jones (1996) writes that through Christ that people are given the Holy Spirit and have the ability to live out full lives of virtue, holiness, hope, forgiveness, and freedom. When living lives like this, people are able to absorb sin, evil, and wrongdoing done to them without passing them on to others. Pursuing virtue and holiness through God's forgiveness and reaching out and forgiving others is living a blessed life (Caussade,1975; Oswalt, 1999).

Reviewing different types of virtue and how they can either compete or work together with each other can provide a deeper look into living a life of virtue. Worthington, Berry, and Parrot (2001) discussed two types or groupings of virtues that can compete within an individual. They use the labels conscientiousness-based virtues (e.g., justice, truth, honesty, responsibility, accountability, and the cardinal conscientiousness-based virtue of self-control) and warmth-based virtues (e.g., empathy, compassion, sympathy, gratitude, humility, forgiveness, and the cardinal warmth virtue of love). These two groups of virtues compete within the individual because people live in a fallen or broken world in need of healing.



When an injustice has occurred, anger arises and the motive to seek justice is triggered and the conscientiousness-based virtues may become the focus as injustices make people desire blame and the assignment of responsibility to the perpetrator for a failure in self-control. If people are not aware that this process is occurring, the conscientiousness-based virtues can easily block out warmth-based virtues such as forgiveness. The virtues can, therefore, become out of balance towards conscientiousness-based virtues such as justice and accountability and away from the warmth-based virtues such as forgiveness, compassion, and love. This lack of balance will usually direct a person to an incomplete or flawed version of human justice or vengeance and towards unforgiving, unloving ways of dealing with the injustice. If this process is not corrected a person's quality of life is negatively affected (Worthington, Berry, et al., 2001). Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, and Finkel (2005) state that most people respond to an injustice with retaliatory feelings and ruminate about the injustice and quickly move heavily into the conscientiousness-based virtues and, therefore, have difficulty forgiving, as people are sinful creatures. To forgive however, the warmth-based virtues must be stimulated.

Without forgiving, people truly struggle to love others and themselves as they are commanded to do (Worthington and Sharp, 2006). Without forgiveness, people stay dangerously positioned in role of the accuser, marinating in their accusations towards the wrongdoer and this position is certainly not a healthy place for people to be for any extended period of time. God's joy, peace, and love are hard to experience in such a place. The warmth-based virtues need to be active and forgiveness needs to occur in order for good self-care to be established. Being able too access the warmth-based virtues

and thereby forgiving is an important factor in helping people to live out healthy lives and healthy self-love, as we are commanded to do within the Great Commandment.

### Summary

Loving God includes following his commands, and God desires people to forgive each other. As people are created in God's image, forgiveness is also responding to and displaying God's loving and forgiving nature towards themselves and others (Grenz, 2000; Oden & Oden, 2006). Forgiveness of others is a response to God's love and forgiveness given freely to people. C. S. Lewis (1960) states that people should forgive the inexcusable in others because God has forgiven the inexcusable in them.

In a broken world, loving others can only properly occur when people offer and receive forgiveness from each other. Without forgiveness, people get stuck in the spiral of vengeance and more and more of life is stolen away. This spiral and the bitterness that results becomes a poison as people hold on to resentments. Forgiveness acts as cure for this poison.

Forgiveness offers freedom, creates the opportunity for healing, and allows the cycle of vengeance to stop. Forgiveness frees individuals, couples, former partners, and families to be healthier. Forgiveness is indicative of a life lived in right relationship with God, one's fellow human beings, and self. Jesus stated that he came to offer life in healthy abundance (John, 10:10), and forgiveness offers people the opportunity to heal and a chance for liberation from anger, hurt, guilt, and shame. Healthy relationships and healthy living require forgiveness, as people cannot truly resolve differences or have peace without it.

### **Research Design**

In this quantitative study, a randomized control trial used an immediate treatment/wait list control design (Kiefer et al., 2010; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Rye, Fleri et al., 2012; Sandage & Worthington, 2010; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010) with a seven-week follow-up. This research used a type of pretest–posttest quantitative design with a control group. It permitted randomized assignment, a control group while still affording all study participants the intervention, and three measurement and comparison points, including one follow-up observation.

### **Instrumentation**

The study operationalized forgiveness using three measures: Transgression-Related Inventory of Motivations to measure unforgiveness, the Decisional Forgiveness Scale to measure decisional forgiveness, and the Emotional Forgiveness Scale to measure emotional forgiveness. Researchers have used the Transgression Related Inventory of Motivation extensively (e.g. Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2012; McCabe, 2003; Conway, 2011; McCrocklin, 2009; Ripley & Worthington, 2002; Kiefer et al., 2010). The Decisional Forgiveness Scale and the Emotional Forgiveness Scale are also used extensively (e.g. Chong, 2009; McCrocklin, 2009; Park, 2012).

The study employed a coparenting measure: the Coparenting Questionnaire. This scale measures coparenting attitudes, behaviors, and choices. The Coparenting Questionnaire is found extensively in literature (e.g. Barzel & Reid, 2011; Fosco & Grych, 2008; Gordis, Margolin, & John, 2001; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001).

### Conclusion

The devastating effects and consistent prevalence of divorce continuously wreaks havoc on all parties the divorce touches, including the children, parents, other family members, family friends, and the community. Interventions aimed at assisting this vulnerable population are vital. This literature review explored the available research in the fields of psychology, clinical social work, counseling, family ministry, sociology, theology, medicine, and law in order to provide a solid research foundation for this project.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients. As such, this review looked at the research on the impact and effects of divorce and found that adults and children alike experience severe consequences due to divorce. This fact is especially true for children. Divorce has been shown to have generational repercussions. High-conflict divorces were found to have substantially worse effects on parents and children.

The impact of forgiveness as a way to heal interpersonal betrayals was reviewed. Forgiveness as a way of reducing wounds in divorce and forgiveness in coparenting were also explored. Whereas divorce has a significantly destructive, negative, and pervasive effect, forgiveness has a significantly positive, constructive, and pervasive effect. Therefore, forgiveness offers an opportunity to ameliorate many of the destructive aspects of divorce and provide opportunities for healing and growth. Unforgiveness or

the lack of forgiveness hampers the ability to coparent, while forgiveness offers immense promise for increasing quality coparenting.

The REACH forgiveness model offers great promise as a robust, adaptive, and useful approach for helping individuals in these divorces develop forgiveness by decreasing unforgiveness and increasing forgiveness, including decisional and emotional forgiveness levels. Religious practitioners and theologians have been advising people to forgive for many reasons for thousands of years. However, forgiveness is not an exclusively religious activity. Science is now saying some of these same things. Like love and rationality, forgiveness is part of being fully human (McCullough, Sandage, et al., 1997). Both science and theology form the foundation for this dissertation project as it sought to explore and complete the research needed to help a suffering population begin to heal, find peace, forgive, and coparent cooperatively.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

With approximately half of all marriages ending in divorce (Clark-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Gaulier et al., 2007) and since almost half of all children born today will experience the divorce of their parents (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, et al., 1989), the problems related to divorce are immense. Parents in divorce face a difficult process in order to forgive each other as they face years of coparenting their children together. This process is made especially difficult in high-conflict divorces. As divorce is a life-changing phenomenon that results in emotional, social, psychological, and relational upheaval that can last a lifetime for all parties involved, the importance of finding ways to decrease the trauma associated with divorce is of vital importance. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients.

#### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

To address the purpose of the study, three research questions were developed. These questions provided a focus for this investigation into the effectiveness of a seven-week, self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook based on the REACH model to promote forgiveness (i.e., decrease unforgiveness, increase decisional forgiveness, and increase emotional forgiveness) and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients.

**Research Question #1**

Would parents in high-conflict divorces who complete the forgiveness workbook intervention report a decreased level of unforgiveness and an increased level of forgiveness?

A hypothesis was posed that parents randomly assigned to completing the workbook intervention would report increased levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness as measured by the Decisional Forgiveness Scale and the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (Hook et al., 2007) as well as decreased levels of unforgiveness as measured by the revenge and avoidance subscales of the Transgression-Related Inventory of Motivation (McCullough, Rachel, et al., 1998) relative to parents assigned to a nonaction wait list control condition.

**Research Question #2**

Would parents in high-conflict divorces who complete the forgiveness workbook intervention demonstrate an increased level of cooperative coparenting?

In order to investigate this research question, a hypothesis was tested. Parents randomly assigned to complete the workbook intervention will report increased levels of cooperative coparenting as measured by the Coparenting Questionnaire (Rye, Fleri, et al., 2012), relative to parents assigned to a nonaction, wait list control condition.

**Research Question #3**

Would forgiveness levels predict cooperative coparenting over and above variance that is explained by the demographic variables including gender, age, race, religious affiliation, and circumstantial differences, including, time since divorce and length of time married?

In order to investigate this research question, a hypothesis was tested that as forgiveness increases, cooperative coparenting would increase when demographic variables known to predict variance in coparenting were controlled.

### **Population and Participants**

Participants were chosen from a pool of high-conflict divorced individuals whose children were receiving counseling services at a counseling center. The study randomly assigned adult volunteer participants ( $N = 32$ ) to one of two conditions (immediate treatment or wait list control). Approximately 31.25% ( $n = 10$ ) of the participants dropped out resulting in a sample total of twenty-two participants ( $N = 22$ ): fourteen ( $n=14$ ) in the immediate treatment group and nine ( $n=9$ ) in the wait list group by the study's conclusion. The mean age of participants was 43.34 years ( $SD = 7.29$ ), and the sample was mostly female (78%). Participants reported racial backgrounds including Caucasian/White (81.3%), African-American/Black (6.3%), and multiracial (12.5%). With regard to religion, most participants were affiliated with Christianity (81.3%) with Buddhism (3.1%), Judaism (3.1%), Atheism/Agnosticism (3.1%), or no religious affiliation (9.4%) also represented.

As an inclusion criterion, all participants were identified as being part of a high-conflict divorce during the assessment process for their children's treatment. During the assessment process, all parents bringing their children into treatment were routinely interviewed to gather clinical data. During this time, individuals in high-conflict divorces were identified, informed of the study, and offered an opportunity to participate in the study. The study consisted primarily of one parent within the coparenting dyad of mother and father except in two situations in which both mother and father participated (one



parenting dyad in the immediate treatment condition and one in the wait list treatment condition).

### **Design of the Study**

This randomized control trial study used an immediate treatment/wait list design (Kiefer, Worthington, et al., 2010; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Rye, Fleri, et al., 2012; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010). Adult participants (N=32) from a pool of high-conflict divorced individuals whose children were receiving counseling services at a counseling center were randomly assigned into immediate treatment or wait list control conditions. This design allowed for a control group while still affording all study participants the intervention, thus eliminating ethical concerns that can occur in some studies regarding withholding treatment (Creswell, 2009). Dependent variables include forgiveness (unforgiveness, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness) and cooperative coparenting.

The study was completed over a total of twenty-one weeks with each dyad participating for fourteen weeks. The workbook was designed for completion within seven weeks (seven, 1-hour, self-directed workbook sessions). Participants were initially evaluated to assess whether they met the definition of high-conflict divorced coparents. Once participants were selected, they were paired and randomly assigned, one to the immediate treatment condition and the other to the wait list condition. The two participants simultaneously progressed through the study together. The immediate treatment condition received the seven-week psycho-educational workbook between observations one and two. The wait list treatment condition received the seven-week psycho-educational workbook between observations two and three.

The wait list design can be visually displayed using a system developed by Campbell and Stanley (1966) with IT representing immediate treatment condition and WT indicating wait list/delayed treatment condition. O indicates an observation/testing time with O1, O2, and O3 indicating three testing points, and X indicating treatment administration (see Figure 3..1).

**Figure 3.1. Wait list Design**

IT Condition:	O1	X	O2	O3	(Immediate Treatment)
WT Condition:	O1		O2	X	O3 (Wait list)

The setting in which the intervention occurred was a semi-private waiting room within the counseling center. The workbook was designed so parents could complete the intervention while they waited for their children to receive counseling for one hour each week for seven weeks. Each week, as the participants arrived, that week's workbook assignment was provided and the participants worked for one hour on the workbook intervention.

The seven-week workbook for this study was created from the empirically supported REACH forgiveness group psychoeducation manuals and a six-section REACH forgiveness workbook by Greer, Worthington and Lavelock (2012). The workbook was contextualized to assist high-conflict divorced coparents. Assignments, exercises, and examples were designed for divorced coparents. Relevant divorce and coparenting data was also presented throughout the workbook.

The workbook was also adapted to fit congruently in much of the terminology, concepts, and techniques with Enright's forgiveness model (Enright, 2001, 2012) and Luskin's forgiveness model (Luskin, 2002, 2007) so as to fit well with three primary evidenced based models of forgiveness available to the public (Wade et. al. 2014) without compromising the REACH model approach. Where appropriate, multiple terms were used to describe a concept by borrowing from all three models. Additional emphasis for certain concepts was added to the REACH model by borrowing from Enright (2001, 2012) and Luskin (2002, 2007). For example several of Luskin's cognitive behavioral approaches were added to assist participants in further reducing the level of conflict and distress experienced in high conflict divorces.

The first section of the workbook introduced participants to the impact and effects of high-conflict divorce, coparenting, and forgiveness. The next two sections continued the discussion of divorce, coparenting, and forgiveness and added an introduction to the idea that forgiveness can be decisional and emotional. The subsequent sections guided the participants through the REACH forgiveness model adapted for high-conflict divorce and coparenting (for further reading on the REACH forgiveness model, see Worthington, 2001, 2003, 2006; for more reading on the REACH forgiveness workbook see Greer et al., 2012; Harper et al., 2013; Lavelock & Worthington, 2012).

Initially both conditions received pretest measures at O1, including the forgiveness inventories TRIM, DFS, and EFS, and the coparenting inventory CQ, to serve as baselines for both conditions. Then the IT condition of randomly assigned participants received the intervention while the WT condition of randomly assigned participants served as a control group and received no intervention.

After the seven-week intervention was completed for the IT, both conditions and their children were tested a second time. These second measures were administered in order to compare their reported outcomes to those reported by participants assigned to the WT.

The WT condition then began the seven-week intervention. After the intervention was completed for the WT, participants of both conditions and their children were assessed a third time. The third assessment functioned as a follow-up and posttreatment assessment for the IT and the WT, respectively. The follow-up measure assessed how well the intervention results were maintained, if the results dissipated, sustained, or became enriched in some manner. This design allowed all participants eventually to receive the intervention while still having the benefit of a control group and a follow-up measure.

### **Procedure of the Study**

Participants were recruited for this study from a pool of high-conflict divorced coparents who have their children in mental health counseling at a local counseling center. The high-conflict divorce status was assessed by a licensed therapist by interviewing the parent during a process of assessment for the child's treatment. Participants identified as meeting the criteria of a high-conflict divorce coparenting situations were then offered the opportunity to participate in the study. Appropriate consents were signed for their participation and for their children to contribute to the study. The children also gave affirmation of willingness to contribute. Demographic variables were collected by means of a questionnaire. Data was collected over a twenty-one week period.

After agreeing to participate, I constructed pairs of participants and randomly assigned a member of each dyad to the immediate treatment condition and to the wait list condition. Placing names in a container, mixing them, and then drawing them out of the container achieved random assignment. For secure online data collection, I used Qualtrics. The dyads received a basic demographic questionnaire and the pretest measures, which included the forgiveness measures (TRIM, EFS, and DFS) and the coparenting measure. Once the pretest measures were completed, the participants in the IT condition were given the first one-hour assignment from the workbook intervention. During this time the WT condition participants were informed that they would serve as a control condition for the initial seven weeks and they would receive the workbook after seven weeks.

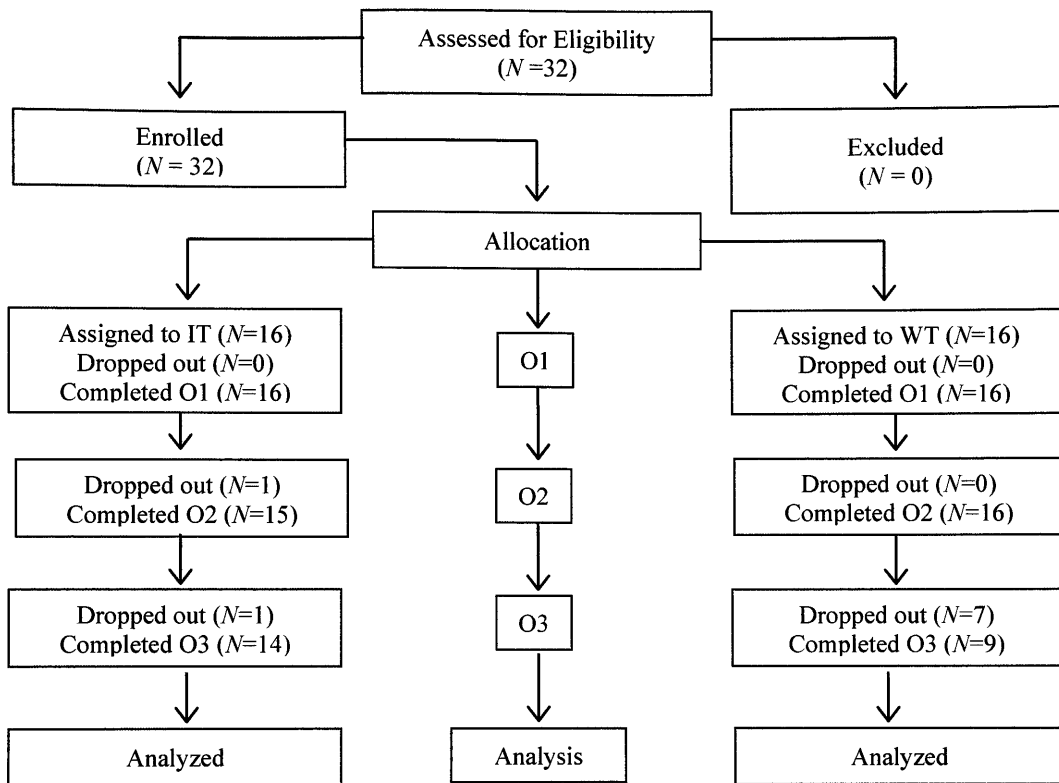
The participants in both the IT and WT conditions then continued to come to the local counseling office weekly when their children received counseling. During this time, the IT condition completed one-hour weekly assignments at the office rather than simply staying in the lobby waiting room. The setting in which the intervention occurred was a semi-private waiting room within the counseling center. The participants were offered the option of using the regular waiting room area, the semi-private waiting room where they would be alone but people might pass through in order to access the restroom, the outside deck/porch area, or they were allowed to do the workbook in their car or to complete the weekly section at home if they preferred more privacy. The WT condition also attended weekly for one-hour periods but did not complete the weekly assignments. They waited in the regular lobby as all other parents typically do while their children receive counseling services.

After seven weeks, participants in the IT and WT conditions received the assessment measures again. Participants in the WT then began receiving the workbook assignments each week and the IT condition waited in the lobby. After seven weeks participants in both the IT and WT conditions received the assessment measures again.

In order to maintain fidelity to the self-directed workbook intervention, participants signed a contract before the study began in which they agreed to complete each section and spend one hour per section. In addition, after each one-hour section, the participants completed a statement indicating what percentage of the workbook they had completed and how long they had spent on the workbook.

In order to increase adherence, during the study if any participants were unable for any reason to participate in the study at the counseling office, that week's assignment was e-mailed to them and the participants completed the workbook assignment at home and e-mailed a statement indicating that they had completed the workbook and how long they had spent on the workbook. The procedure of the study and the process in which the participants moved through the study can also be illustrated visually by Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2. CONSORT Flow Chart to Track Participants' Progression through the Study**



### Instrumentation

**Transgression-Related Inventory of Motivations.** The Transgression-Related Inventory of Motivation (McCullough, Rachel, et al., 1998) was used to measure forgiveness of wounding that occurred as a result of the divorce and coparenting relationship. This 12-item measure asks for responses to statements referring to a transgression recipient's current thoughts and feelings about the transgressor. The responses were given on a five-point Likert-type scale. The answer continuum ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The instrument includes two subscales, five items (1–5) for revenge and seven items (6–12) for avoidance. Higher scores on both

subscales reflected higher levels of unforgiveness. Two total subscales scores and a total overall score were created for avoidance and revenge by computing the two variables in SPSS. Sample items are (1) “I’ll make him/her pay,” and (6) “I want him/her to get what he/she deserves” (see Appendix A). The survey took approximately 3-7 minutes for participants to complete the entire inventory. Content and construct validity with this measure are considered good, and the measure has been well documented to be correlated with similar instruments (McCullough & Hoty, 2002). As an example, scores on the TRIM are significantly correlated with scores on the Forgiveness Quiz (Kamat, Jones, & Row, 2006; McCabe, 2010). Within the measurement itself, the measurement subscales of revenge and avoidance are weakly correlated at .39 (McCabe, 2010). A Cronbach’s alpha of .78 was reported by McCullough & Hoty (2002). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha ranged between .81 and .94.

**Decisional Forgiveness Scale.** Decisional forgiveness of the ex-spouse was measured by the Decisional Forgiveness Scale (Hook et al., 2007). The DFS consists of eight items that measure the degree to which one has made a decision to forgive someone of a specific offense. Participants indicated their agreement with each item on a five-point rating scale where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 5 indicated strongly agree, (see Appendix B). Scores on the DFS had Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .82 to .86 (Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, and Miller (2007) demonstrated scores on the DFS also showed evidence of construct validity and were correlated with other measures of state forgiveness, trait forgiveness, forgiveness-related constructs such as empathy, and anger and a behavioral measure of forgiveness



(Lin & Worthington, 2013). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha ranged between .46 and .86.

**Emotional Forgiveness Scale.** Emotional forgiveness of the ex-spouse was measured by the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (Hook et al., 2007). The EFS consists of eight items that measure the degree of emotional forgiveness for a specific offense. Participants indicated their agreement with each item five-point rating scale, 1 being strongly disagree to 5 which equals strongly agree (Lin, & Worthington, 2013; Lin, Y., Worthington, Griffin, Greer, Opare-Henaku, Lavelock, Hook, Ho, & Muller, 2013), (See Appendix C). Scores on the EFS had Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .69 to .83. (Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). Scores on the EFS also showed evidence of construct validity and were correlated with other measures of state forgiveness, trait forgiveness, forgiveness-related constructs, and behavioral measure of forgiveness (Lin, & Worthington, 2012; Lin, Y., Worthington, Griffin, Greer, Opare-Henaku, Lavelock, Hook, Ho, & Muller, 2013; Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha ranged between .58 and .93.

**Coparenting questionnaire.** Cooperative coparenting was measured with the Coparenting Questionnaire (Margolin et al., 2001) and was modified for divorced parents (Rye, Fleri, et al., 2012). On this measure, participants rated the frequency of parenting behaviors on 14 items with responses falling on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) never to (5) always (see Appendix D). Internal consistencies for the CQ as reported by Margolin, Gordis, and John (2001) based upon three different community samples were acceptable for cooperation Cronbach's alphas = .69-.84, conflict Cronbach's alpha = .74-.84, and triangulation Chronbach's alpha = .73-.84. Margolin et al. (2001) also reported

modest significant association between the CQ and measures of marital conflict, parenting practices, and parenting stress. In the version modified for divorced coparents, Rye, Fleri, et al. (2012) report acceptable internal consistencies with a Cronbach's alpha of .69-.76. In addition, pretest measures related to other measures as expected, including forgiveness  $r = .24$   $p = .045$  and dispositional forgiveness  $r = .35$ ,  $p = .004$ . In the present study, Cronbach's alpha ranged between .66 and .85.

**Demographic survey.** Demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, race, religion, active in their religion, initiator of the divorce, years since divorced) were collected by means of a questionnaire. This questionnaire was completed at the beginning for use in evaluating the variables poststudy (Appendix F).

### **Variables**

This study included an independent variable, dependent variables, and intervening variables. The independent variable was the psycho-educational forgiveness workbook intervention. The dependent variables were forgiveness level (including unforgiveness level, forgiveness level, decisional forgiveness level, and feelings forgiveness level) and level of cooperative coparenting. The first intervening variable was the motivation level of the participant. Active participation was also an intervening variable.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected for twenty-one weeks. Each participant's total time in this study was no more than fourteen weeks. Participants were initially evaluated to assess if they met the definition of high-conflict divorced coparents. Once participants were selected, they were paired and randomly assigned, one to the immediate treatment condition and the other to the wait list condition. The two participants simultaneously

progressed through the study together. Each participant was pretested on the first day at observation one to determine the baseline. Demographic data was also collected at this time using the demographic data assessment questionnaire. Participants in the immediate treatment condition received the seven-week workbook intervention between observations one and two and were posttested with all of the measurement tools at observation two. The wait list treatment condition was also tested using all of the measurement tools at observations two as the control group. The wait list condition then received the seven-week workbook intervention between observations two and three while the immediate treatment condition received no treatment during this time. Both conditions were tested again at observation three using all the measurement tools. The wait list treatment condition was tested to provide posttest scores. The immediate treatment condition was tested to provide an assessment for maintenance of progress. Online data was collected using Qualtrics.

### **Data Analysis**

This study was quantitative in methodology. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive statistics helped describe the sample. Inferential statistics were used to assess the change in forgiveness level and the change in cooperative coparenting from before the intervention to after the intervention and to assess the relationship between forgiveness and coparenting.

### **Forgiveness and Unforgiveness**

A between-within subjects 2 x 3(s) (condition x time[s]) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine the effect of treatment in two conditions (immediate treatment condition v wait list control condition) across three time periods

(O1, O2, O3) on unforgiveness, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness ratings. When significant multivariate effects were found, a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVAs) was completed on each dependent measure to determine the locus of any observed effects. Univariate analysis of variances indicated the locus of effect for each category: unforgiveness, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness. In addition, simple effects analyses were conducted to compare mean difference between the condition that might occur at each time period.

### **Coparenting**

Cooperative coparenting was measured with the Coparenting Questionnaire. A mean was calculated on level of forgiveness. A between–within subjects 2 x 3(s) (condition x time[s]) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine the effect of treatment in two conditions (immediate treatment condition vs. wait list control condition) across three time periods (O1, O2, O3) on coparenting ratings.

Forgiveness and coparenting were examined to see the their relationship. A three-level hierarchical multiple regression was computed using the coparenting outcomes as a dependent variable. In the first block, demographic factors already known to predict variance in coparenting were included (i.e., age, gender, racial background, and religious affiliation). The second block contained the same demographic factors as well as circumstantial factors known to predict variance in coparenting (i.e., number of years married and time since divorce). The third block included forgiveness outcomes to determine if forgiveness predicts cooperative coparenting when controlling for the influence of the aforementioned demographic variables.

### **Ethical Procedures**

All participants were adult volunteers with children in treatment at the counseling center. Although the progress parents make towards forgiveness and cooperative coparenting likely has a positive effect on their children, all participants understood that choosing to be in this study or choosing not to be in the study had no bearing on the services being provided for their children. All participants provided informed consent to contribute to the study. All data was kept secured following all regulations for the securing of confidential records including storing all materials behind two locks or two levels of electronic password protection on a secure computer or network. No clinical data from the children's counseling services were used. No study data was disseminated with identifying information attached. Each participant was assigned a number and the number was used rather than the identifying information. Due to confidentiality and the sensitive nature of high conflict divorces, all participant workbooks (except the measurement instruments) were maintained by the participants or shredded immediately after study data was retrieved. All survey tools were shredded after the data could be converted to numbers.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### Problem and Purpose

The problem of divorce is pervasive (Clark-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, et al., 1989; Gaulier et al., 2007) and its effects are severe. This fact is especially true for parents and children in experiencing the trauma of a high-conflict divorce. Within these families coparenting is typically either nonexistent or immensely damaged. Forgiveness is a powerful tool for reducing interpersonal conflict and increasing cooperation (Worthington, 2005; Enright, 2001; McCullough, Pargament et al., 2000; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). The REACH forgiveness model has demonstrated substantial success increasing forgiveness level for those who have been injured interpersonally (McCullough, Sandage, et al., 1997; Wade, 2005, 2006, 2009; Worthington, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; Worthington, Hunter, et al., 2010; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010; Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Recently the REACH forgiveness process has been developed into a workbook format with promising results (Harper et al., 2013; Greer et al., 2012; Lavelock & Worthington, 2012). However, this presentation of the REACH model has not been tested with a high-conflict divorce sample.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of this self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients. This study adapted and contextualized the REACH forgiveness model into a workbook designed specifically for high-conflict divorced coparents.

### Participants

Participants in this study were parents involved in high-conflict divorces whose children were receiving services at a counseling center within a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. The project drew from seven counties and numerous towns and cities. Parents ( $N = 32$ ) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (immediate treatment or wait list control). Approximately 31.25% ( $n = 10$ ) of the participants dropped out. An analysis of baselines of any outcome of interest indicated that participants who dropped out did not differ from those who completed the study: unforgiveness ( $p = .217$ ), decisional forgiveness ( $p = .157$ ), emotional forgiveness ( $p = .443$ ), and coparenting behaviors ( $p = .560$ ). For IT, sixteen started the study at O1, fifteen remained for O2, and fourteen remained at O3. For WT, sixteen started the study at O1, sixteen remained for O2, and nine remained at O3. For both conditions combined, thirty-two started the study at O1, thirty-one remained for O2, and twenty-three remained at O3.

The mean age of participants was 43.34 years ( $SD = 7.29$ ), and the sample was mostly female (78%). Participants reported racial backgrounds, including Caucasian/White (81.3%), African-American/Black (6.3%), and multiracial (12.5%). With regard to religion, most participants were affiliated with Christianity (81.3%). Buddhism (3.1%), Judaism (3.1%), Atheism/Agnosticism (3.1%), or no religious affiliation (9.4%) were also represented in the sample.

Participants reported information about the circumstances of their divorce. Within the participants, 56% of them initiated the divorce; 34% of participants' former partners initiated the divorce; and the divorce was mutually initiated by 6.3% of the participants

and their former partners. Also, thirty-four percent of the participants had been divorced prior to their present separation. The mean number of years that participants had been married to their former partners was 10.52 years ( $SD = 5.54$  years). The mean number of years since the completion of the participants' divorces was 5.94 years ( $SD = 3.48$  years). A wide range of number of children was represented from 1 to 7 children ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). These numbers indicate that the parents and a large number of children of these parents were exposed to high conflict for an average of 5.94 years, not including predivorce conflict. This fact makes this study all the more salient in the service of helping these parents relate to each other more civilly.

#### **Cleaning of Data**

Outliers ( $n = 4$ ) were identified and adjusted to one unit higher than the next highest value in order to preserve the order of the data and to reduce the influence of outliers on the results. More than 5% of the data were missing, so the present findings should be interpreted within the limitations of the small sample size in the present study. Means and standard deviations for both treatment conditions (IT v. WT) across all three time periods (O1, O2, O3) are reported in Table 4.1.

#### **Initial Equivalence of Conditions**

In order to ensure the equivalence of immediate treatment and waitlist control conditions, independent samples  $t$ -tests were performed to compare participants' responses at the baseline assessment. Participants' ratings of unforgiveness ( $p = .793$ ), decisional forgiveness ( $p = .565$ ), and emotional forgiveness ( $p = .552$ ) did not differ significantly. The difference between participants in the immediate treatment and control



conditions on the baseline measure of coparenting behaviors ( $p = .062$ ) approached significance. In summary, the conditions were deemed initially equivalent.

### **Research Question #1**

Would parents in high-conflict divorces who complete the forgiveness workbook intervention report a decreased level of unforgiveness and increased levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness?

A hypothesis was posed that parents randomly assigned to completed the workbook intervention would report increased levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness as measured by the Decisional Forgiveness Scale and the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (Hook et al., 2007) as well as decreased levels of unforgiveness as measured by the revenge and avoidance subscales of the Transgression-Related Inventory of Motivation (McCullough, Rachel, et al., 1998) relative to parents assigned to a nonaction wait list control condition. A mixed 2 x 3(S) [condition x time(s)] multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed in which the effects of treatment on forgiveness outcomes (i.e. TRIM, DFS, & EFS) were examined between two conditions (IT v. WT) across three assessment occasions (O1, O2, O3). The assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were met. Because the variances within each time point were unequal for participants' ratings of unforgiveness (Mauchly's  $W = .714$ ,  $p = .041$ ) and ratings of decisional forgiveness (Mauchly's  $W = .668$ ,  $p = .022$ ), the Huynh-Feldt epsilon was used to correct the degrees of freedom on the respective analyses. Variances among participants' ratings of emotional forgiveness within each time point were equivalent (Mauchly's  $W = .950$ ,  $p = .614$ ). Sphericity was, therefore, assumed for participants' EFS scores, and no correction was applied.

Findings indicated that the main effect of time at the multivariate level was significant, Wilks's  $\lambda = .163$ , multivariate  $F(6, 76) = 18.72, p < .001$ . Furthermore, univariate tests indicated a main effect of time for each outcome variable: participants' ratings of unforgiveness,  $F(1.746, 34.920) = 26.79, p < .001$ ; participants' ratings of decisional forgiveness,  $F(1.677, 33.544) = 32.424, p < .001$ ; and, participants' ratings of emotional forgiveness,  $F(2, 40) = 44.45, p = .001$ . Overall, participants became less unforgiving and more forgiving as time progressed.

Nevertheless, the degree to which participants improved over time was qualified by the condition (i.e., immediate treatment v. waitlist control) to which participants had been randomly assigned. A multivariate condition x time(s) interaction, Wilks's  $\lambda = .478$ , multivariate  $F(6, 76) = 5.65, p < .001$ , showed a significant difference between the two conditions (IT v. WT) across three assessment occasions (O1, O2, O3). To determine the locus of the effect, univariate analyses were conducted using participants' scores on each outcome variable (i.e. TRIM, DFS, & EFS). First, a significant condition x time(s) interaction was observed for participants' ratings of unforgiveness,  $F(1.746, 34.920) = 18.74, p < .001$ . Simple effects analyses were performed to test for differences in participants' unforgiveness ratings between conditions across assessment occasions. Participants' TRIM scores did not differ between conditions at O1 ( $p = .812$ ), the immediate-treatment condition ( $M = 21.71, SD = 4.56$ ) had lower scores than the wait list condition ( $M = 38.00, SD = 6.12$ ) at O2 ( $p < .001$ ), and scores did not differ between conditions at O3 ( $p = .444$ ).

Second, a significant condition x time(s) interaction was observed for participants' ratings of decisional forgiveness,  $F(1.677, 33.544) = 12.29, p < .001$ . Simple

effects analyses were conducted to test for differences in participants' DFS ratings between conditions at each assessment occasion. Participants' decisional forgiveness scores did not differ between conditions at O1 ( $p = .678$ ), the immediate-treatment condition ( $M = 36.00$ ,  $SD = 2.88$ ) had higher scores than the wait list condition ( $M = 27.50$ ,  $SD = 4.87$ ) at O2 ( $p < .001$ ), and participants' scores did not differ between conditions at O3 ( $p = .230$ ).

Third, a significant condition  $\times$  time(s) interaction was observed for participants' ratings of emotional forgiveness,  $F(2, 40) = 11.024$ ,  $p < .001$ . Simple effects analyses were conducted to test for differences using participants' EFS ratings between conditions at each assessment occasion. Participants' emotional forgiveness scores did not differ between conditions at O1 ( $p = .960$ ). The immediate-treatment condition ( $M = 29.07$ ,  $SD = 3.17$ ) had higher scores than the wait list condition ( $M = 17.13$ ,  $SD = 6.53$ ) at O2 ( $p < .001$ ), and scores did not differ between conditions at O3 ( $p = .443$ ).

Finally, three paired-samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to determine if participants who were assigned to the immediate treatment condition maintained their gains at a follow-up assessment that occurred seven weeks after completion of the workbook intervention. Findings indicated that participants in the immediate treatment condition maintained decreased levels of unforgiveness,  $t(13) = -8.74$ ; increased levels of decisional forgiveness,  $t(13) = 5.94$ ; and, increased levels of emotional forgiveness,  $t(13) = 7.71$ ,  $p = .001$ .

In summary, participants who completed a self-directed, psycho-educational workbook (i.e., IT condition) between O1 and O2 reported lower levels of unforgiveness and higher levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness relative to participants who had

not yet completed the intervention (i.e., WT condition). Participants assigned to the immediate treatment condition also maintained their gains at a seven-week follow-up assessment. After completing the intervention between O2 and O3, participants assigned to the waitlist control condition made similar gains to participants who previously completed the workbook. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, fully supported: the self-directed workbook intervention was found to promote forgiveness among parents involved in high-conflict divorces.

### **Research Question #2**

Would parents in high-conflict divorces who complete the psycho-educational forgiveness workbook intervention demonstrate an increased level of cooperative coparenting? This study hypothesized that parents randomly assigned to complete the workbook intervention would report increased levels of cooperative coparenting as measured by the Coparenting Questionnaire (Rye, Fleri, et al., 2012), relative to parents assigned to a nonaction, wait list control condition.

In order to test this hypothesis, a mixed 2 x 3(s) [condition x time(s)] analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed in which the effect of treatment on coparenting behaviors was examined between two conditions (IT v. WT) across three assessment occasions (O1, O2, O3). The assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were met. Variances among participants' coparenting ratings within each time point were also equivalent (Mauchly's  $W = .794, p = .112$ ). Sphericity was, therefore, assumed for participants' CQ scores, and no correction was applied.

Findings of the study indicated that the main effect of time,  $F(2, 40) = 34.13, p < .001$ , demonstrated that participant's coparenting behaviors improved over time.

However, the degree to which participants improved over time was qualified by the condition (i.e., immediate treatment v. waitlist control) to which participants had been randomly assigned. A significant condition x time(s) interaction was observed for participants' coparenting scores,  $F(2, 40) = 18.23, p < .001$ . Simple effects analyses were conducted to test for differences in participants' coparenting ratings between conditions across assessment occasions. Participants' CQ scores did not differ between conditions at O1 ( $p = .348$ ). The immediate-treatment condition ( $M = 54.29, SD = 3.52$ ) had higher scores than the wait list condition ( $M = 41.13, SD = 4.42$ ) at O2 ( $p < .001$ ), and scores did not differ between conditions at O3 ( $p = .939$ ). In addition, participants assigned to the immediate treatment condition maintained their gains at a seven-week follow-up assessment when compared to baseline levels of coparenting,  $t(13) = 5.41, p < .001$ .

In summary, participants who completed a self-directed workbook (i.e., IT condition) between O1 and O2 reported improved cooperative coparenting behaviors relative to participants who had yet complete the intervention (i.e., WT condition). Participants assigned to the immediate treatment condition also maintained their gains at a seven-week follow-up assessment. After completing the intervention between O2 and O3, participants assigned to the waitlist control condition made similar gains. Hypothesis 2 was, therefore, fully supported: the self-directed workbook intervention was found to promote cooperative coparenting behaviors among people following high-conflict divorces.

### **Research Question #3**

Would forgiveness levels predict cooperative coparenting over and above variance that is explained by the demographic variables including gender, age, race,

religious affiliation, and circumstantial differences, including, time since divorce and length of time married? In order to investigate this research question, a hypothesis was tested that as forgiveness increases (DFS, EFS), cooperative coparenting would increase when demographic variables known to predict variance in coparenting were controlled.

A three-level hierarchical multiple regression was computed to determine if participants' baselines of decisional and emotional forgiveness predicted baselines of coparenting behaviors when controlling for the influence of demographic (i.e., age, gender, racial background, and religious affiliation) and circumstantial factors (i.e., number of years married and time since divorce). The first model included only demographic factors and was not significant,  $F(4, 26) = .44, p = .779, R^2 = .063$ . The second model included demographic and circumstantial factors and was also not significant,  $F(6, 24) = .60, p = .728, R^2 = .130$ . In the final model, participants' baseline levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness were included after accounting for the aforementioned demographic and circumstantial factors. The final model was found to be significant,  $F(8, 22) = 2.59, p = .037, R^2 = .485$ . Decisional forgiveness ( $\beta = .506, p = .02$ ) significantly predicted coparenting behaviors, while emotional forgiveness did not ( $p = .363$ ). Participants' levels of decisional forgiveness uniquely accounted for 14.21% of the variance in participants' coparenting behaviors. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was partially supported, such that the extent to which participants reported having made a decision to forgive their former partner but not participants' reported level of emotional forgiveness predicted cooperative coparenting behaviors, when controlling for demographic and circumstantial factors.

**Table 4.1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Wait list and Immediate-Treatment Conditions**

Measure	Observation 1		Observation 2		Observation 3	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<u>Wait list (WT)</u>	<u>(Pre1)</u>		<u>(Pre2)</u>		<u>(Post)</u>	
TRIM_AR	40.63	6.91	38.00	6.12	22.88	3.64
DFS	28.75	5.06	27.50	4.87	35.75	1.58
EFS	16.50	5.26	17.13	6.53	29.13	3.27
CQ	43.25	5.95	41.13	4.42	53.75	1.98
<u>Immediate-Treatment (IT)</u>	<u>(Pre)</u>		<u>(Post)</u>		<u>(Follow-Up)</u>	
TRIM_AR	41.50	8.80	21.71	4.56	21.29	5.03
DFS	27.57	6.90	36.00	2.88	36.93	2.40
EFS	16.64	6.81	29.07	3.17	30.29	3.38
CQ	45.86	6.21	54.29	3.52	53.93	6.27

TRIM\_AR = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations-Avoidance + Revenge (range, 7–60), DFS = Decisional Forgiveness Scale (range, 8–40); EFS = Emotional Forgiveness Scale (range, 8–40), CQ = Coparenting Questionnaire (range, 1–70).

**Figure 4.1. TRIM across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times**

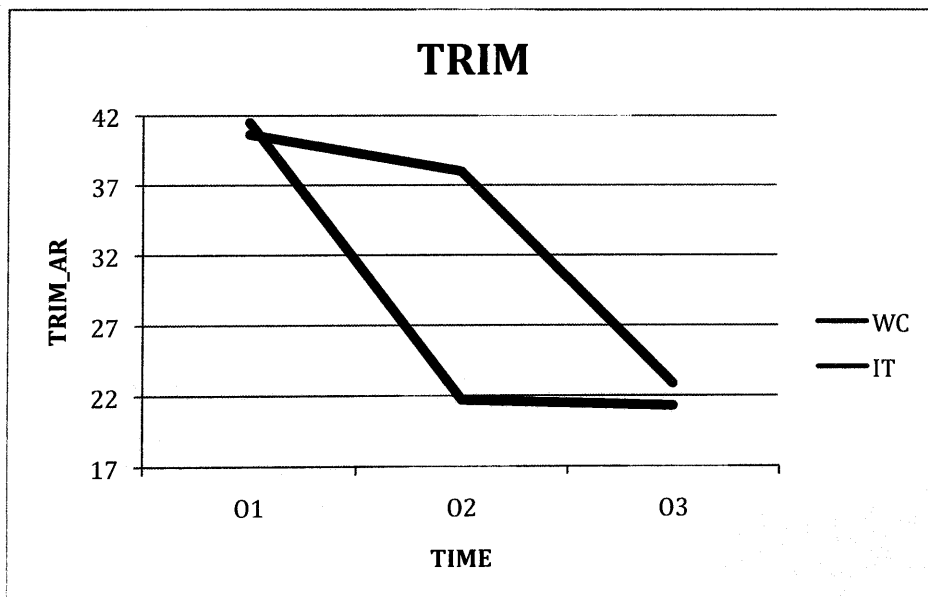


Figure 4.2. DFS across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times

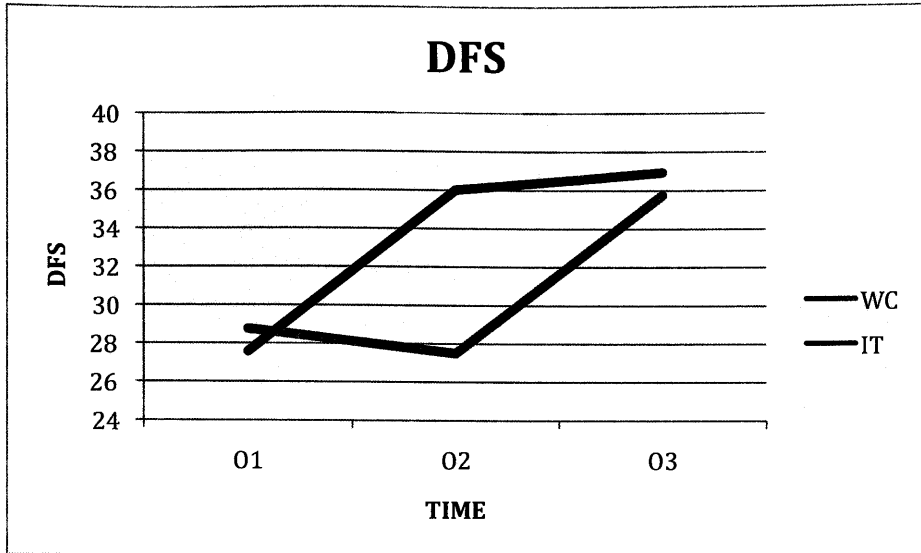
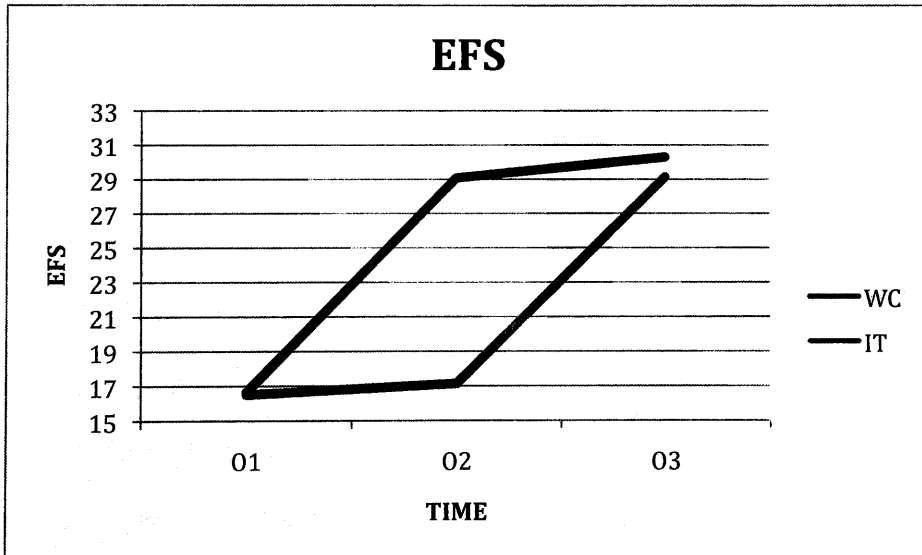
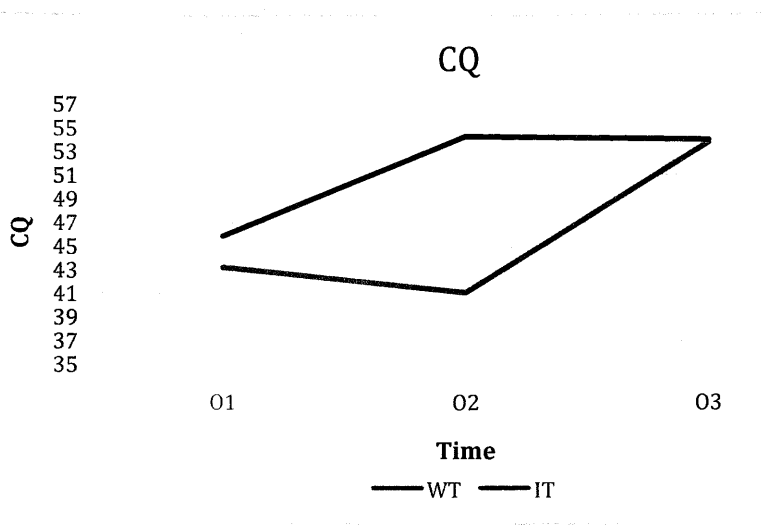


Figure 4.3. EFS across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times





**Figure 4.4. CQ across Two Conditions and Three Observation Times**

### Summary of Major Findings

1. The self-directed workbook intervention was found to promote forgiveness among parents involved in high-conflict divorces.

Research question #1 investigated the degree to which study participants who completed the self-directed, psycho-educational workbook intervention decreased unforgiveness and increased both decisional and emotional forgiveness. The findings indicated that the immediate treatment condition group between O1 and O2 reported lower levels of unforgiveness and higher levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness relative to participants who had yet completed the intervention (i.e., WT condition). Participants assigned to the immediate treatment condition also maintained their gains at a seven-week follow-up assessment. After completing the intervention between O2 and O3, participants assigned to the waitlist control condition made similar gains to participants who previously completed the workbook. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, fully supported.

2. The self-directed workbook intervention was found to promote coparenting behaviors among people following high-conflict divorces.

Research question two investigated the degree to which study participants who completed the self-directed, psycho-educational workbook intervention increased their cooperative coparenting. According to the results found during this study, participants who completed the workbook (i.e., IT condition) between O1 and O2 reported improved coparenting behaviors relative to participants who had yet complete the intervention (i.e., WT condition). Participants assigned to the immediate treatment condition also maintained their gains at a seven-week follow-up assessment. After completing the intervention between O2 and O3, participants assigned to the waitlist control condition made similar gains. Hypothesis 2 was, therefore, fully supported.

3. Parents who demonstrated an increase in their decisional forgiveness levels increased their cooperative coparenting behaviors.

Research question three investigated the relationship between forgiveness and cooperative coparenting. According to the results of this study, parents who increased their forgiveness levels also increased their coparenting levels. More specifically, those parents who demonstrated an increase in their decisional forgiveness levels increased their cooperative coparenting behaviors significantly even after demographic and circumstantial variables were controlled.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Major Findings**

High conflict divorces yield low levels of forgiveness and poor levels of cooperative coparenting. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients. This randomized control trial using an immediate treatment/wait list control design with a seven-week follow-up used two conditions of sixteen randomly assigned adult participants (N=32) from a pool of high-conflict divorced parents. Participants spent between 45–90 minutes per week with the average participation time being 60 minutes. The control trial demonstrated that high conflict divorced parents who participated in the seven-week self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook to promote forgiveness demonstrated significant positive results in decreasing unforgiveness, increasing decisional and emotional forgiveness, and increasing cooperative coparenting. During the study forgiveness was demonstrated to be an important mechanism of positive change in cooperative coparenting. In addition, a positive relationship was demonstrated between decisional forgiveness levels and cooperative coparenting levels when demographic and circumstantial variables were controlled. Parents in high-conflict divorces that make the decision to forgive their former spouses and act accordingly increased their cooperative coparenting levels.

**Research Question #1: Effectiveness of Forgiveness Workbook Intervention**

Research question #1 investigated if parents in high-conflict divorces who completed the psycho-educational forgiveness workbook intervention reported a decreased level of unforgiveness and an increased level of decisional and emotional forgiveness. Data analysis of the results indicated that participants who completed the forgiveness workbook decreased their unforgiveness levels and also increased their levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness. Therefore, this study demonstrated that forgiveness levels in high-conflict divorced coparents could be increased through the use of this self-directed, psycho-educational forgiveness workbook adapted from the REACH forgiveness model and contextualized for divorced coparents. No other known study to date has attempted specifically to decrease unforgiveness and increase forgiveness levels in high-conflict divorced coparents through the use of psycho-educational workbook.

This study added to the mounting data that demonstrates the benefit of psycho-educational approaches to increasing forgiveness levels and that these approaches can be generalizable to multiple populations (Worthington, 2001, 2003). As seen in Chapter 2, the REACH psycho-educational model has been tested with excellent results on a variety of issues and with diverse populations, including religious, nonreligious, children, college-age adults, older adults, couples, families, prisoners, as well as a variety of ethnic and cultural groups (McCullough, Sandage, et al., 1997; McCullough & Worthington, 1995, 1999; Sandage & Worthington, 2010; Wade, Kidwell, et al, 2014; Wade, Worthington, et al, 2005; Wade, Worthington, et al., 2009; Worthington, 2001, 2003, 2005; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000; Worthington, Hunter, et al., 2010; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010; Worthington, Mazzeo, et al., 2002). Moreover, this study helped

confirm recent data that a psycho-educational forgiveness workbook approach can work as well as the facilitator-led approach. Research by Harper et. al. (2013), Greer, Worthington and Lavelock, (2012), and Lavelock, and Worthington (2012) demonstrated the REACH psycho-educational forgiveness model can be successfully converted into a workbook while still being equally effective as the facilitator-led approach.

This confirmation regarding the psycho-educational workbook is important because it helps demonstrate that in addition to being effective, the workbook approach allows a more easily disseminated delivery method, greater flexibility, and the ability to assist populations that are difficult to gather together in a facilitator-led intervention or have limited time or financial resources. The psycho-educational workbook approach, therefore, can have great benefit for both difficult-to-reach and difficult-to-impact population groups.

The high-conflict divorced coparent population is both a difficult-to-reach and a difficult-to-impact population. These parents are typically hard to reach as they are usually working full-time hours and parenting children on their own. Many times their social support systems are fractured due to the divorce, and they often have limited family support. These parents often maintain over-stretched schedules and frequently have limited time and financial resources available for therapeutic interventions. As individual and group therapy is often a very expensive and time-consuming route, most counseling options are too often ruled out as viable for this population. A self-guided, psycho-educational workbook is cost effective, time-limited, and conducive to the high conflict divorced coparent in its ability to be flexible to parents' busy schedules and their limited financial resources. Psycho-educational workbooks can be easily and

inexpensively given to people who need them in either paper or electronic formats. This fact is great news for divorced coparents but it is also great news for clients with a variety of constraints: economic, time–schedule, transportation, and any number of physical limitations that make standard forms of in-office counseling not very accessible to them. These populations would certainly also include the elderly shut-in, the person who is ill and is hospital or homebound, as well as people with any number of physical disabilities. A forgiveness workbook could also easily be made available to those who live in underserved or remote locations who would not typically have access to high quality therapeutic interventions.

What is additionally noteworthy about the successful results found by using this workbook is that the high-conflict divorced coparent relationship is also difficult-to-impact as this parental dyad has often demonstrated an inability to resolve conflict effectively and consistently for years. In this study the population maintained a high conflict level for an average of six years postdivorce. After a failed marriage and then years of a high level of postdivorce conflict, many wounds and many dysfunctional interpersonal patterns are firmly in place as former partners are locked in a cycle of intense conflict.

This study also primarily had access only to one parent in the parenting dyad, which made impacting forgiveness and coparenting a more difficult task. This research, however, demonstrated that despite these difficulties, the psycho-educational workbook approach is effective in helping to create positive change in this population. The project offers hope that this approach may possibly be generalized to other difficult-to-reach or difficult-to-impact populations. Researchers and clinicians may find these results offer

them reason to assess the psycho-educational workbook approach's value with their most challenging population groups.

As the workbook approach provides another viable option in helping the high-conflict divorce population, this option can thereby come alongside other intervention modalities beginning to become available such as parent education programs, collaborative family law approaches, divorce consultations, differentiated evaluations, mental health counseling, divorce recovery services, focused therapeutic interventions, reunification therapy, and parenting coordination as discussed by Deutsch (2008), Gaulier et. al. (2007), and McHale and Lindahl (2011). These interventions offer great promise in being able to provide effective ways to resolve conflicts, manage difficult relationships, increase cooperative coparenting, and increase the quality of parenting and quality of life experienced by both the children and the parents involved.

Theologically, Scripture calls for people to resolve their conflicts, to find ways to work peacefully with each other, to care effectively for and avoid harming children, and to love God, love others, and love oneself properly, as found in the Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12: 28–31. When divorced coparents forgive their former spouses this Great Commandment is lived out. Forgiveness is a form of loving God, loving others, and loving self properly. As discussed in Chapter 2, forgiveness is necessary if one wishes to love God by following his commandments as God clearly commands his followers to forgive. Forgiveness is also necessary if one wishes to love others as forgiveness is a necessary component for sustaining any healthy human relationships. These two points are well illustrated within the work of Volf (1996, 2005), Jones (1995) and Worthington and Sharp (2006). Forgiveness is also an excellent

way to love oneself properly as it has been shown to improve the quality of life, quality of psychological well-being, quality of health, and health resilience of the forgiver. When a divorced coparent within a high-conflict divorce forgives his or her former spouse, conflict is reduced, the Greatest Commandment is embodied, the life of the child or children within the divorce is improved, and the quality of life of the forgiver is likely to improve. This intervention demonstrated a method to help divorced coparents resolve their conflicts, find ways to work peacefully with each other, care effectively for their children and offered an opportunity for these parents to embody the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–31).

### **Research Question #2: Increase in Coparenting Levels**

Research question #2 investigated if parents in high-conflict divorces who completed the psycho-educational forgiveness workbook intervention would demonstrate an increased level of coparenting. Data analysis confirmed that the self-directed workbook intervention promoted coparenting behaviors among high-conflict divorced coparents. This finding demonstrated that forgiveness is an effective mechanism of positive change in coparenting for high-conflict divorced coparents.

Building upon research by Bonach (2007, 2009) and Bonach & Sales (2002), which demonstrated that forgiveness could help mediate conflict between divorced coparents, this study demonstrated that forgiveness was a mechanism of change for coparenting behaviors. Rye, Fleri, et al. (2012) hypothesized that an intervention that included the REACH forgiveness model intervention would increase coparenting. This study confirmed that hypothesis. The study's findings demonstrated that increasing forgiveness is one mechanism for positive change in cooperative coparenting. As many



counselors, clinical social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, clergy, family educators, and even those in the legal system are trying to find ways to increase cooperative coparenting, this study's results are good news to these professionals and to the thousands of parents and children these professionals can assist with interventions of this type. If these professionals have additional resources and knowledge they can more effectively assist this population. As such, this study should help inform practice in these fields by adding needed information and potential resources.

Theologically Volf (1996, 2005), Jones (1995), and Worthington and Sharp (2006) report that through forgiveness the cycle of conflict and vengeance is disrupted and opportunities for healing and cooperation open up. This study appears to confirm this point. A forgiveness model aimed at reducing unforgiveness and increasing forgiveness also demonstrated effectiveness in increasing cooperative coparenting within high conflict divorce situations. Through forgiveness interparental conflict was reduced and cooperation was increased. As coparenting increases, the Greatest Commandment (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–31) is embodied.

Cooperative coparenting follows God's commands for people to resolve conflict and work together in peace. Cooperative coparenting also demonstrates love for others as it is a powerful way to improve the life of the child or children involved. The level of conflict within a coparenting relationship is one of the most destructive and pervasively negative aspects of the divorce for the child. Once a parental dyad enters into this cycle of conflict and vengeance, the dyad has a very difficult time getting out and rarely emerges unscathed. However, parents' love for their children, and the obvious harm that

parental conflict inflicts upon the children, is usually the factor that brings parents to a point of being willing to try and find ways to coparent with their former spouses.

Increasing cooperative coparenting is also a way for people to love themselves properly. Cooperative coparenting is an excellent form of self-care as it can reduce tension and increase quality of life. Parents who cooperatively coparent appear to enjoy parenting more and to enjoy their lives more. When parents cooperate they find ways to assist each other with structures and flexibility that meet their needs better. Cooperative coparenting, therefore, helps to fulfill Scripture and fits well within the biblical framework. This study demonstrated an effective method to increase cooperative coparenting, it also demonstrated an effective method to fulfill the scriptural call to love God, love others, and love oneself properly as found in the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–31).

During the course of this project, I observed fairly remarkable change within many of the participants involved. Prior to the study, these parents presented with a high level of anger and frustration towards their former spouses and most presented with a sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair regarding the coparenting relationship. During the course of the intervention, I witnessed the participants' level of anger, amount of complaints, and their sense of frustration reduce. Many parents who once appeared hopeless and helpless appeared to have found hope and to have found a way to help themselves through this difficult process. Many parents specifically remarked about this change within themselves. Many discussed that as they became more forgiving their coparenting experience changed in very positive ways. Additionally, many of the children whose parents were involved in the study showed excellent improvement in

treatment, and a few of them even remarked that they had noticed a change in their parent's relationship recently.

The fact that forgiveness has been demonstrated to be an effective mechanism for increasing cooperative coparenting in these high-conflict divorce situations is good news as it offers great promise as an intervention in clinical practice. This intervention offers a good option for parents who wish to increase their cooperative coparenting. It is also a useful tool for the professionals who work with these parents and their families.

### **Research Question #3: Positive Relationship between Forgiveness and Cooperative Coparenting Levels**

Research question #3 investigated if forgiveness levels would predict attitude toward coparenting over and above variance that is explained by the demographic variables, including gender, age, race, religious affiliation, and circumstantial differences such as time since divorce, and length of time married. In order to investigate this research question, a hypothesis was tested that as forgiveness increased, coparenting would increase when demographic variables known to predict variance in coparenting were controlled. In answering this question, hypothesis 3 was partially supported such that the extent to which participants reported having made a decision to forgive their former partner but not participants' reported level of emotional forgiveness predicted coparenting behaviors, when controlling for demographic and circumstantial factors.

The study, therefore, found a positive relationship between decisional forgiveness and cooperative coparenting. This finding indicates that when individuals make the decision to forgive they are also likely to increase their cooperative coparenting. This finding fits well with research done by Chi, Du, and Lam (2011), DiBlasio (1998), Exline

and Baumeister (2000), and Worthington, Jennings, et al. (2010) that demonstrated the power of decisional forgiveness to impact behavioral choices.

Research has demonstrated that decisional forgiveness is related to behavioral choices, can increase positive choices, and can reduce negative choices such as revenge (Watkins et al., 2011; Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). When forgiveness is absent or when overt or covert forms of revenge are sought, the coparenting relationship tends to fall into what Volf (1996, 2005) refers to as the cycle of vengeance and unhealthy, unproductive, destructive interparental conflict and dysfunction arises. When this behavior occurs both parents suffer, the coparenting relationship suffers, and the child or children involved in the divorce suffers. Many of these high-conflict divorces spend years, sometimes decades, in high levels of back and forth litigation and legal conflicts. Research shows forgiveness improves interpersonal and interparental relationships (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Bonach, 2007, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Burchard et al., 2003; DiBlasio & Benda, 2008; Enright, 2001, 2012; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Fincham, 2000; Pringle, 2008; Rye & Parament, 2002; Worthington, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000; Worthington, Jennings, et al., 2010). This point is also demonstrated theologically within the work of Volf (1996, 2005), Jones (1995) and Worthington and Sharp (2006). However, until now very little data existed to demonstrate the relationship between forgiveness and cooperative coparenting within these high-conflict divorces.

Whereas decisional forgiveness is related to behavioral choices and can increase positive choices and reduce negative choices, emotional forgiveness appears more related to emotional qualities of life and may have more physical and mental health benefits

(Worthington, Witvliet, et al., 2007). Although participants in this study did increase in emotional forgiveness and, therefore, may have experienced some of the emotional forgiveness type benefits, this increase did not demonstrate itself to have a direct relationship with increasing coparenting when other variables were controlled. Therefore, this study offers some evidence that this population may not need to attain the level of emotional forgiveness in order to improve the coparenting relationship. This information is helpful as emotional forgiveness is often quite difficult to attain in these ongoing relationships that are often filled with emotional wounds. Emotional forgiveness requires an empathic stance towards the perceived offender and is likely to take much longer to achieve in these ongoing, divorced coparenting relationships that are ripe for continued emotional wounding. If high levels of emotional forgiveness were necessary in order to improve coparenting behaviors, then improving the coparenting relationship would be a much bigger and more difficult task. If participants can experience the benefits of decisional forgiveness's ability to assist their coparenting without having to develop emotional forgiveness, this information is indeed good news for this population group and the professionals who serve it.

This finding also fits well theologically as Scripture commands that people forgive each other and act accordingly. Scripture does not specifically command that people reach the level of, and benefit of, emotional forgiveness. The decision to forgive and to treat the other person in a forgiving and respectful manner is, however, commanded. Volf (1996, 2005) and Jones (1995) point out that this behavior is commanded because without it people can become trapped in cycles of vengeance and unhealthy maladaptive relational interactions. Volf (1996, 2005) and Jones (1995) state

that ultimately some form of forgiveness is necessary to find a way out of this dysfunctional cycle. This study demonstrated that within a high-conflict divorce, deciding to forgive might be more indicative of coparenting change than developing forgiving emotions towards a former spouse. Theologically, one could wonder if this fact is the reason God's followers are commanded to make the decision to forgive. Making the commitment to forgive and acting in accordance with that decision benefits the interpersonal relationship without rushing the time necessary for emotional healing. As the relationship is benefited by decisional forgiveness, this type of forgiveness may open up more opportunities for emotional forgiveness to develop.

This information may be of use to individuals seeking to coparent more effectively and may help inform clinical practice for professionals seeking to assist divorced coparents. These professional may include counselors, clinical social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, judges, and family educators. Clergy and those in ministry may also find this information to be of interest as it fits well with the biblical mandate to make the decision to forgive and to act in accordance with this decision. Counseling interventions that spend years trying to impact emotional forgiveness may benefit by including a strong emphasis on decisional forgiveness when working with high-conflict divorced coparents. Clergy who spend years preaching forgiveness may be benefited by having a firm understanding of both decisional and emotional forgiveness and their benefits and having additional tools to make available to their parishioners for developing these forms of forgiveness. The court system and the legal professionals involved who are overwhelmed with litigation from these high-conflict cases may benefit

by recommending programs that help clients to develop decisional forgiveness towards each other.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The genesis of this study developed because of the immense impact divorce is having on the children and families of this nation. The divorce rate in the United States is consistently high. Most divorced parents will remarry. Most second marriages will also fail. More than half of all children are directly impacted by divorce and most children are indirectly impacted by divorce. The trauma a family, and especially children, experience during and after a divorce is typically substantial and sustained and has been shown to impact generation after generation. A divorce negatively impacts quality of life of all parties involved and those around them. Emotional, relational, and physical health, professional and academic pursuits, as well as coparenting and social functioning are impacted by a divorce. Counseling offices, law offices, and courtrooms are overflowing with the consequences of poorly resolved marriages. Of all the factors involved in a divorce, the level of interparental conflict appears to be the most impactful variable that results in high levels of trauma. High-conflict divorce situations are the top 20% of chronically angry divorced couples and high-conflict divorced coparents typically display very little ability to resolve their conflicts, to problem solve, to put the child's needs first, and to coparent cooperatively.

The negative effects of divorce is a problem counselors, clinical social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, legal professionals, family educators, clergy, and many others deal with every day as they reach into the lives of these children and their families and try to effect positive change. This study emanated from this problem and its

implications should be helpful to these professionals and the people they serve as it helps fulfill an almost desperate need for information, interventions, and guidance as to ways to impact this problem and to help this population.

Mental health professionals who work with divorce, divorced coparents, or provide coparenting counseling or reunification therapy may find that this study has important implications for their work. For instance this study demonstrated that forgiveness can benefit the parent, the child, and the coparenting relationship. It also demonstrated that it may not always be necessary to develop emotional forgiveness in order to effect positive change, as decisional forgiveness itself may be enough to effect certain behavioral changes. This information can be of great benefit to clinicians working with divorced families or divorced individuals as it can help inform practice decisions by increasing the amount of time spent and the approaches used to help clients to develop forgiveness.

Mental health professional may also benefit from this study because it offers an effective intervention approach that is schedule friendly, time limited, economically viable, and reasonably flexible for helping to treat this difficult-to-reach and difficult-to-impact population. Most mental health professionals are always looking for effective, affordable solutions to help their clients heal and grow. This intervention may help meet that need.

Professionals within the legal field such as lawyers, paralegals, family mediators, guardians ad litem, parent coordinators, judges, and the judicial system may find this study to be helpful. Law offices and courtrooms are typically overflowing with the results of divorce conflicts. Many legal professionals report how unproductive and frustrating



this high level of conflict makes things for all parties involved, including the legal professionals. They often report how limited resources are often unwisely spent fighting unnecessary emotionally driven legal battles. For this reason, finding approaches that foster more cooperation between divorcing coparents is of great value to these professionals. Therefore, this study offers useful information, an innovative intervention that legal professionals can recommend or perhaps provide to their clients, and useful information to help guide certain interventions with their clients.

The results of this study also fit well with a new approach to divorce resolution called collaborative family law in which collaborative solutions are sought in an attempt to meet all parties' needs more effectively and limit the damaging effects of continued legal conflicts. The professionals involved in these pursuits can be aided by the knowledge and the additional understanding of the potential power of forgiveness in these divorce situations. This study also offers a potential intervention or service focused on forgiveness that these professionals can recommend.

These results may also offer great promise to another fairly new approach to assisting high-conflict divorced coparents called parent coordination. Parent coordinators are typically assigned by court order due to the high degree of parental conflict and low level of cooperative coparenting within the parenting dyad. This study helps address the primary function of the parent coordinator's role in discovering a way to help reduce parental conflict and increase cooperative coparenting. In addition, as this study used a self-guided, psycho-educational workbook approach, this intervention can be offered to parent coordination clients without removing the parent coordinator from their nonclinical role or placing them in a clinically therapeutic role. As such, this study may

offer very useful information and a useful intervention for these professionals to add to their professional toolbox.

Family education and divorce recovery professionals are another group of professional and paraprofessional workers that may find this study to have important implications to their work. These approaches are often underfunded and the workers are often overwhelmed with the difficulties that arise from high-conflict divorces. The results of this study can help guide the interventions used and the information provided in these educational and divorce recovery approaches. Divorce classes or educational approaches that aim to help parents learn to cope with divorce and to develop cooperative coparenting skills that do not focus on the importance of forgiveness or do not offer their participants resources on how to develop forgiveness may find that they could benefit their participants better by using the results of this study to make the informed decision to add forgiveness and forgiveness tools as an important part of their approach.

Based upon the results of this study and the predominantly Christian population (81.3%) served by the study, it is quite likely that this workbook could easily be adapted for an overtly Christian audience. Pastors may possess the educational background to make such adaptations. Certainly pastors, church leaders, other clergy, and family ministry workers may find this study to have significant implications for their work. These professionals, paraprofessionals, and lay volunteers are often meeting with divorced individuals and families within their homes and their places of worship. Having the results of this study along with Scripture to help inform coparents of the great benefits of forgiveness may help assist many families in need. Having an effective intervention, like the one tested in this study that can help these divorced coparents develop

forgiveness, may also be of value to these workers. In addition, as most ministry budgets are either nonexistent or extremely tight, ministry workers could benefit greatly if this intervention approach could be produced and delivered in the most affordable way possible. The self-guided, psycho-educational workbook this study tested offers great promise for being able to help to meet these needs in the most affordable of ways.

This study also may have direct and indirect implications for divorced coparents. First, the information that forgiving a former spouse can actually increase coparenting and that cooperative coparenting is one of the best ways a parent can ameliorate the negative effects of a divorce is important information for a parent to know as it may help motivate a parent to begin the process of forgiveness. Second, as self-directed approaches become available, parents can begin to move through highly effective forgiveness interventions without having always to depend upon a professional to assist them. Third, as professionals become aware of this information and have access to tools to help clients forgive and coparent more effectively, more and more divorced coparents can gain access to this assistance.

This dissertation has offered an in-depth look at the problem of divorce, especially high-conflict divorce, and presented a clinical trial that resulted in data demonstrating that a psycho-educational workbook intervention with high-conflict divorced coparents works. This intervention helped divorced coparents reduce unforgiveness, increased decisional and emotional forgiveness, and helped effect positive change in cooperative coparenting. Professionals within the mental health, legal, educational, and ministry fields as well as others may find this study has implications for their work. As such, these professionals should find ways to include forgiveness

interventions in their work with divorced coparents and especially high-conflict divorced coparents. Professionals working with high-conflict divorced individuals and others wishing to improve coparenting relationships should find this intervention offers a viable option for achieving these results. As professionals recognize the importance and power of forgiveness to assist clients and they are given easy-to-use tools to achieve these goals, more focus could be paid to assisting clients with the forgiveness process. In addition, more and more interventions and adaptations of interventions could be developed to assist this population further or to branch out to use this intervention to help other population groups.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several factors limit the extent to which these findings are generalizable. This study's small sample size impacts the ability to generalize the results of this study to all high-conflict divorced coparents. In addition, the attrition rate within this study added to this limitation. In this study approximately 31.25% of the participants dropped out. An analysis of baselines of any outcome of interest, however, indicated that participants who dropped out did not differ from those who completed the study.

In addition, this study was limited in that only one parent was typically available in each coparenting dyad with only two exceptions. Only having access to one parent in the coparenting dyad is likely to limit the ability to effect as much change as one might desire. Research demonstrates that parents typically blame each other for their lack of coparenting. Both parents in coparenting dyads tend to believe they are better at coparenting than their former spouses, and both parents typically see themselves as victims rather than offenders. This phenomenon is probably even greater in high-conflict

divorces. Therefore, working with only one parent within the parenting dyad was a limitation of this study as this factor may have limited the potential benefits.

Even though the participants in this study were drawn from a large diverse metropolitan area, all participants were parents of children in counseling at one counseling center. This shared demographic variable may influence the generalizability of the results. Most participants were also female (78%) and most participants were Caucasian/White (81.3%) with African-American/Black making up 6.3%, and multiracial making up 12.5%. Having mostly female and mostly Caucasian participants may make the results more difficult to generalize to all high conflict divorced coparents.

With regard to religion, most participants in the study were affiliated with Christianity (81.3%), with Buddhism (3.1%), with Judaism (3.1%), with atheism/agnosticism (3.1%), and with no religious affiliation (9.4%). As Christianity typically places a strong emphasis on forgiveness, it may be possible that this factor could be a limitation in this study's generalizability.

This study was also limited in that it did not control for the amount of counseling or mental health assistance a parent had had prior to beginning the intervention. It may be that due to previous therapeutic interventions a person may be more or less open to change. Clients can easily range from being therapeutically naïve to having spent more than a decade in counseling. This study did not control for this variable, whereas future studies may wish to control for it.

The counseling office setting may have also limited the study. Participants had several options of where to complete the study including the standard lobby, a semi-private waiting room where people may walk through on their way to the restroom, the

outside deck/porch area of the office, a personal car, or at home. This factor was not measured or controlled for during this study and, therefore, is a limitation.

The high level of litigation involved in these high-conflict divorces may also have impacted participants' willingness to record less socially desirable emotions and behaviors. Some parents acknowledged concerns regarding putting their feelings down on paper, despite assurances of confidentiality, due to a perceived risk of materials possibly being used for custody, divorce, or litigation-type purposes.

The pressure of social desirability may have also been a factor in this study as I was also the participant's children's therapist. Social desirability is the natural human interpersonal dynamic of wanting to look better or wanting to avoid looking bad to another person. As a result of this factor, participants may have responded, at times, in socially desirable ways. When results were reviewed, some participants who had verbally expressed strong levels of anger, bitterness, and hatred for their former spouses indicated low levels of these feelings during the study.

### **Unexpected Observations**

One unexpected outcome was the fact that participants reported greater forgiveness and lower levels of anger in pretests than other clinical data would indicate. This fact may have been due to social desirability factors, a by-product of being their children's therapist, or due to the nature of many of the participants being in a highly litigious divorced coparenting situation. Participants may have feared reprisal in legal proceedings for being transparent with reporting less desirable feelings.

Another unexpected outcome of this research was that research in a real-life setting is messy, participant fidelity to the process is hard to maintain, and a large sample

size for this population is difficult to acquire yet is needed to account for attrition. This high level of attrition, especially the level within the wait list condition was unexpected.

The controlled waitlist design of this study was made up of three observational points and by far the highest level of attrition was found when the waitlist condition moved into the intervention phase (O3). Waiting the seven weeks to begin the intervention portion of the study may have impacted the participant's motivation level. Increased conflict with one's former spouse over the seven week wait may have also lowered participants resolve to participate in a study on forgiveness.

In contrast, the natural fairly high level of attrition for high-conflict divorced coparents may have actually been lowered in the immediate treatment group by nature of the parent's involvement in the forgiveness study. As several of the waitlist condition participants who dropped out of the study also dropped out of therapy, it may be that being involved in a forgiveness study actually lowered a fairly common attrition problem with high-conflict divorced coparents who actually received the intervention early. Without the intervention more of the immediate treatment participants may have failed to follow through on the well-intended therapeutic goal of counseling for their children. This issue may be of interest to counselors, clinical social workers, and psychologists working with this population. Involvement in a forgiveness study may actually serve to lower attrition rates.

### **Recommendations**

A number of recommendations emerged as a result of this study that may assist future research. First, adding a social desirability scale might benefit future research. Second, many of these participants were involved in high levels of litigation. Future

research might attempt to measure or control for this variable. In addition, many of these participants also struggle with trust issues after the level of conflict and litigation within their divorces. Structuring future research so as to provide a barrier between the clinician and the researcher so participants do not feel their children's therapist has access to their results may be beneficial. This may serve to reassure the participants further that information provided for the study would remain confidential and could not hurt them legally or therapeutically.

Third, further research could also explore the use of the REACH forgiveness workbook with other populations. Recently divorced coparents are likely to benefit from the use of this workbook as they appear to experience severe levels of hurt, resentment, and unforgiveness frequently. These emotions impact their behaviors, including their cooperative coparenting behaviors. Research could also explore the impact on other difficult-to-reach populations, including elderly shut-ins, the person who is ill and is hospital or homebound, as well as people with any number of physical disabilities. Research could also explore using a forgiveness workbook for individuals who live in underserved or remote locations that would not typically have access to high quality therapeutic interventions.

Fourth, this study used a fourteen-week design offering two intervention conditions, a control condition, and a seven-week follow-up. The fourteen-week length of the study may have contributed to the high level of attrition during the later part of the study. Future studies could look at using a shorter, less complex research design.

Fifth, the psycho-educational workbook tested in this study was a seven-week workbook, which included seven one-hour sections (seven hours total time).



Worthington, Kurusu, et al. (2000) demonstrated that forgiving usually takes time and that longer intervention times typically yield better results while studies that use shorter time frames usually have weaker results. However, future studies could examine effectiveness of shorter or longer workbooks or longer or shorter sections with this population. Shorter intervention times may help decrease attrition problems whereas a longer intervention time might increase the effectiveness of this intervention.

Sixth, future studies could look to add a control for religiousness of the sample as this study had access primarily to Christians. This factor could be further controlled for or analyzed. Future studies could also look more closely at the level or quality of the participants' religious affiliation. Future studies could also look at adapting this divorced coparent's workbook to an overtly Christian audience.

Seventh, this study primarily had access to only one parent in the coparenting dyad. Future research may look at trying to work with both parents. By working with both parents, reciprocal behaviors may occur in greater magnitude and quantity. As one parent forgives and begins to coparent better, the other parent may reciprocate in some way and also coparent better. However, if both parents forgive each other and improve their coparenting relationship, then this effect may increase. In addition, the child or children involved in the high-conflict divorce would almost certainly benefit from both parents forgiving each other and increasing their cooperative coparenting.

### **Postscript**

Today's parents and children are quite likely to find themselves both a product of divorce as children and then eventually end up divorced coparents themselves. Research demonstrates that all parties involved in a divorce, and especially a high conflict divorce,

experience immense pain and suffering, often times resulting in years, sometimes decades, sometimes generations, of emotional, relational, and psychological consequences. For this reason find ways to assist this struggling population is essential.

This study grew out of an immense desire to help with this problem. In doing so, this study demonstrated that a forgiveness intervention could offer great promise as one way to decrease conflict and increase cooperative coparenting behaviors between divorced coparents. Biblically people are commanded to forgive each other and to find ways to maintain healthy, peaceful, cooperative, productive relationships. This study demonstrated the effectiveness of forgiveness in some of the most difficult of all divorce cases—the high-conflict divorce coparenting relationship. The findings demonstrated that a self-directed, psycho-educational, forgiveness workbook was effective in promoting forgiveness and cooperative coparenting among individuals in high-conflict divorces who are parents of counseling clients.

This study offers implications for the mental health, legal, and ministry fields as well as others, and it is this type of intervention that may offer ways to reduce the problem of the high-conflict divorce. If a world can be imagined where this problem was solved, conflict was low, and interpersonal relationships were healthy, that world would almost certainly include forgiveness and cooperation as essential elements. I feel very blessed to have been given the opportunity to complete this dissertation, to do my best to take on the difficult challenge of a clinical trial, and to try and seek additional solutions to assist these parents and their children who are in such desperate need.

**Appendix A****TRIM-R and TRIM-A**

**DIRECTIONS:** For the following questions, please indicate what you imagine your **current thoughts and feelings** would be about the person who wounded you. Use the following scale to indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the statements.

1 = strongly disagree

2 = mildly disagree

3 = agree and disagree equally

4 = mildly agree

5 = strongly agree

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I'll make him or her pay.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ I wish that something bad would happen to him/her.

3. \_\_\_\_\_ I want him/her to get what he/she deserves.

4. \_\_\_\_\_ I'm going to get even.

5. \_\_\_\_\_ I want to see him/her hurt and miserable.

6. \_\_\_\_\_ I'd keep as much distance between us as possible.

7. \_\_\_\_\_ I'd live as if he/she doesn't exist, isn't around.

8. \_\_\_\_\_ I wouldn't trust him/her.

9. \_\_\_\_\_ I'd find it difficult to act warmly toward him/her.

10. \_\_\_\_\_ I'd avoid him/her.

11. \_\_\_\_\_ I'd cut off the relationship with him/her.

12. \_\_\_\_\_ I'd withdraw from him/her.

**Appendix B****Decisional Forgiveness Scale (DFS)**

Participants confidential # \_\_\_\_\_

**Think of your current intentions toward the person who hurt you. Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.**

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I intend to try to hurt him or her in the same way he or she hurt me.	SD	D	N	A	SA
2. I will not try to help him or her if he or she needs something.	SD	D	N	A	SA
3. If I see him or her, I will act friendly.	SD	D	N	A	SA
4. I will try to get back at him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA
5. I will try to act toward him or her in the same way I did before he or she hurt me.	SD	D	N	A	SA
6. If there is an opportunity to get back at him or her, I will take it.	SD	D	N	A	SA
7. I will not talk with him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA
8. I will not seek revenge upon him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA

## Appendix C

### Emotional Forgiveness Scale

Participants confidential # \_\_\_\_\_

Think of your current emotions toward the person who hurt you. Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I care about him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA
2. I no longer feel upset when I think of him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA
3. I'm bitter about what he or she did to me.	SD	D	N	A	SA
4. I feel sympathy toward him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA
5. I'm mad about what happened.	SD	D	N	A	SA
6. I like him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA
7. I resent what he or she did to me.	SD	D	N	A	SA
8. I feel love toward him or her.	SD	D	N	A	SA

## Appendix D

### Coparenting Questionnaire

Participants confidential # \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions about how you and your ex (or soon to be ex) currently approach parenting:

1 = Never

2 = Rarely

3 = Sometimes

4 = Usually

5 = Always

		NN	RR	SS	UU	AA
1	I tell my ex lots of things about my child/children	1	2	3	4	5
2	I fill my ex in on what happens during my child's/children's day.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I say nice things about my ex to my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I ask my ex's opinion on issues related to parenting.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I share the burden of discipline with my ex.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I say cruel or hurtful things about my ex in front of my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I use my child/children to get back at my ex.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I try to get my child/children to take sides when I argue with my ex.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I deliver messages to my ex through my child/children rather than say them directly to my ex.	1	2	3	4	5
10	My ex and I have different rules for my child/children regarding food, chores, bedtime, or homework.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I have different standards than my ex for my child/children's behavior.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I argue with my ex about my child/children	1	2	3	4	5
13	I support my ex's discipline decisions.	1	2	3	4	5

14 I undermine my ex's parenting.

1 2 3 4 5

### Appendix E Demographic Survey

Which of the following best describes your gender?

Female       Male       Prefer not to answer

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

With what race do you identify?

African–American/Black       American Indian/Alaskan Native

Asian       Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

Caucasian/White       Multiracial

Other       Prefer not to answer

Are you of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity?       Yes       No

With which religious affiliation do you most closely identify?

Atheism/Agnosticism       Buddhism

Christianity       Hinduism

Islam       Judaism

None       Other

Prefer not to answer

Do you consider yourself active in your religion?

Very active       Active       Not very active       Not active at all

How long were you married? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been divorced? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been separated? \_\_\_\_\_

Who initiated your divorce?  I Initiated  My Former Spouse  Mutual

Were you divorced prior to this divorce?  YES  NO

How many children do you have in your household? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider your financial settlement following the divorce to have been fair?

Very Fair  Fair  Unfair  Very Unfair

Do you consider your parenting time or custody arrangements to be fair?

Very Fair  Fair  Unfair  Very Unfair

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## **Appendix G**

### **Informed Consent Letter**

**STUDY TITLE: The Use of Forgiveness in High-Conflict Divorce:  
A Study of a Psycho-Educational Approach to Increasing Forgiveness and  
Coparenting**

You and your child are invited to be in a research study being done by ERNEST W. REILLY, MSW, LCSW as a Doctor of Ministry student from the Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you, as a parent, have a child who is receiving counseling services, have been assessed and have agreed that you are in a divorce involving coparenting where there is a higher than average level of interparental conflict and you desire to increase forgiveness and to increase positive attitude towards cooperative coparenting with your former spouse.

If you, after reading this and having all your questions answered, voluntarily agree to be in the study, you will be asked to complete a seven-week forgiveness workbook, which involves seven one-hour, self-directed workbook segments. This workbook is based on the REACH forgiveness model and adapted for use for divorced coparents in high-conflict divorce situations. This randomized control trial study will be completed with you, the participant, within Ernest W. Reilly, MSW, LCSW's counseling office's private or semi-private waiting spaces or on a computer, either during your child's counseling time or on your own time. The study will require completion of the workbook and promptly completing assessment surveys either within the counseling office or via online through e-mail. Any online data collection will be completed through Qualtrics.com's secure data collection services.

In the workbook, you will be asked to write confidentially about feelings, thoughts or behaviors you experienced after a wrongdoing was committed against you by your former spouse and/or coparent. You will choose which wrongdoing to discuss. You will engage in a number of brief exercises to promote forgiveness and coparenting. The responses you choose to provide in the workbooks will be kept confidential and secure, being viewed by only one researcher. You will keep your own workbook or it can be shredded for you after the study is completed. Once the study is completed at the end of data collection, all identifiable data associated with survey responses will be converted into numbers.

You will be randomly assigned to one of two research conditions. You will either be assigned to an immediate treatment condition in which you will receive the seven-week workbook and begin working on it the first day of the study, or you will be assigned to a wait list condition where you will simply wait seven weeks before starting the workbook. The total study time will include 14 weeks, yet your participation doing your workbook will be 7 weeks. You will be asked to complete brief surveys on three occasions, including prior to starting the 14 weeks, after 7 weeks, and again after 7 more weeks. There is no payment or cost involved in this study.

You will know that you are in the study. If anyone else is given information about you, he or she will not know your name. You will be assigned a number on the first day of the study and only your number will be used from that point forward. Data is being collected only for research purposes. When data collection is finished, ID numbers and any identifiable information will be deleted.

All surveys you complete, which will only have your number on them, will be kept in password-protected or double locked files, and these files will be kept until all data analysis and post-study research has been completed. Access to all data will be limited to this researcher. No identifying information will ever be shared.

If something makes you feel bad while you are in the study, please tell Ernest W. Reilly, MSW, LCSW. If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want. You can ask Ernest W. Reilly, MSW, LCSW questions any time about anything in this study.

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

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Signature of person agreeing to be in the study

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Date Signed

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