



R.A. Denton

UTILISING FORGIVENESS TO HELP SEXUALLY ABUSED ADOLESCENTS BREAK FREE FROM GUILT AND SHAME: A PASTORAL GESTALT THEORY

ABSTRACT

Guilt and shame can be traumatic, self-conscious experiences which have an impact on sexually abused adolescents' physical, psychological, social, emotional, moral and religious development. It can determine the adolescents' behaviour, their views of themselves and their interpersonal relationships. Guilt and shame arouse feelings of helplessness, anger, blame, bitterness and the need for retaliation, while forgiveness can relieve these impulses effectively and be utilised as a source for a recovering experience. Through the use of forgiveness as a coping mechanism, abused adolescents can be guided to handle unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business) and break free from guilt and shame. A pastoral Gestalt theory can assist abused adolescents with the necessary awareness to focus on their foreground in order to reach self-regulation of their emotional experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Abuse can affect adolescents' psychological and psychosocial health and development in a comprehensive manner. The aim of this article is to provide a pastoral Gestalt theory to help sexually abused adolescents become more aware of their emotional experiences and utilise forgiveness to break free from guilt and shame. First, abused adolescents should be viewed as unique creatures of God who are in a relationship with God. Secondly, abused adolescents should be approached as a

*Dr Rudy Denton, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, South Africa.
E-mail: rudy@nhk.co.za*

psychophysical unity, which is more than the sum of their psychological and psychosocial qualities.

Within the context of a multidisciplinary approach, the German word *Gestalt* describes a complete whole that cannot be broken down into its particular parts without losing its essential nature (Tan 2011:157). An integrated interaction takes place between the psychophysical and the psychological features, which means that abused adolescents experience and respond to their world as a total person. Gestalt theory assumes that abused adolescents have an inherent capacity to become more aware of, and in contact with their internal and external worlds. Tan (2011:157-162) and Corey (2009:201-206) summarised the basic theoretical principles of Gestalt theory as

holism, field theory, the figure-formation process, organismic self-regulation, the now, unfinished business, contact and resistance to contact, energy and blocks to energy.

Pastoral counselling can utilise the psychological insights of Gestalt theory and apply its findings from a Christian vantage point. The development of a pastoral Gestalt theory can be instrumental to the overall well-being of abused adolescents that occur at the interface between pastoral counselling and Gestalt theory. Pastoral counselling and Gestalt theory share an understanding that distinguishes their differences, distinctive content and unique character, but also recognises the common ground upon which interaction and collaboration could take place in answering questions of vital human well-being. Pastoral counselling operates from a Christian faith perspective and Gestalt theory as social science from a phenomenological and empirical perspective. The development of a pastoral Gestalt theory does not imply the analytical fragmentation of the existential experience of abused adolescents, but develops a holistic approach that constructs a Christian world view within the context of human experience and knowledge. In the hermeneutic interaction between pastoral counselling and Gestalt theory, pastoral counselling will carry a normative character and the Gestalt theory a descriptive character, with a strong focus on the anthropological unity between the body, soul and mind of abused adolescents.

2. GUILT AND SHAME AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON

Complex emotions such as guilt and shame are universal emotions that can be a painful experience for abused adolescents in the midst of their

emotional life (Crosson-Tower 2002:57). In order to explain guilt and shame, the fundamental equation can be made between the ethical and theological understanding of guilt and shame, on the one hand, and the existential and psychological guilt and shame, on the other (Pattison 2000:210). Although the Christian faith is not a quick fix for sexually abused adolescents who experience guilt and shame, it could reduce the negative experience and transform abused adolescents to grow in a relationship with God, the self and others. Watson-Jarvis and Bishop (1998:1) describe God's involvement in human beings as follows:

God enters our struggles with us and brings hope and freedom to our lives that had seemed doomed and mired in confusion.

Lerner and Steinberg (2009:462) and Plante and Sherman (2001:3) also point out that, in general, there is no correlation between common faith (religion) and mental health, but that faith facilitates mental health. On the other hand, Emmons (1999:875) suggests that religion is important to self-concept, identity, and relationship to God and others.

The purpose of Gestalt theory involves, first, the awareness and recognition of abused adolescents' personal experience and, secondly, the activation of their own support system by means of conscious and responsible choices (Oaklander 2007:34; Korb, Gorrell & Van der Riet 2002:95). Gestalt theory involves the entire Gestalt process through increased awareness of emotion, thought and behaviour (Zinker cited by Tan 2011:162). Gestalt theory is not only an abstract philosophy, but also a pragmatic engagement with abused adolescents to repair their equilibrium in emotional experiences and to organise and regulate their behaviour. Gestalt focuses on the integrated functioning of all aspects of abused adolescents and can be described as a pattern completion by the adolescents, their context, environment and the relationship manifested between abused adolescents and their environment.

2.1 Definition of guilt and shame

The underlying factors have to be determined in order to guide abused adolescents to understand their behaviour and their dealing with guilt and shame, because guilt can be problematic when it is inappropriate, inhibitory and constantly connected to shame. The proneness to shame and guilt is linked to fundamental aspects of abused adolescents' psychological and social well-being (cf. Tangney & Dearing 2004:146). It shows the imbalance between abused adolescents and their world, and determines their behaviour, their view of themselves and their interpersonal relationships. The emotional imbalance, through the awareness of unresolved emotional

experiences (unfinished business), can prevent organismic self-regulation, through *Gestalt formation* and *Gestalt destruction*, because abused adolescents cannot distinguish between their emotions. Kinnear (2007:10) states that abused adolescents can be so overwhelmed by their emotions that they become their worst enemy. This often leaves abused adolescents with a sense of powerlessness and helplessness.

2.1.1 Interaction between guilt, a guilty consciousness and a sense of guilt

The interaction between guilt and a guilty consciousness explains the distinction between a neurotic and a psychotic degree of differences in a sense of guilt. Guilt refers to the wrongful act committed, whereas a sense of guilt is an emotional experience of guilt (Yontef 2003:365). A sense of guilt is an indication of the quality and extent of guilt consciousness (Enright 2003:111). It encompasses abused adolescents' total being within the self and the environment. Guilt generates a sense of guilt driven by conscience and functions as an alarm system to warn abused adolescents that something went wrong in their own psychological structure (cf. Louw 1999b:470). Internal and phenomenological guilt are expressed in anxiety, pain, dissatisfaction, depression, anger, remorse and repentance, as a result of the violation of internalised values (Jones, Schratte & Kugler 2000:1039-1042). A sense of guilt represents a cognitive and emotional experience that emerges when abused adolescents feel that they have violated a moral standard and are responsible for an offence (Tangney, Struewig & Mashek 2007:349). If the recovery of a sense of guilt does not occur in thought, feeling or action, it often turns into shame (Yontef 2003:367).

2.1.2 A sense of guilt connected with shame

Inappropriate guilt can be problematic when it is inhibitory and constantly connected with shame. It is a false sense of guilt that precedes neurotic guilt and develops into shame (Tangney & Dearing 2004:122). Shame, unlike a sense of guilt, is an intense feeling of discomfort and an awareness of errors and shortcomings in the self (Johnson 2007:469; Yontef 2003:353). Guilt can be defined as abused adolescents' negative evaluation about their behaviour, whereas shame refers to their negative evaluation of their complete self (Dutton 2006:201). Shame is the experience of a deep wound in the self, which can influence the identity development of abused adolescents' emotional experiences (Murray & Ciarrocchi 2007:23).

The differentiation between guilt and shame lets guilt emerge as learned behaviour, whereas shame emerges as emotional and psychosocial problems connected to both individual and relationship levels (Dutton 2006:201). Middleton-Moz (1990:56) describes the internal response and a sense of the self in the experience of guilt and shame as follows: "When we experience guilt, we blame our behaviour. When we experience shame, we blame our character and being". Guilt indicates a realisation of a norm and standard contravened (behaviour), whereas shame emerges as the subjective reaction regarding disappointment and failure (identity). Shame can be a traumatic emotional experience which influences abused adolescents' physical, mental, social, emotional, moral and religious development.

Abused adolescents are subjected to the establishment of a particular identity, which can develop into a distorted and negative self-image that leads to a sense of worthlessness, inferiority and powerlessness. It may lead to abused adolescents withdrawing and isolating themselves from interpersonal relationships and inhibit their ability to be empathetic to form relationships with others (McNish 2004:3). The proneness to shame creates feelings of failure, self-criticism, inferiority, rejection, blame, anger, bitterness and the need for retribution (Chagigiorgis & Paivio 2008:123; Tangney & Dearing 2004:3). It is a falsification of abused adolescents' awareness of themselves where shame attempts to distort and inhibit the image of God (*imago Dei*) in abused adolescents to prevent them from forgiving like God.

2.2 A pastoral theological approach to guilt and shame

The spiritual and religious development of abused adolescents has a certain influence on determining their experiences of guilt, a sense of guilt and shame. As moral beings, abused adolescents live a life focused on God and are addressed by the working of the Holy Spirit (Richardson 2005:153; Seamands 2004:21; Louw 1999b:228). From a biblical perspective, actual guilt indicates a debt to God, when man broke his dependent relationship with God and his fellow men (Browning *et al.* 2004:57). From this theological perspective, a sense of guilt is recognised by the conscience that speaks to abused adolescents and may lead to regret, remorse, repentance and confession. Gilley (2003:1) describes the distinction between biblical guilt and general feelings of guilt as follows:

First, we must distinguish between guilt and the feelings of guilt. Guilt is simply the result of having violated God's principles. ... Guilt feelings, on the other hand, are the uncomfortable, inner awareness that we have violated these principles.

A sense of guilt can be described as an experience that results in a maximum interface between religion and psychology. The internal evaluation of self-conscious or self-blaming emotions focus on the offence (violation) and failure of a person's personal or communal internalised moral standards. A false sense of guilt can be a painful sense of shame before God and an associated sense of self-criticism (McNish 2004:2). As a moral matter, shame determines the relational dimensions of abused adolescents in a relationship with God, the self and others (Tangney *et al.* 2007:355). Inbody (2005:183) describes the subjective experience of shame as follows:

we feel naked, exposed, needing to hide or cover ourselves, rejected by God and the community, abandoned, without any self-regard.

2.3 Gestalt theory approach to guilt and shame

Gestalt theory describes a person as a self-regulating organism in a relational relationship that adapts to the needs of the self and the environment (Philippson 2009:20). In Gestalt theory, self-conscious guilt and shame emotions can separate abused adolescents from the self in the interpersonal field. Abused adolescents are always directed on the sensitivity and dependence of the field within the polarities of their experience of the self (Oaklander 2007:144; Blom 2006:40). The field is an essential and integral part of the self where contact boundary disturbances or modifications can negatively affect abused adolescents' contact with inner emotions and the environment (O'Connor & Braverman 2009:285). The separation or loss of contact in the field, in both the inner and outer environment, has the ability to leave abused adolescents with the experience of trauma, inhibiting growth and regression to previous neurotic or creative defences (cf. Yontef 2003:353). If there is disequilibrium in the self's experience in the field, abused adolescents will attempt to escape unbearable emotional experiences (Philippson 2009:21).

2.3.1 Guilt and shame as a complex and holistic experience of the self

Identification of abused adolescents with the environment at the contact boundary is very important for personality development. Guilt and shame develop from a relational concept of human experience and always takes place in the context of an intra- and interpersonal relationship (Tangney & Dearing 2004:3; Lee 2003:7). The experience of shame may be an indication that abused adolescents are not in contact with the self and may cause tension and discrepancy between the inner and outer world

of their emotional experience. Abused adolescents' experience of shame can evolve in a reduced self-concept coupled with fear, self-criticism, a defensive mind-set and the denial or retroflection of anger (cf. Yontef 2003:353). The proneness to shame is linked to abused adolescents' emotional experience to be trapped in their own false image of the self as an isolated failure, leaving no room for the self within or outside the self. Shame involves the awareness of a wound experienced internally and separates abused adolescents from the self and contact with others in the external environment.

2.3.2 The process of making contact

The purpose of Gestalt theory is to bring abused adolescents' awareness of the reality to the *here-and-now*, where they can take responsibility for their emotional experience and behaviour in the environment. Oaklander (2007:51) and Sweeney and Hofmeyer (1999:163) consider contact to be the ability to interact with the environment through the awareness of appropriate use of senses, the ability to express emotions in a healthy manner, and the use of intellect to share and express ideas, thoughts and needs. Abused adolescents will often break contact in the *here-and-now* to protect themselves against the experience of guilt and shame. This should be seen in the dynamic context (field) where certain influences affect their self-regulation (Brownell 2010:93).

Contact boundaries

Abused adolescents have boundaries that distinguish them from their environment in order to preserve their identity. To make contact with the field, abused adolescents reach out and discover their own boundary (Brownell 2010:93). In good boundary functioning, abused adolescents move between contact (*Gestalt formation*) and contact breach or withdrawal (*Gestalt destruction*) of their environment (Oaklander 2007:22). Contact implies the dialogical relationship and an encounter between the subject and the object of consciousness ("*me*" and "*not-me*") (O'Connor & Braverman 2009:285; Philippsen 2009:21). This process occurs due to abused adolescents' physical and emotional needs and natural desire to regulate these needs through self-regulation.

Abused adolescents' contact with their environment, or the lack thereof, determines, to a large extent, their development or growth. Through awareness, abused adolescents develop insight into their contact and contact withdrawal patterns to make choices and to accept responsibility for their choices (Oaklander 2007:22). When abused adolescents come into contact with unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business), an

internal process helps abused adolescents organise perceptions and give meaning to their emotions (Brownell 2010:93; Philippson 2009:20). The internal process that takes place within the self in relation to the external and internal awareness of the self and others, and all systems acting on abused adolescents, will have an impact on their process (personality) development that consists of a holistic combination of their entire being.

Process for the formation of the self through Gestalt formation

Gestalt formation is an ongoing biological process that enables abused adolescents to be aware of any equilibrium disturbances or modifications on their foreground (Oaklander 2007:12; Corey 2009:193). Gestalt formation involves *internal regulation*, where abused adolescents utilise self-regulation by inherent characteristics to satisfy their own needs, or *external regulation*, where the process of Gestalt formation between abused adolescents and their environment occurs (Brownell 2010:21; Lee 2003:8; Wheeler 2003:41). Gestalt formation focuses on the whole process of action, emotion, thought and interaction between abused adolescents, their context, immediate experience and awareness in the *here-and-now* in order to restore the balance. In healthy Gestalt formation, abused adolescents identify with their own experience (including feelings, thoughts, needs, and observations) and sense of the self with a coherent positive feeling and image of the self (Houston 2003:16). This can only occur when abused adolescents become aware of the self's dominant needs in their interactional field or figure-ground interaction and use their abilities and resources from their environment to satisfy their needs. This includes their overall functioning and not only intra-psychic or interpersonal dimensions (Corey 2009:194).

Gestalt formation implies that abused adolescents can regulate their contact and withdrawal experience of guilt and shame (Wheeler 2003:42). Through self-concept, self-esteem and self-perceptions, abused adolescents are aware that they are not separated from their circumstances. In the process of organismic self-regulation, through *Gestalt formation* and *Gestalt destruction*, the awareness cycle happens continuously and often unconsciously in the daily lives of abused adolescents when they try to satisfy different demands on their foreground. The dynamic formation of the self implies that abused adolescents could be aware of their guilt and shame when they accept the contact boundary through assimilation and confluence, or reject it by alienation, withdrawal and self-defensive action (Philippson 2009:22).

Contact boundary disturbances or modifications

In the process of Gestalt formation, interruptions can be experienced by contact boundary disturbances or modifications that affect the natural, healthy process of organismic self-regulation (Tan 2011:161; O'Connor & Braverman 2009:312). Contact boundary disturbances can be considered unhealthy processes that affect the healthy functioning of the creative self and disturb the relationship between the organism and its environment (Korb *et al.* 2002:54-56). It affects relevant awareness and causes abused adolescents' Gestalt to be incomplete. Abused adolescents experiencing guilt and shame may have different roles and different descriptions of the self by utilising polarities. Polarities can lead to polarisation of emotions, confusion of the self and breaking of contact with others (Oaklander 2007:22; Korb *et al.* 2002:14). Opposite emotions can cause discomfort, because love and hate, rejection and acceptance can be present simultaneously.

Abused adolescents can inhibit and block various aspects of the self (as senses, body, emotions and intellect) by defence mechanisms used to escape the conscious guilt and shame experiences in the present and attempt to protect their distorted self-esteem and feelings about themselves. When abused adolescents' self is weak or vague and they can no longer regulate the contact boundaries between themselves and their environment, contact boundary disturbances or modifications act by polarities of confluence or isolation. Abused adolescents may apply different roles and different descriptions of the self in order to inhibit and block experiences of conscious guilt and shame:

- *Desensitisation* disrupts the function of sensation and breaks the contact process of sensory and bodily awareness (Woldt & Toman 2005:x). Abused adolescents reformulate the impact of emotions of guilt and shame to prevent an emotional claim on the self. They can deny the sensory and physical sensation of emotional pain and discomfort by suppressing unwanted emotions on the foreground and keeping them in the background.
- *Introjection* involves the experience of guilt and shame as private and intimate self-conscious or self-blame emotions that correlate with measures of resentment, suspicion, depression, anxiety and anger (Dutton 2006:201; Tangney & Dearing 2004:2). In order to ensure love and acceptance and avoid rejection and loneliness, abused adolescents may accept information, attitudes and ideas from the environment without evaluating them critically. When abused adolescents are exposed to guilt and shame, a guilt or shame complex can form the dominant factor in the formation of their personality (Oaklander 2007:144; Tangney *et al.* 2007:352).

- *Projection* implies that abused adolescents will blame someone or something outside themselves for their emotions, behaviour and disrupted interpersonal relationships (Corey 2009:198; Korb *et al.* 2002:65). Abused adolescents can project their own personal emotional experience of guilt and shame by keeping the environment responsible for their emotional pain and discomfort.
- *Retroreflection* can lead to isolation and emotional withdrawal from the environment, because abused adolescents do not express their feelings and punish themselves by guilt, shame, sadness, self-criticism and an inferior self-concept (Yontef 2003:358). Although the power of emotions is supposed to be directed outwards, abused adolescents direct their energy by retroreflection on the self that can give rise to self-conscious or self-blame emotions, distortion, depression, psychosomatic symptoms and physical dysfunction (cf. Tan 2011:161; Oaklander 2007:94).
- *Deflection* involves different degrees of avoiding contact with others and the environment. Abused adolescents will deflect the experience of guilt and shame by, for example, talking constantly and being extremely polite, in an attempt to maintain their self-regulation and protect themselves against emotional pain (Tan 2011:161). Sweeney *et al.* (1999:164) describe deflection as “turning away from that which is uncomfortable, yet needing to hit and kick to release the energy of anger or other deep feelings”.
- *Egocentrism* implies that abused adolescents can be excessively subjectively aware of their emotional experience of guilt and shame when they blame themselves and judge their behaviour as a failure. Abused adolescents often blame themselves for everything that goes wrong in their lives, because they find it difficult to separate their individual experiences from other’s responsibility (Oaklander 2007:9; Tangney 2003:387). The experience of guilt and shame as self-conscious emotions may lead to a negative self-concept and self-esteem, with intense self-consciousness and self-criticism.
- *Egotism* implies that abused adolescents are trapped in the reality of introspection, because they constantly manage their experience of guilt and shame or a situation objectively and rationally not to be subjective and emotionally involved. Egotism prevents assimilation and integration of emotional experiences and makes contact with others and the environment difficult.
- *Confluence* occurs when the separation between abused adolescents and others is unclear and the boundaries of the self are lost. They can

incorporate a great deal of themselves in others or the environment, with the result that they lose their own identity and are no longer in touch with themselves (Tan 2011:161; Hamilton 1997:63). While guilt and shame involve extreme self-consciousness, abused adolescents have a strong need to belong, especially in relationships with others. They will often act as “*pleasers*” to satisfy everyone and to conform to others’ expectations (Corey 2009:198). Confluence associated with sadness, fear and a low self-concept generates further shame and doubt in the self.

- *Impasse and isolation* allow abused adolescents to often feel safe, because it is too painful to work on their self-conscious emotions of guilt and shame. Oaklander (2007:15) describes the impasse as “literally hang on to someone, constantly try to please, are unable to make a choice or commitment, or complete a task for fear of failure”. The paralysing internal monitoring, through impasse and isolation, may lead to abused adolescents’ withdrawal, passivity and inaction from the environment for fear of being further exposed to the experience of guilt and shame.

3. FORGIVENESS UTILISED AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON

Forgiveness is a complex phenomenon that involves social, spiritual, cognitive and emotional dimensions of human experience and provides a challenge for integration. The pastoral Gestalt theory can help sexually abused adolescents to utilise forgiveness and break free from guilt and shame. The use of forgiveness as a coping mechanism can assist abused adolescents to deal with unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business). Abused adolescents can move to equilibrium once the imbalance in the experience of guilt and shame is restored and forgiveness is considered an option to forgive themselves and others. This may lead to the discovery that they can make choices for their emotional expression and satisfy their needs.

The study of forgiveness is a theological term that can be used to explain a psychological and spiritual process that has emotion-regulating properties. Harris (2007: 108), Williams (2006:8) and Ransley and Spy (2004:5) point out that abused adolescents can be effectively assisted from a pastoral Gestalt theory, because forgiveness is an essential part of counselling and psychotherapy. Forgiveness is not the answer to all emotional problems, but there have been changes in the lives of those who have decided to forgive instead (Macaskill 2004:31). Fortune and Marshall (2004:56) make it

clear that forgiveness should not be regarded as a quick fix for therapeutic recovery. From an interpersonal perspective, forgiveness can be used to empower abused adolescents to cope with painful experiences (Pattison 2000:209). A movement of forgiveness and self-forgiveness can lead to a restored relationship with God, the self and others, and restore hope for the future (Worthington 2006:9; McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen 2001:17). According to Enright, Freedman and Rique (1998:46), the psychological definition of interpersonal forgiveness involves the affective, cognitive and moral behaviour of human development. Enright *et al.* (1998:46-47) define forgiveness as follows:

[A] willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her.

Forgiveness is usually perceived as a slowly evolving or step-by-step process where accumulated anger and a desire for retribution built up, but gradually discharge through a healing process and a sense of empathy towards the offender. Chagigiorgis and Paivio (2008:123) support a goal description of forgiveness that reduces negative feelings, increased self-empowerment and self-esteem, and a more differentiated perspective of abusive or neglectful others. Various researchers have indicated that forgiveness is associated with positive psychological and physical health, positive emotions, healthy social interaction and high life satisfaction.¹ People who do not forgive are often prisoners of their own emotions of anger, hatred and bitterness (Malcolm 2008:283; Chagigiorgis & Paivio 2008:124; Worthington 2003:68). Richards (2009:157) describes unforgiveness as follows: "Holding on to a grudge and refusing to forgive is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die".

3.1 Faulty notions of forgiveness

Although definitions of forgiveness vary between different researchers, there is a lateral consensus among those who develop forgiveness therapy. An incorrect view of forgiveness is often the reason why constructive and positive behaviour changes do not happen. Clarification of forgiveness involves arguments by several researchers who highlight key components regarding incorrect beliefs about forgiveness.

1 Richards (2009:155), DeCourville, Belicki and Green (2008:2), Worthington (2006:272), Enright and Rique (2004:10), Plante and Sherman (2001:108) and Pattison (2000:213).

- Forgiveness is not atonement and reconciliation

In relationships involving sexual abuse, forgiveness can take place without atonement, reconciliation and interaction with the offender in order to protect the abused adolescent (cf. Chagigiorgis & Paivio 2008:123; Freedman 2008:96). Forgiveness is granted (by choice) or experience (by emotion); reconciliation is earned through mutually trustworthy behaviour on both sides from the forgiver and the offender. Atonement and reconciliation are not always possible or desirable (Helm, Cook & Berecz 2005:26) and not an essential part or an inevitable product of forgiveness, but a possibility.

- Forgiveness is not a pardon and justification

Forgiveness is not the pardoning of the offender or the approval of behaviour that causes pain (DeCourville *et al.* 2008:2; Kendall 2002:13). Pardoning implies the justification of the offence and would encourage a feeling of resentment, bitterness and hatred (Macaskill 2004:29). Forgiveness is not exemption, because the perpetrator of abuse can be legally prosecuted (Belicki, Rourke & McCarthy 2008:166). Forgiveness can help abused adolescents leave bitterness behind and begin the healing process, without pardoning the offender.

- Forgiveness is not condoning

Forgiveness does not excuse or condone harmful behaviour (Freedman 2008:96; Aureli & De Waal 2000:359). An apology and excuse from the offender has a positive effect on forgiveness, but it implies no justification for the commission of the offence. Regardless of his/her circumstances, the offender is liable for the harm and damage s/he caused (Belicki *et al.* 2008:172).

- Forgiveness is not denial and repression

Forgiveness is not denial and suppression of pain, negative emotions and anger (Chagigiorgis & Paivio 2008:124; DeCourville *et al.* 2008:2). Kendall (2002:16) shows that victims of sexual abuse and rape, in particular, tend to repress the painful memories of their experiences. Defence mechanisms such as denial or suppression are not equivalent to forgiveness and can be obstacles in the healthy process of forgiveness (cf. McMinn 1996:206).

- Forgiveness is not to forget

Forgiveness is not an attempt to forget the painful effects of destructive behaviour (Freedman 2008:96; Kendall 2002:17). According to Kendall (2002:18) and Aureli and De Waal (2000:360), it is a demonstration of

grace when the person is fully aware of the abuse, and still chooses to forgive. Forgiveness involves an emotional relief and deliverance from bondage to the past, but is not an attempt to forget the reality of the past. It is a choice, despite pain and injustice suffered, to give up the right to retribution.

- Forgiveness is not tolerance

Forgiveness does not imply a tolerance of harmful behaviour. Although forgiveness is a form of acceptance, it is possible to make peace with the pain of abuse in the past, but not with the physical violation of the offender (Enright & North 1998:47). Tolerance involves accepting that the abuse occurred, but not necessarily give up negative emotions, thoughts and behaviour towards the offender.

3.2 Pastoral theological approach to forgiveness

Forgiveness is an important component of the Christian faith and regarded as a concept that is inextricably linked to the events of the atonement of Jesus Christ (Johnson 2007:45; McCullough *et al.* 2001:17; Louw 1999b:475). McCullough and Worthington (1999:1142) state: "When people forgive (or feel forgiven) the experience evokes religious and spiritual thoughts, images and effects". From a theological perspective, forgiveness is an interactive principle that links abused adolescents inextricably to their relationship with God, themselves and their fellow men. Stoop and Masteller (1996:179) suggest the processing of traumatic experiences as a choice between a path of bitterness or forgiveness. This is a Christian faith action and reaction to the violation of one person against another. God forgives man and man is encouraged to live up to this image of God (Browning *et al.* 2004:58). This implies a Christian duty to forgive each other and suggests a life that radiates forgiveness (France 2007:250; McMinn 1996:214). Jesus Christ proposed forgiveness as a way of life and no conditions are set (Fortune & Marshall 2004:32).

Forgiveness can be regarded as a therapeutic tool to abused adolescents on a path of recovery. It can be defined as the unconditional acceptance of God's grace through faith, and release (surrender) of an offender at the mercy of God (Louw 1996:391). The rational goal of forgiveness is to imitate God, to fulfil one's religious duty, to seek God's forgiveness, to follow the path of righteousness (Ransley & Spy 2004:15), and to repair the relationship with God, the self and others. Pargament (1997:262) describes the freedom of forgiveness as follows:

Forgiveness offers the possibility of peace of mind, that is, the hope that painful memories can be healed, that the individual will no longer be held emotionally hostage to acts of the past.

3.2.1 Constructive understanding of the essence of Christian forgiveness

Forgiveness does not deny the pain or change the past, but it breaks the cycle of bitterness that ties abused adolescents to the hurts of the past (Pritchard 2005:24). McCullough *et al.* (2008) describe forgiveness as religious behaviour researched through specific interventions and techniques that can be measured and facilitated. Although the Christian faith is not a quick fix for man's guilt, it can reduce adolescents' guilt and shame (cf. Enright 2003:6; Worthington 2003:26). Guilt and shame arouse feelings of blame, anger, bitterness and the need for revenge, whereas forgiveness can alleviate these impulses (Enright 2003:15; Lamb & Murphy 2002:7).

3.3 A pastoral Gestalt theory to utilise forgiveness to break free from guilt and shame

When abused adolescents experience guilt and shame, unresolved emotional experiences come to the fore accompanied by psychological stress and the need to complete the unfinished business. The awareness of negative emotions toward the self and the offender obstruct Gestalt formation and prevent homeostasis and organismic self-regulation. Anger, guilt and shame can activate the need for revenge, due to the humiliation and pain experienced (Harris 2007:110). Forgiveness can restore abused adolescents' balance by organising and regulating the impact of negative emotions, behaviour and experiences. Davis (2002:278) suggests forgiveness as a self-regulation mechanism that happens inside abused adolescents:

It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps most importantly a letting go of the role of victim.

3.3.1 Handling unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business)

Contact boundary disturbances or modifications can be used to block energy, to protect the self or to falsify feelings about the self (Oaklander 2007:142). Abused adolescents will express negative emotions by blaming the offender for the disturbances as a result of the offender's actions.

With retroreflection, introjection and projection of unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business), abused adolescents can experience intense guilt and shame and isolate themselves from the environment.

Self-regulation

In dealing with unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business), the generation and differentiation of emotions, negative thoughts and intentions of retaliation alleviate in the foreground. The pastoral Gestalt theory can help unlock abused adolescents' deepest fear and frustration, and bring negative emotions in contact with their experience. The awareness of negative emotions such as anger, guilt and shame can be confronted and creates emotional tension to work with their unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business). The painful memories of unresolved emotional experiences may also be expressed in a grieving process where abused adolescents experience interpersonal loss (cf. Chagigiorgis & Paivio 2008:127). Abused adolescents can be aware of the emotional pain associated with the abuse and move from a reactive and defensive position, which is directed outwards, to an awareness aimed at making contact and express their self-conscious guilt and shame emotions.

Reformulation and new thinking

Forgiveness affects abused adolescents' entire being and moral behaviour. From the awareness and expression of emotions and unanswered needs, a schematic reformulation takes place in abused adolescents, leading to new thinking about the offender and the self. According to Malcolm and Greenberg (2001:188), abused adolescents can be assisted to let go of earlier feelings of need deprivation. Abused adolescents can pursue the cognitive understanding of the offender's personal history or childhood and place the abuse within the context of the offender's circumstances (cf. Freedman 2008:97). The reformulation and new thinking about the offender does not exempt the offender from his responsibility for the offence, but helps understand him better. Through the use of polarities and emotional identification with the offender's circumstances, abused adolescents can empathise and sympathise with the offender (cf. Belicki, Rourke & McCarthy 2008:166-167). In the commitment to forgive, abused adolescents abandon thoughts, feelings and intentions of retaliation against the offender (Enright & Rique 2004:9). Forgiveness can enable abused adolescents to get free of hatred, bitterness, guilt, shame, sadness and other emotions. It is an emotional, cognitive and behavioural process that develops by the shift of perception, feeling, attitude and behaviour towards the offender (cf. Malcolm 2008:283; Worthington 2006:25).

Forgiveness as a coping mechanism

Abused adolescents, who are angry towards the offender, feel guilty and ashamed of the violence in their subconscious impulses, while forgiveness can relieve these impulses (Enright 2003:15; Freedman 2008:94). The challenge of the pastoral Gestalt theory is not only focused to assist abused adolescents with forgiveness *per se*, but to deal with the emotional pain of an offence and accept responsibility for life by the guidance to forgiveness. Abused adolescents are empowered to develop a strong self-esteem that gives them a sense of well-being and creates a positive self to process unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business) such as anger, guilt and shame. Forgiveness is a key point in the awareness and therapeutic change of emotional experiences. Enright and Coyle (cited by Maltby, Macaskill & Gillett 2007:556) conceptualise forgiveness as

a positive process that allows the individual to grow and move on his/her life, leaving behind worries and ruminations about the transgression they experienced.

Forgiveness as completion of unresolved emotional experiences

Integration as a goal in the pastoral Gestalt theory expects that abused adolescents, as a holistic entity, will be assisted to integrate cognition, emotion, body and senses to complete unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business) on their foreground. Integration can be considered the completion of unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business) in order to achieve homeostasis. This leads to abused adolescents discovering that they can make choices for emotional expression, can satisfy their needs, and experiment with new behaviour.

To experience the integration of their total being, abused adolescents move towards equilibrium when their imbalance in the experience of guilt and shame is restored and they consider forgiveness as an option to forgive the offender. It is a moral conduct and conscious choice to release the offender and set abused adolescents free of the past. According to Malcolm and Greenberg (2001:189), the completion of unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business) provides a sense of optimism about the future. As a source of healing experience, forgiveness guides abused adolescents to psychological and physical health, positive emotions, healthy social interaction and high life satisfaction.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The awareness of unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business) hampers Gestalt formation and prevents homeostasis and organismic self-regulation. The presence of unfinished business manifests in abused adolescents' experience of negative emotions toward the self and the offender. Emotions of guilt and shame generate feelings of failure, inadequacy, anger, blame, bitterness and the need for retribution, while forgiveness can relieve these impulses. Abused adolescents should understand and recognise their own internal process of feelings and emotions before these can be passed on to a concrete process to forgive. Awareness of their own forgiveness process can assist abused adolescents to accept responsibility for their new behaviour through the integration of forgiveness as an important component of a Christian way of life. An important feature of forgiveness is the unconditional acceptance of God's grace and the implementation of empathy and compassion toward the offender within the domain of God's grace.

Pastoral Gestalt theory can help sexually abused adolescents become more aware of their emotional experiences and utilise forgiveness to break free from guilt and shame. In the commitment to forgiveness, abused adolescents can surrender their negative thoughts, feelings and intentions of retaliation and revenge against the offender. The process of forgiveness is a transition from a past in which sexually abused adolescents were caught up in negative emotional experience of guilt and shame, to a future of hope with a strong self-concept and self-esteem that gives them a sense of well-being.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AURELI, F. & DE WAAL, F.B.M. (EDS.)
2000. *Natural conflict resolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- BELICKI, K., ROURKE, J. & MCCARTHY, M.
2008. *Potential dangers of empathy and related conundrums*. In: W. Malcolm, N. DeCourville & K. Belicki (eds.), *Woman's reflections on the complexities of forgiveness* (New York: Routledge), pp. 165-185.
- BLOM, R.
2006. *The handbook of Gestalt play therapy: Practical guidelines for child therapists*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- BROWNELL, P.
2010. *Gestalt therapy: A guide to contemporary practice*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

- BROWNING, R.L., REED, R.A., BROWNING, D.S. & FOWLER, J.W.
2004. *Forgiveness, reconciliation, and moral courage: Motives and designs for ministry in a troubled world. Studies in practical theology.* Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- CHAGIGIORGIS, H. & PAIVIO, S.
2008. *Forgiveness as an outcome in emotion-focused trauma therapy.* In: W. Malcolm, N. DeCourville & K. Belicki (eds.), *Woman's reflections on the complexities of forgiveness* (New York: Routledge), pp. 121-141.
- COREY, G.
2009. *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy.* 8th ed. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- CROCKER, S.F.
2007. Commentary I: Working with forgiveness in Gestalt therapy. *Gestalt Review* 11(2):120-122.
- CROSSON-TOWER, C.
2002. *Understanding child abuse and neglect.* 5th ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- DAVIS, L.
2002. *I thought we'd never speak again: The road from estrangement to reconciliation.* New York: HarperCollins.
- DECOURVILLE, N., BELICKI, K. & GREEN, M.M.
2008. Subjective experiences of forgiveness in a community sample: Implications for understanding forgiveness. In: W. Malcolm, N. DeCourville & K. Belicki (eds.), *Woman's reflections on the complexities of forgiveness* (New York: Routledge), pp. 1-20.
- DUTTON, D.G.
2006. *The abusive personality. 2nd ed: Violence and control in intimate relationships.* New York: Guilford Press.
- EMMONS, R.A.
1999. Religion in the psychology of personality: An introduction. *Journal of Personality* 67:873-888.
- ENRIGHT, R.D.
2003. *Forgiveness is a choice. A step-by-step process for resolving anger and restoring hope.* Baltimore, MD: United Book Press.
- ENRIGHT, R.D. & COYLE, C.T.
1998. Researching the process model of forgiveness within psychological interventions. In: E.L. Worthington (ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological forgiveness* (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press), pp. 139-161.
- ENRIGHT, R.D. & NORTH, J.
1998. *Exploring forgiveness.* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

- ENRIGHT, R.D. & RIQUE, J.
2004. *The Enright forgiveness inventory. Manual, test booklet and scoring key.* Madison, WI: International Forgiveness Institute.
- ENRIGHT, R.D., FREEDMAN, S. & RIQUE, J.
1998. The psychology of interpersonal forgiveness. In: R.D. Enright & J. North (eds.), *Exploring forgiveness* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press), pp. 15-34.
- FORTUNE, M.M. & MARSHALL, J.L. (EDS.)
2004. *Forgiveness and abuse: Jewish and Christian reflections.* London: Routledge.
- FRANCE, R.T.
2007. *The gospel of Matthew.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- FREEDMAN, S.
2008. Forgiveness education with at-risk adolescents. A case study analysis. In: W. Malcolm, N. DeCourville & K. Belicki (eds.), *Woman's reflections on the complexities of forgiveness* (New York: Routledge), pp. 93-119.
- GILLEY, G.E.
2003. *Guilt. Think on these things articles.* [Online.] Retrieved from http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/articles/read_articles.asp?id=3. [2008, 22 July].
- HAMILTON, J.D.
1997. *Gestalt in pastoral care. A holistic approach.* New York: Haworth Press.
- HARRIS, E.S.
2007. Working with forgiveness in Gestalt therapy. *Gestalt Review* 11(2):108-119.
- HELM, H.W., COOK, J.R. & BEREZ, J.M.
2005. The implications of conjunctive and disjunctive forgiveness for sexual abuse. *Pastoral Psychology* 54(1):23-34.
- HOUSTON, G.
2003. *Brief Gestalt therapy.* London: Sage Publishers.
- INBODY, T.
2005. *The faith of the Christian church: An introduction to theology.* Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans.
- JOHNSON, E.L.
2007. *Foundations for soul care: A Christian psychology proposal.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- JONES, W.H., SCHRATTER, A.K. & KUGLER, K.
2000. The guilt inventory. *Psychological Reports* 87:1039-1042.
- KENDALL, R.T.
2002. *Total forgiveness.* Florida: Charisma House.

KINNEAR, K.L.

2007. *Childhood sexual abuse. A reference handbook*. 2nd ed. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Greenwood Publishing Group.

KORB, M.P., GORRELL, J. & VAN DE RIET, V.

2002. *Gestalt therapy: Practice and theory*. 3rd ed. New York: Pergamon.

LAMB, S. & MURPHY, J.G.

2002. *Before forgiving: Cautionary views of forgiveness in psychotherapy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

LEE, R.G.

2003. Shame and the Gestalt model. In: R.G. Lee & G. Wheeler (eds.), *The voice of shame: Silence and connection in psychotherapy* (Cambridge, MA: Gestalt Press), pp. 3-21.

LERNER, R.M. & STEINBERG, L. (EDS.)

2009. *Handbook of adolescent psychology. Individual bases of adolescent development. Volume 1*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

LOUW, D.J.

1996. Guilt and change – the healing power of forgiveness. *Scriptura* 59:383-395.

1999a. *A mature faith. Spiritual direction and anthropology in a theology of pastoral care and counseling*. Leuven: Peeters Press.

1999b. *Pastoraat as vertolking en ontmoeting: Teologiese ontwerp vir 'n basisteorie, antropologie, metode en terapie*. Wellington: Lux Verbi.

MACASKILL, A.

2004. The treatment of forgiveness in counselling and therapy. *Counselling Psychology Review* 20:26-33.

MALCOLM, W.

2008. The timeliness of forgiveness interventions. In: W. Malcolm, N. DeCourville & K. Belicki (eds.), *Woman's reflections on the complexities of forgiveness* (New York: Routledge), pp. 275-292.

MALCOLM, W. & GREENBERG, L.S.

2001. Forgiveness as a process of change in individual psychotherapy. In: M.E. McCullough, K.I. Pargament & C.E. Thoresen (eds.), *Forgiveness. Theory, research and practice* (New York: Guilford Press), pp. 179-202.

MALBY, J., MACASKILL, A. & GILLET, R.

2007. The cognitive nature of forgiveness: Using cognitive strategies of primary appraisal and coping to describe the process of forgiving. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 63(6):555-566.

MCCULLOUGH, M.

2008. *Beyond revenge: The evolution of the forgiveness instinct*. New York: Wiley & Sons.

- McCULLOUGH, M.E. & WORTHINGTON, E.L.J.
1999. Religion and the forgiving personality. *Journal of Personality* 67:1141-1164.
- McMINN, M.R.
1996. *Psychology, theology and spirituality in Christian counseling*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishing.
- McNISH, J.
2004. *Transforming shame: A pastoral response*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- MIDDELTON-MOZ, J.
1990. *Shame and guilt: The masters of disguise*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
- MURRAY, K.M. & CIARROCCI, J.W.
2007. The dark side of religion, spirituality and the moral emotions: Shame, guilt, and negative religiosity as markers for life dissatisfaction. *Journal of Pastoral Counseling* 42:22-41.
- OAKLANDER, V.
2007. *Hidden treasure. A map to the child's inner self*. London: Karnac Books.
- O'CONNOR, K.J. & BRAVERMAN, L.D. (Eds.)
2009. *Play therapy and practice: Comparing theories and techniques*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.
- PARGAMENT, K.I.
1997. *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York: Guilford Press.
- PATTISON, S.
2000. *Shame: Theory, therapy, theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PHILIPPSON, P.
2009. *The emergent self: An existential-Gestalt approach*. London: Karnac Books.
- PLANTE, T.G. & SHERMAN, A.C.
2001. *Faith and health: Psychological perspectives*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- PRITCHARD, R.
2005. *The healing power of forgiveness*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.
- RANSLEY, C. & SPY, T. (Eds.)
2004 *Forgiveness and the healing process: A central therapeutic concern*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

- RICHARDS, M. (ED.)
2009. *Caresharing: A reciprocal approach to caregiving and care receiving in the complexities of aging, illness or disability*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing.
- RICHARDSON, R.
2005. *Experiencing healing prayer*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press.
- SEAMANDS, D.A.
2004. *Genesing van emosionele pyn – nuwe hoop vir mense wat seer gekry het*. Vereeniging: CUM.
- STOOP, D. & MASTELLER, J.
1996. *Forgiving our parents forgiving ourselves*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications.
- SWEENEY, D.S. & HOFMEYER, I.C. (EDS.)
1999. *Handbook of group play therapy: How to do it, how it works, whom it's best for*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers.
- TAN, S.Y.
2011. *Counseling and psychotherapy: A Christian perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- TANGNEY, J.P.
2003. Self-relevant emotions. In: M.R. Leary & J.P. Tangney (eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (New York: Guilford Press), pp. 384-400.
- TANGNEY, J.P. & DEARING, R.L.
2004. *Shame and guilt*. New York: Guilford Press.
- TANGNEY, J.P., STUEWIG, J. & MASHEK, D.F.
2007. Moral emotions and moral behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology* 58:345-372.
- WATSON-JARVIS, K. & BISHOP, D.R.
1998. *Christ's touch changes us. Embracing true guilt and breaking free from false guilt*. Los Angeles, CA: Wellness Institute, Inc.
- WHEELER, G.
2003. Self and shame. A new paradigm for psychotherapy. In: R.G. Lee & G. Wheeler (eds.), *The voice of shame: Silence and connection in psychotherapy* (Cambridge, MA: Gestalt Press), pp. 23-58.
- WILLIAMS, L.
2006. Spirituality and Gestalt: A Gestalt-transpersonal perspective. *Gestalt Review* 10(1):6-21.
- WOLDT, A.L. & TOMAN, S.M.
2005. *Gestalt therapy: History, theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.

WORTHINGTON, E.L.

2003. *Forgiving and reconciling*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press.

2006. *Forgiveness and reconciliation: Theory and application*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

YONTEF, G.M.

2003. Shame and guilt in Gestalt therapy. Theory and practice. In: R.G. Lee & G. Wheeler (eds.), *The voice of shame: Silence and connection in psychotherapy* (Cambridge, MA: Gestalt Press), pp. 351-380.

Keywords

Trefwoorde

Pastoral counselling

Pastoral berading

Gestalt theory

Gestalt teorie

Abuse

Mishandeling

Adolescence

Adolessensie